



# Social Isolation & Loneliness in Older Adults



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“Our **epidemic** of loneliness and isolation has been an underappreciated public health crisis that has harmed individual and societal health.”

Our relationships are a source of healing and well-being hiding in plain sight - one that can help us live healthier, more fulfilled, and more productive lives...”

U.S. Surgeon General Dr. Vivek Murthy  
*May 3, 2023*



# Social Isolation and Loneliness-What is the difference?

## Social Isolation

- Objective. The # of relations and contacts a person has
- when an individual **Lacks Opportunities** to be Socially Connected
- \*May not be unpleasant for the person; they may choose to isolate. Doesn't make a person lonely.

## Loneliness

- Subjective. A distressing *feeling*
- Can be felt regardless of whether they are alone or in the company of others
- Varying degrees of loneliness; there are differences in frequency, duration, and intensity.
- \*A person may be Lonely but not Socially Isolated and vice versa



At our  
Core,  
Humans  
are Social  
Beings

# Social Connectedness

creates a sense of belonging, being cared for, valued and supported.

“Connection is why we are here. [We are] wired to love, to be loved, and to belong. When [these] needs are not met, we don’t function as we were meant to. We break. We fall apart. We numb. We ache. We hurt others. We get sick.” -Brene Brown



**What does belonging look like to you?**

# Three Vital Components of Connection

## Structure

- # of relationships
- Variety of relationships (co-workers, friends, family, neighbor)
- Frequency of interactions

## Function

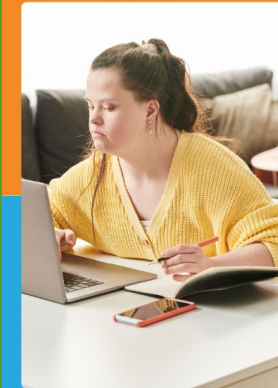
- Degree to which others can be relied upon for various needs

## Quality

- The degree to which relationships and interactions with others are
  - positive,
  - helpful,
  - satisfying

## Back to the Basics

*The Building Blocks of Connection*



Everyone has a story  
- when was the last time you listened to someone else's?

# Factors that Can Shape Social Connection

## Individual

- Chronic disease
- Sensory and functional impairments
- Mental health
- Physical health
- Personality
- Race
- Gender
- Financial status
- Life stage

## Relationships

- Structure, function, quality
- Household size
- Characteristics and behavior of others

## Community

- Outdoor space
- Housing
- Workplace
- Local government
- Local business
- Community organizations
- Health care
- Transportation

## Society

- Norms and values
- Public policies
- Tech environment and use
- Civic engagement
- Historical inequities

## Back to the Basics

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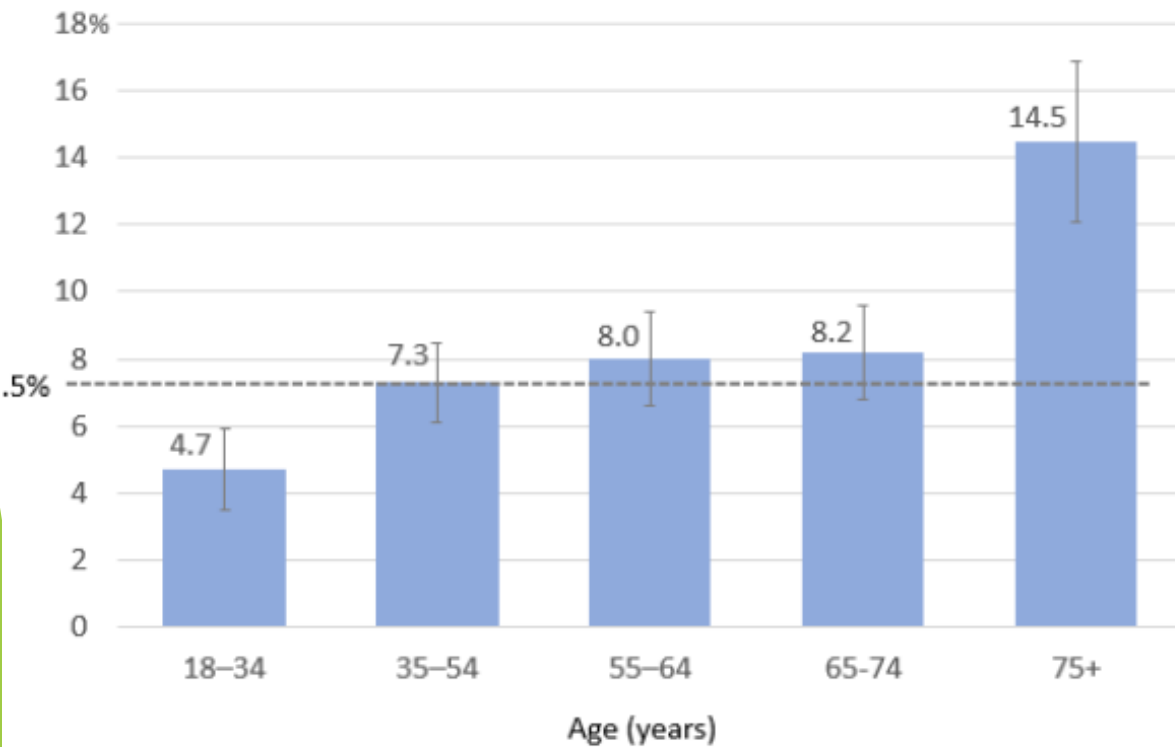
Where we are born, live, learn, work, play and age has an impact on our health.



**Social connection is more than a personal issue**

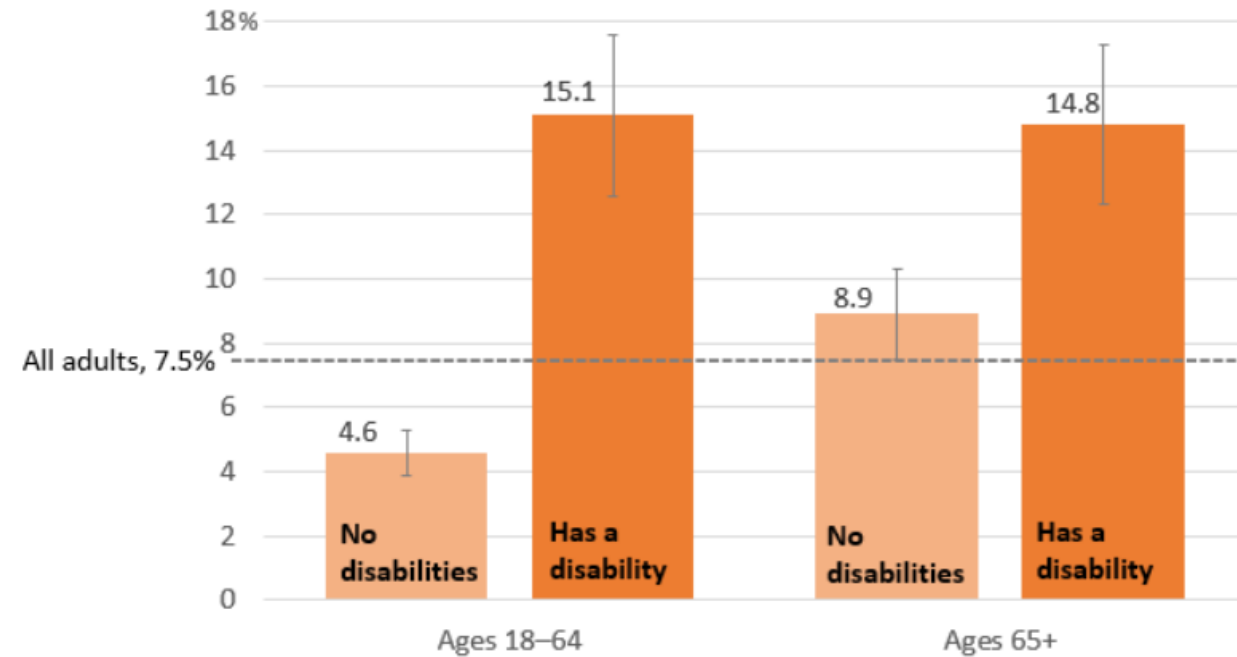
# Who is lonely?

Percent of adults who rarely or never get the social and emotional support they need by age group, WI, 2015, 2017, and 2020 combined



Adults ages 75 and older were the most likely to lack the social support they needed.

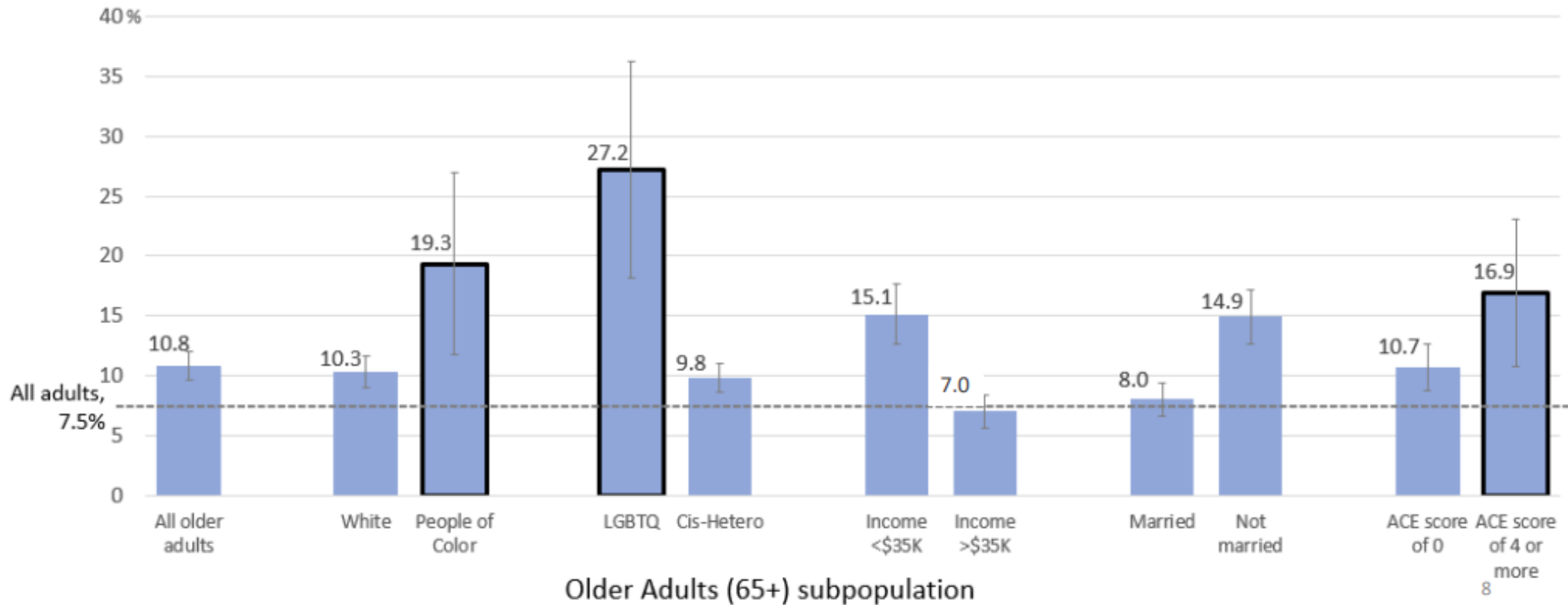
Percent of adults who rarely or never get the social and emotional support they need by age group and disability status, WI, 2015, 2017, and 2020 combined



Adults with disabilities were more likely to lack the social support they needed regardless of age

# At-risk groups

Percent of adults ages 65 and older who **rarely or never get the social and emotional support they need** by select characteristics, WI, 2015, 2017, and 2020 combined





# Risk Factors for Social Isolation and Loneliness

Chronic health conditions

Limited mobility

Living alone

Financial insecurity

Grief and loss

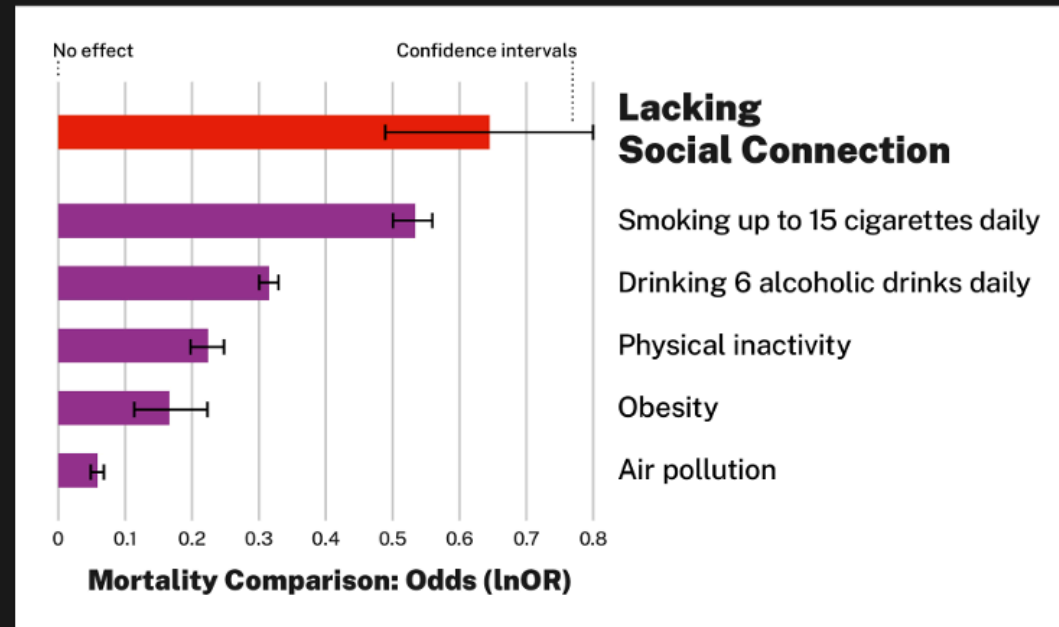
Lack of transportation

Cognitive impairment/dementia

Hearing/vision impairment

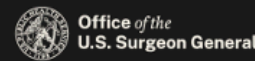
Caregiving responsibilities

# Lacking social connection is as dangerous as smoking up to 15 cigarettes a day.



**Comparison groups:** Complex measures of social integration: high v. low; not smoking v. smoking < 15 cigarettes daily; alcohol abstinence v. drinking > 6 alcoholic drinks daily; physical activity v. inactivity; low BMI v. high BMI; low air pollution v. high air pollution.

**Source:** Holt-Lunstad J, Robles TF, Sbarra DA. Advancing Social Connection as a Public Health Priority in the United States. *American Psychology*. 2017;72(6):517-530. doi:10.1037/amp0000103. This graph is a visual approximation.



Office of the  
U.S. Surgeon General

**FIGURE 4:** Lacking social connection is as dangerous as smoking up to 15 cigarettes a day.

# How does SIL affect health?

## Physical Health



- Increased progression of frailty
- Increased risk of dementia
- Decreased memory and learning
- Struggle in fighting off smaller illnesses

## Mental Health



- Increased risk for anxiety and depression
- Loss of self-confidence and self-esteem
- Daily routines and self-care may become harder to maintain
- Increased risk of substance and prescription drug abuse

# RX Social Connect: Social Isolation and Loneliness Reduction Project



- ▶ Goal: train community pharmacists in screening older adults for social isolation and loneliness (SIL) and ultimately referring participants to community resources and a mental health provider as needed for appropriate follow-up.



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SERVICES**

- ▶ A “social prescription”

# Why pharmacists?

- most accessible healthcare provider
- a pharmacist may be one of the few points of contact in their lives
- "Given the profound consequences of loneliness and isolation, *we have an opportunity, and an obligation, to make the same investments in addressing social connection* that we have made in addressing tobacco use, obesity, and the addiction crisis" – Vivek Murthy, U.S. Surgeon General



# How does it work?

## The UCLA 3-Item Loneliness Scale

Scale  
**3**

This scale comprises 3 questions that measure three dimensions of loneliness: relational connectedness, social connectedness and self-perceived isolation. The questions are:

- 1. How often do you feel that you lack companionship?**
- 2. How often do you feel left out?**
- 3. How often do you feel isolated from others?**

## Using this scale: how to score and interpret your results

In order to score somebody's answers, their responses should be coded as follows:

Response	Score
Hardly ever	1
Some of the time	2
Often	3

The scores for each individual question can be added together to give you a possible range of scores from 3 to 9. Researchers in the past have grouped people who score 3 – 5 as “not lonely” and people with the score 6 – 9 as “lonely”.<sup>19</sup>



- ▶ Widely used across the world – cited over 1,500 times
- ▶ Regularly asked as part of the English Longitudinal Study of Ageing (ELSA)
- ▶ Proven accurate in various deliveries (self-completed, face-to-face, and telephone)

# Follow- Up Assessment Vital Voices for Mental Health



- Living alone, general feelings of loneliness;
- Limited social interaction; few social contacts
- Concern with medical debt/bills piling up
- Limited mobility
- Difficulty completing daily tasks
- Difficulty preparing meals/ getting proper nutrition
- Lack of transportation
- Memory, dementia, neurocognitive concerns
- Caregiver status
- Hearing/vision loss
- Experiencing unresolved grief or loss; bereavement
- Self-identified as having fair or poor health; living with chronic conditions
- Uninsured
- Concerns with anxiety, depression, suicidal thoughts



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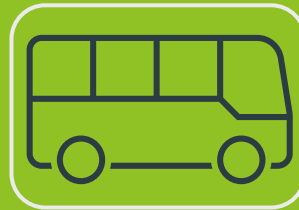
**BEHAVIORAL  
HEALTH SERVICES**



# Aging & Disabilities Services Resources



Vital Voices



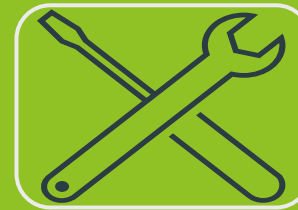
Older Adults  
Transportation  
Services (OATS)



Milwaukee County  
Caregiver Support  
Specialists



Dementia Care  
Specialists



ERAs Senior  
Network



Riverworks  
Financial  
Clinic



Milwaukee  
County Senior  
Centers



Milwaukee  
County Dining  
Sites/ Meals  
on Wheels



Jewish Family  
Services Late  
Life  
Counseling



Evidence  
Based  
Prevention  
Programs



Milwaukee  
County  
Behavioral  
Health  
Services

# What can I do to improve Social Connection in my community?

## Volunteer

Check out your local senior center, grab lunch at a dining site

Incorporate more small social interactions in your day



Invite others to participate in activities with you

**“Together, we can build a country that’s healthier, more resilient, less lonely, and more connected.”- Vivek Murthy, U.S. Surgeon General**

### Back to the Basics

*The Building Blocks of Connection*



Neighbors helping neighbors - check in with those around you. You could help change a lightbulb, mow their lawn, or just sit for a cup of coffee and chat.



Questions, comments, suggestions for  
increasing social connection?

Thank you!!!

Reach out anytime:

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