

## **BROADCAST-The pandemic loosens its grip but loneliness epidemic keeps tight hold**

While society adjusts to the new normal of work, family, social interaction, along with an easing of health and safety protocols post-pandemic, behavioral health leaders say the residual impact on increasing loneliness among all age groups and populations can't be ignored.

Research has found that social isolation significantly increases a person's risk of premature death from all causes, a risk that may rival those of smoking, obesity, and physical inactivity.

According to [a study by Cigna](#), young adults are twice as likely to be lonely than seniors. Seventy-nine percent of adults aged 18 to 24 report feeling lonely compared to 41% of seniors aged 66 and older. This is consistent with earlier research.

Morgan Hurtado of Bloomington, Illinois is in her early 30s and has three younger boys. She works days. Her husband works second shift. Hurtado lives where she grew up and has longtime friends nearby. However, she says at least one other millennial friend has moved away and feels very disconnected.

**"I see him a lot on social media just doing things by himself or maybe on Snapchat just sitting at home, watching TV, not really going out and having face-to-face interactions in a large group setting where there, being a metropolitan area, there's plenty of opportunity to do that," she shared. (:24)**

As she looked at her own life, Hurtado realized she relies on her family for all of her intimate conversations and emotional support. She's is vowing to make more of an effort to meet with friends in person

**"Something I'm trying in my personal life as sort of an experiment if you will, is to limit my social media interactions or just limit my time as a whole on social media, forcing me to have those in-person interactions more often and maybe leading to new relationships, friendships." (:22)**

OSF HealthCare Behavioral Health Director says young people are often moving away from families and they're often not comfortable making new social connections.

**"We're now a very mobile workforce. Previously the kids who came back home worked and they were by family and they still had their high school friends. That dynamic is fading quite a bit," she suggested. (:12)**

Crowe advises millennials to limit their time on social media because it can distort a person's perspective

**"When you are on social media, a lot of what you're seeing is not reality. What we post are our best situations, our best self, our best opportunities and often when we look at that, we may not measure up to what our friends are doing or what our acquaintances are doing," according to Crowe. (:20)**

[Newer research from the AARP Foundation](#) showed the consequences of isolation and loneliness on nursing home residents' quality of life are alarming: 50% increased risk of developing dementia, a 32% increased risk of stroke and a nearly fourfold increased risk of death among heart failure patients.

Dr. Denise Dechow (pronounced DECK-oh), DO, a psychiatrist at OSF HealthCare who specializes in geriatric care, says the isolation of the pandemic was particularly hard on nursing home residents who were confined to their rooms for long periods.

**“Feelings of loneliness can lead to increased risk of depression, anxiety, substance use disorder, aggression, impulsivity and suicidal thoughts.” (:12)**

Dechow says many older Americans suffered from prolonged grief disorder because COVID-19 delayed the traditional rituals around death

**“And this has to do with prolonging symptoms of anxiety, depression, sadness and sleep disturbance. What we notice is that we can’t *not* participate in these rituals. These are important and must take place, even if it’s a year after someone has passed.” (:22)**

[OSF Silver Cloud](#) is a free online tool and phone app to help manage the feelings and causes of depression, anxiety or stress. OSF HealthCare also offers free [behavioral health navigation services](#) to help understand all resources available to you.