
Social Isolation and Loneliness

Many people who have, or had, cancer experience moments of isolation and loneliness. Being isolated or lonely can affect how you feel, both mentally and physically. It can cause anxiety, depression, and other types of mental distress.

If you are isolated or lonely, there are things you can do to take care of yourself and stay connected.

- [Understanding social isolation and loneliness](#)
- [Isolation, loneliness, and cancer](#)
- [Who is most at risk?](#)
- [What are the symptoms of loneliness?](#)
- [What if I like being alone?](#)
- [How does isolation and loneliness affect health?](#)
- [Tips for managing isolation and loneliness](#)
- [What are “third places” and how can they reduce loneliness?](#)
- [What can caregivers, friends, and family do to help?](#)
- [Find more support](#)

Understanding social isolation and loneliness

Social isolation and loneliness are related, but they aren't the same thing.

When you are **socially isolated**, you are physically alone or separated from others. You have very little contact or support from other people.

Loneliness is a *feeling*. It can happen when you are isolated, but it can also happen when you are surrounded by people. When you are lonely, you might feel like you don't have as many meaningful relationships, friendships, or connections as you would like to

have.

About 1 in 5 people living in the U.S. say they feel lonely often or all of the time. For people between the ages of 50 and 80, it's 1 in 3.

You can feel lonely even when you have lots of friends and family around you. Many people feel this way. This is especially common if you have, or had, cancer.

Isolation, loneliness, and cancer

People who have, or had, cancer are more likely to experience isolation and loneliness than people without cancer. They are more likely to struggle with anxiety, depression, and thoughts of suicide. Loneliness among cancer survivors is also linked to higher mortality (death) rates.

At any point in your cancer journey, it's normal to feel like you can't relate to other people. This can be very lonely. You might also feel powerless, or like no one understands or sees the "real" you.

You might feel:

- Like people are there for you physically, but not for anything deeper
- Like no one wants to listen or talk about the uncomfortable or messy parts of cancer
- Guilty for sharing negative thoughts when you "should" be thankful to be alive
- Afraid to tell others how afraid you are
- Empty or numb (or you might feel nothing at all)
- Like no one understands the real you
- Like other people are uncomfortable being around you

Loneliness is very common, but many people are afraid to talk about it. You might feel ashamed to share your struggles. You might also worry people will judge you. But talking about loneliness is one of the best ways to manage it. Sharing your story can also make it easier for other people to talk about their own loneliness.

Who is most at risk?

Social isolation and loneliness can happen to anyone. But some groups of people are at greater risk. This includes:

- Any marginalized group
- People and communities who have been underrepresented or under resourced
- People with disabilities
- Survivors of domestic violence, child abuse, or elder abuse
- People living in rural areas
- Single parent
- Single adults without children
- Younger and older adults
- Immigrants and non-English speaking individuals

People experience social isolation and loneliness in different ways. Everyone's situation is unique. But there are some common ways young adults, older adults, men, and women are affected.

Young adults

Over the years, loneliness in young adults has increased. Young adults between the ages of 18 and 22 are now one of the loneliest age groups after older adults.

Social media can have a big impact on feelings of isolation and loneliness in this age group. Major life changes, like starting college or a new career, also have an impact.

Men and women

Men and women often experience loneliness differently. Men are more likely to feel lonely, but women are more likely to reach out for support when they feel lonely.

Older adults

There are certain physical problems and life circumstances that many older adults face. These problems can make it hard to communicate or spend time with other people.

These life changes and physical problems include:

- Trouble hearing or seeing
- Trouble balancing, walking, or falling
- Multiple chronic illnesses
- Being retired or unemployed
- Losing loved ones

- Living alone

While older adults are among the loneliest age groups, they are less likely than young adults to reach out for support.

What are the symptoms of loneliness?

Many people are afraid to share that they feel lonely. Some people might not even realize that they're lonely. Here are some signs that you, or someone you know, might be experiencing loneliness:

- Feeling depressed or anxious most of the time
- Aggressive or passive behavior
- Worse sleep than usual
- Problems with memory, thinking, or focus
- Poor hygiene or self-care (like not showering or brushing teeth)

What if I like being alone?

You might enjoy spending time alone. This is healthy, and it can be healing. But there is a difference between enjoying time alone and self-isolation.

Self-isolation is when you distance yourself from other people. Avoiding everyone for long periods of time doesn't usually improve your well-being. Self-isolation is often about escaping, avoiding, or numbing unpleasant thoughts or beliefs.

Unfortunately, self-isolation often makes negative thoughts and beliefs worse. Self-isolating for long periods of time also increases your risk for developing:

- Anxiety
- Depression
- Thoughts of suicide (suicidal ideation)
- Intrusive thoughts (repetitive and often upsetting thoughts that you can't control)
- Substance use disorder

988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline

988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline provides 24/7, free and confidential support via phone or

chat for people in distress, resources for you or your loved ones, and best practices for professionals. Includes information on finding your local crisis center.

Phone: 988

- Interpretation for more than 240 languages
- ASL Videophone for people who are deaf or hard of hearing

Text: 988 (English and Spanish only)

Website: <http://suicidepreventionlifeline.org>¹

To get immediate help, you can also go to the emergency department or call 911.

How does isolation and loneliness affect health?

Social isolation is more damaging to your health than excess body weight and not being physically active.

Isolation, loneliness, and other types of mental distress can cause physical changes to your body. Just like other health conditions, these physical changes can increase inflammation and cause serious problems over time.

Research shows social isolation can be as harmful to your health as smoking up to 15 cigarettes a day.

Physical effects of social isolation

Social isolation increases your risk of:

- Heart disease
- Stroke
- Diabetes
- Infection
- Dementia
- [Depression](#)² and [anxiety](#)³
- Self-harm and thoughts of suicide

Physical effects of good social connection

Social connections are the relationships and interactions we have from day to day.

Just like social isolation can have a negative effect on your health, building social connections and meaningful relationships can have a positive effect. These connections have physical benefits and can even boost your immune system.

This happens in 3 main ways:

Your body

Social connection can affect your hormones and levels of inflammation.

Your mind

Social connection improves stress and triggers “feel-good” chemicals in your brain like oxytocin and serotonin. It can also improve your sense of safety, meaning, purpose, and resilience (your ability to cope with difficult things).

Your behaviors

People with good social connections get more physical activity, have better nutrition and sleep, and are less likely to use tobacco.

Social connections and managing your cancer

Increasing your social connections can also be an important part of managing your cancer.

This is because people with positive social connections are more likely to engage in healthy behaviors like physical activity and eating nutritious foods. They are also more likely to get preventive health care, including vaccinations and cancer screening tests.

There are many ways to build positive social connections. It is more about the quality of your social connections, not the quantity (amount).

Some examples of positive social connections are:

- Friendships
- Romantic relationships
- Family relationships

- Coworkers and colleagues
- Community, sports, or volunteer groups
- Faith or church groups
- Everyday conversations with strangers

Tips for managing isolation and loneliness

Just like other health problems, it's important to manage your isolation and loneliness so it doesn't get worse. Reaching out and being vulnerable with other people builds meaningful connections. These connections can help you create a sense of belonging. They can make you feel valued and less alone. Here are a few things you can do to take care of yourself and stay connected:

Join a support group

Look for an online or in-person support group for people with cancer (or their caregivers). Connecting with people who know what you're going through can feel comforting.

Sign up for an activity or class

Sign up for an activity or class. You can learn something new and meet other people who share your interests.

Check in with people

Make time to reach out and check in on other people. Call or text someone who might also be feeling lonely or isolated. Supporting others can help you feel less alone.

Be present with others

When you spend time with people, put away distractions. This shows others you value their time and appreciate your conversations with them. These types of interactions help build quality relationships.

Act with kindness and respect

Try to remember that other people in your life might be lonely too, even if it doesn't

seem like they are. Just as you have many thoughts and feelings no one knows about, so does everyone around you.

Don't assume someone isn't lonely because of who they are or how they appear on the outside. Sometimes, we intentionally or unintentionally hide the sad or lonely parts of ourselves from the outside world and social media.

Try mindfulness-based activities

Studies show that certain mindfulness-based activities can improve social connectivity and decrease feelings of loneliness.

Mindfulness is about noticing and being present with your thoughts, emotions, body, and the world around you. Our minds distract us from the present moment all the time, so it's easy to get caught up in thoughts about the past or future.

Mindfulness takes lots of repeated and intentional practice, but it can help you stay connected to the present moment. Noticing more around you (such as in nature, moments of joy, or even moments of grief) can help you feel more connected to the world.

Mindfulness also encourages self-reflection (thinking about your own thoughts and actions). This can help you better understand why you feel lonely, what you want more of in your life, and how you can become more connected to others.

Learn more about [practicing mindfulness and relaxation](#)⁴.

Meet your community

Check with your local public library or community center for groups and events in your neighborhood. This might include social events, community service, or clubs with other people who are looking to connect.

What are “third places” and how can they reduce loneliness?

Third places are another important part of managing loneliness and social isolation. **A third place is any public space where people gather** (other than work, home, or school).

Third places are a great way to connect with people at your own pace. At a third place, you can choose to talk and interact with people, or you can choose to be around other

people without talking to them.

Some third places shown to improve loneliness include:

- Coffee shops, cafes, and restaurants
- Museums, libraries, and parks
- Churches and faith centers
- Social and sports clubs
- Salons and barbershops
- Community, youth, and senior centers

If you aren't ready to talk to others or jump into a class, you can simply spend time together in a shared space like a coffee shop. You still benefit from being around others even if you never talk to them.

What can caregivers, friends, and family do to help?

It's hard to know how to help someone who feels lonely or isolated. But even a small gesture can make a big difference. Here are some ideas:

Invite them to talk about their cancer (or not)

Tell them it's okay to talk with you about their cancer. They might not bring it up because they don't want to burden you. Let them know you are here to listen.

Tell them it's okay if they **don't** want to talk about their cancer. They might want to talk about things that make them feel "normal," like what's going on at work or a show you're watching.

Meet them where they are

Ask them if they want advice or if they just want support. If they aren't looking for advice, try not to give it. Resist the urge to try to cheer them up or fix them. Meet them where they are and just hold space for them to share without judgement.

If you don't know what to say, that's okay

If you freeze or don't know what to say, you can just tell the truth: *"I don't even know what to say, but I care about you so much and I'm here for you."*

Be open about your own feelings and fears

Be open with them. If you're scared, tell them. Hiding it doesn't make the situation any better. Hearing how you feel might help them see they aren't alone.

Seek out short moments of human connection

Don't be afraid to touch, hug, or shake hands (if the other person is okay with this). These short moments of human connection can mean a lot to someone with cancer who is feeling alone.

Ask them what they need

Ask them for 3 specific things you can do to be there for them. This could be doing a load of laundry, bringing their favorite treat, or grabbing dinner and talking.

Offer to help with chores

Offer to help with things they need to get done around the house, like grabbing groceries or taking care of a pet. This way, you'll spend time together while also helping with their to-do list.

Find ways to connect virtually

If you can't be there in person, virtual connections can help someone feel less alone. Even if you do spend time together in person, online games and apps are another chance to connect.

Keep sending invitations

Don't stop inviting someone to do things just because they have cancer. Simply being included and invited is meaningful, even if they can't go.

Take care of yourself, too

Caregivers, friends, and family of people with cancer can also feel isolated and lonely. These tips apply to you, too.

Find more support

Cancer Survivors Network

An online community where people with cancer, survivors, and caregivers can connect with others 24/7.

Cancer Help ⁵

Contact the ACS cancer helpline to get answers and information

MHA - Mental Health America

Find a counselor or mental health provider.

Hyperlinks

1. suicidepreventionlifeline.org/
2. www.cancer.org/cancer/managing-cancer/side-effects/emotional-mood-changes/depression.html
3. www.cancer.org/cancer/managing-cancer/side-effects/emotional-mood-changes/anxiety.html
4. www.cancer.org/cancer/survivorship/coping/practice-mindfulness-and-relaxation.html
5. www.cancer.org/about-us/what-we-do/providing-support.html

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Last Revised: June 26, 2024

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<https://www.cancer.org/cancer/acs-medical-content-and-news-staff.html>

Our team is made up of doctors and oncology certified nurses with deep knowledge of cancer care as well as editors and translators with extensive experience in medical writing.

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