



## American Association of Naturopathic Physicians

Social Isolation: The Hidden Public Health Epidemic  
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When is the last time your physician asked you about your support system? In an age where we're more isolated than ever, we need a medical system that plays a central role in helping each patient develop a personal community. This becomes challenging in the average 15-minute doctor's appointment, and so we must re-think the role of the doctor-patient relationship when it comes to addressing social isolation.

Despite the growing presence of social media and similar "connection" technology, more people feel they lack support in their lives. Upwards of 40% of our population report feeling lonely or isolated, double what it was in the 1980s.

Unfortunately, social isolation is one of the strongest predictors of chronic disease. **It's as dangerous to be lonely in our lives as it is to smoke 15 cigarettes per day**, and two times more dangerous as it is to be obese. In fact, based on a large study that followed over 300,000 people for 7.5 years, those most isolated have a 50% higher chance of dying early than those who are not. More specifically, being isolated dramatically increases our chances of developing heart disease, stroke, cancer, and dementia.

These statistics may be surprising, but most physicians agree that social determinants of health (including access to appropriate food and housing in addition to sufficient social support) are as important as medical determinants. Unfortunately, those same physicians can feel ill-equipped to help their patients navigate their loneliness and seek support in an effective and ongoing manner.

Beyond the stigma of loneliness we understand intuitively, being isolated or lacking a support system has important evolutionary implications for our health and well-being. As a "tribal" species, our primitive bodies and minds require human connection just as much as regular food and water. **From the perspective of our earliest ancestors, it was more dangerous to our survival to be left alone and vulnerable than it was to miss a meal.**

There is considerable social need to make sure everyone has "someone," yet there is not sufficient attention targeted at solving this public health challenge. There is also debate as to the best approach to reducing rates



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of isolation, or the best setting in which to do so. Former Surgeon General of the U.S., Dr. Vivek Murthy proposes the need to solve this challenge primarily in the workplace.

If medical care is to be truly comprehensive, beyond the acute setting, every doctor needs to consider social needs just as much as diagnostic and treatment options. To do so effectively, there are three key areas of focus:

1. A strong, empathic therapeutic doctor-patient relationship grounded in an understanding of the patient's most pressing personal needs
2. Education or referral to learn techniques that help patients remain resilient to the stress in their lives, such as recommendations for meditation or journaling
3. Encouraging patients to foster introspective thought and creative expression so that they can better understand themselves and their isolation

Additionally, actively helping patients seek out local resources, such as community events and support groups can be a powerful motivator to encourage them to step outside of their comfort zone.

Naturopathic doctors (you can find one near you here) are ideally positioned to help with this public health epidemic. Appropriately dubbed "The Physicians Who Listen," an average visit with a naturopathic doctor is 30 to 90 minutes in duration. The opportunity to connect with patients on a deeper level allows NDs to understand the medical and social needs of their patients on the physical, emotional, cognitive, *and* social levels.

Tribal by nature, we're all trying to do our best to find connection in our quickly globalizing world. It's time we work together across the medical landscape to address this issue.