

THE SPARTAN SHIELD



the epidemic of loneliness

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Introduction: The Epidemic of Loneliness

By Anna Boens

“You can feel lonely even if you have a lot of people around you, because loneliness is about the quality of your connections,” U.S. Surgeon General Dr. Vivek Murthy stated in his advisory, released to the public on May 23.

Murthy’s advisory, roughly 60 pages long, declares the United States to be experiencing yet another epidemic: one of loneliness. The advisory establishes that loneliness is caused by the advancements of modern society that have played a role in decreasing social connection, leaving Americans across the country grappling with feelings of isolation.

This increase in loneliness began around two decades ago with the creation and popularization of social media, he explained. In-person relationships have become increasingly difficult in the wake of social media’s popularity, and younger generations are the most susceptible to the woes of social media.

While online platforms give people the ability to connect with users from around the world, many lack connections with the people around them. Social media, among other causes, have contributed to a culture of isolation and loneliness in the United States.

Another cause of poor social connection between people is the amount of change Americans have

been subject to in recent years. “In the last few decades, we’ve just lived through a dramatic pace of change. We move more, we change jobs more often,” stated Murthy.

With the amount of lonely Americans increasing in recent years, Murthy has come up with a strategy to strengthen connections.

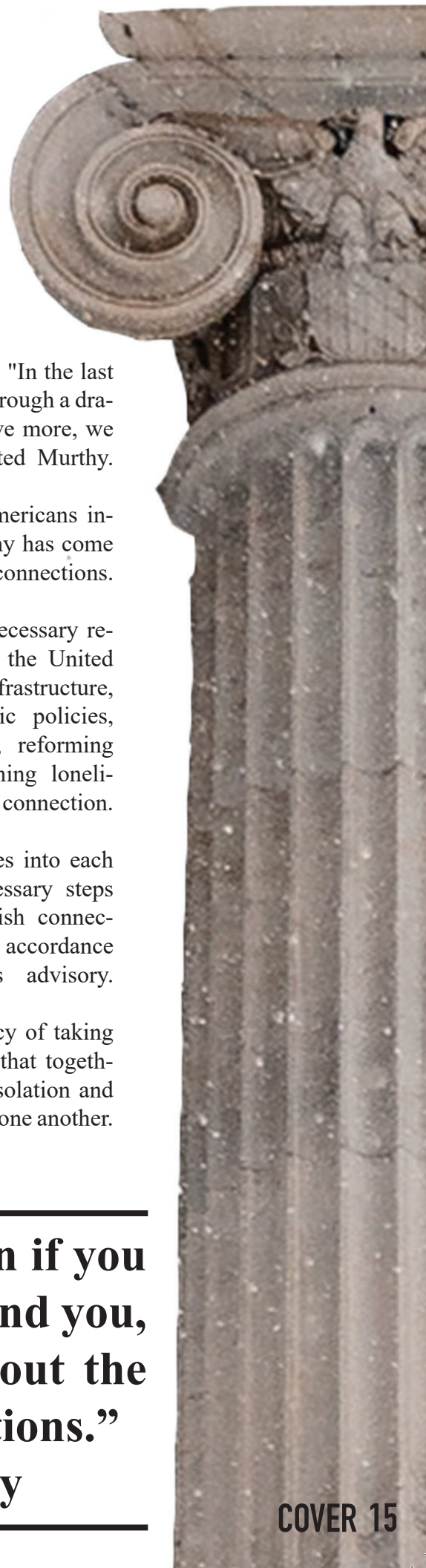
He established six pillars of necessary reform to combat loneliness in the United States: strengthening social infrastructure, creating pro-connection public policies, mobilizing the health sector, reforming digital environments, researching loneliness and fostering a culture of connection.

This edition’s cover story dives into each pillar, expanding on the necessary steps the U.S. must take to establish connectivity and community in accordance with the surgeon general’s advisory.

Murthy emphasized the urgency of taking action against loneliness, and that together, Americans can overcome isolation and create deeper connections with one another.

“You can feel lonely even if you have a lot of people around you, because loneliness is about the quality of your connections.”

- Dr. Vivek Ramsey



Fostering Connection: The Imperative for Social Infrastructure to Combat Loneliness

By Megan Kay Montgomery

lined in the advisory emphasizes the importance of supporting social connection. This is introduced as strengthening social infrastructures, such as physical assets, programs and local policies.

Physical assets include the public resources of a city, including churches, parks and public libraries. Community programs include volunteering, clubs and member associations, and local policies include things like public transportation and housing. These infrastructures are often put in place for a specific purpose, but they offer an added bonus: social connection. Riding the bus or joining

a local club can help abridge the disconnection felt in towns across the country.

Isolation has only increased in recent years in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. The isolation felt during quarantine has lingered, leaving millions still grappling with feelings of loneliness and instability. Communities have scarcely recovered, proving that the structures within a community are a major factor of how they stay connected. Places like churches, libraries, parks and coffee shops are examples of structures that can bring a feeling of connection to the community.

The National Institution of Health released a recent study about the effects of loneliness on one's health, finding that a myriad of health effects from depression to heart disease threaten those dealing with loneliness. The study also stated those who live in deprived neighborhoods are more likely to be struck by this epidemic of loneliness. "Working for a social cause or purpose with others who share your values and are trusted partners puts you in contact with others and helps develop a greater sense of community," the study explained.

A town can decrease their residents' loneli-

ness and health risks by putting more effort and pride into their buildings, ultimately increasing the quality of their physical assets. LeClaire is a great exam-

ple of how a town with valued physical infrastructure can improve social connection. LeClaire has its own public library, city hall, grocery store, churches and downtown area.

LeClaire resident and PV senior Sidney Love has experienced firsthand how the town's setup is beneficial to residents. Love expressed how she feels the downtown area fosters connection within the community. "I never feel alone, even just watching people walk past me." The small town has also revamped one of their parks, adding newer playground equipment and a dog park.

While small towns can't solve this epidemic alone, every town in the United States can and should take more time and energy to save falling buildings, add public transportation and provide the community with better housing, as Murthy emphasizes in his advisory. With these revamped physical assets, programs and policies, the government could prevent the nation's epidemic from getting worse.

Volunteering programs and clubs are great opportunities for people to feel connected and develop a sense of pride in their communities. Even simply hosting more public events can add structure to communities. With almost weekly activities happening in LeClaire, it's no wonder that the town has such an interconnected community, Love described.

Bettendorf resident and PV senior Ethan Mentzer explained that another way to fight loneliness and isolation is to be involved in programs. "There's just a certain connection you feel with the people in the community when you're more involved. Being a part of Young Life, for example, has really changed my outlook of the community and the people in it," Mentzer said.

While Love and Mentzer don't reside in the same town or participate in the same activities, they both believe in one thing; a stable community built with pride and filled with active residents is the least-likely place for loneliness to be found. Murthy concludes the first pillar's description by emphasizing that communities need to help rebuild the connections lost during the pandemic to strengthen social ties and combat isolation.

There is no doubt about it: Americans are lonely.

Nearly one in four Americans have reported feelings of loneliness, with citizens ages 19 to 25 having reported being the most lonely, according to a recent Meta-Gallup national survey.

But U.S. surgeon general Dr. Vivek Murthy outlined a possible solution in his advisory, released on May 23. The 60-page advisory establishes six pillars of reform to bring Americans together and overcome a culture rooted in isolation.

The first pillar out-

Living to Work, Working to Die: the Need for Pro-Connectivity Policies

By Ayah Alsheikha

The American Dream is long expired. Hustle culture is quickly burning out America's corporate base of workers, leaving them overworked and devoid of connectivity. The fast-paced nature of American hustle culture has led many to believe that rest is a luxury they can't afford. This relentless pursuit of success has enamored American workers, motivating many to climb the corporate ladder, expecting success at the top. But for some, the top seems to permanently remain out of reach.

The hope for success strains workers to the point of desperation, prompting many to sacrifice time with family, relationships and even sleep just to get ahead. Former Yahoo CEO Marissa Meyer controversially explained how she often worked as many as 130 hours a week, saying it was possible "if you're strategic about when you sleep, when you shower, and how often you go to the bathroom."

But when is it too much?

U.S. Surgeon General Dr. Vivek Murthy has declared the U.S. to be in an epidemic of loneliness. In a society that values productivity and achievement, the toll of loneliness is often underestimated. American culture prioritizes hard work and expects people to make sacrifices for success, but fails to prioritize connection and community. Even beyond work life, Americans lack infrastructure that supports human contact and relationships.

From the beginning of a young American's life in the education system to the workplace, loneliness plagues every step of the way.

College sophomore Sophia Heim commented on how the isolating culture of education leads into the workforce. "In college, you live alone, you walk to class alone and you eat alone. It is hard to coordinate with friends to do anything because there is no public transportation anywhere," she said. "And then you get a job, and you realize that it is always going to be this way. Coworkers are cordial, but it ends there. I don't think I've made real, meaningful connections at work."

Loneliness is a pervasive issue in American society and affects people from all walks of life. Despite technology's ability to foster connectivity across the globe, hustle culture has created a sense of isolation and loneliness right at home. The relentless focus on individual success often leaves

little time for nurturing genuine relationships, leading to a paradox where people are digitally more connected than ever, yet suffer from a lack of meaningful, in-person connections.

And a solution, Murthy believes, must come from a cultural paradigm shift in the norms of work and life. "Advancing this culture [of connection] requires individuals and leaders to seek opportunities to do so in public and private dialogue, schools, workplaces, and in the forces that shape our society like media and entertainment, among others," he stated in the 2023 Surgeon General's Advisory.

Murthy also emphasized the responsibility of companies to ensure that there is an interconnected and healthy culture in the workplace. "[Companies must] put in place policies that protect workers' ability to nurture their relationships outside work including respecting boundaries between work and non-work time, supporting caregiving responsibilities, and creating a culture of norms and practices that support these policies."

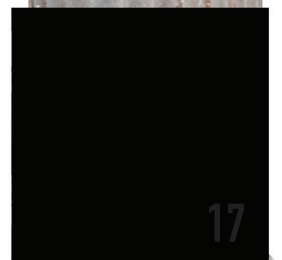
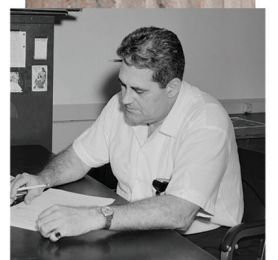
But this culture shift is not the responsibility of companies alone; the government, according to Murthy, is obligated to enact policies that foster a healthy work environment as well. This includes paid parental leave and public transportation.

What Murthy calls a "Connection-in-All-Policies" approach obliges all forms of government to work towards mitigating the effects of loneliness. "Examples of pro-connection policies include paid leave, which enables individuals to spend time with family during critical early life stages, and increased access to public transit, which allows individuals to physically connect more easily," the advisory explained.

The effects of loneliness go beyond that of a mental toll: the Surgeon General's advisory compared the health effects of loneliness

to that of smoking 15 cigarettes a day. Loneliness is at blame for increased rates of heart disease, strokes and dementia in the United States, among other increasingly common ailments. "It's hard to put a price tag, if you will, on the amount of human suffering that people are experiencing right now," Murthy said in an interview with All Things Considered.

The effects of loneliness on Americans are beyond quantification and Murthy believes that systemic changes are not only necessary, but imminently needed. "We [must] look for ways to help others. Service is one of the most powerful antidotes to loneliness that we have. And I feel confident that we can overcome this challenge with loneliness and build the kind of connected lives that we all want."



A Silent Epidemic: Mobilizing the Health Sector to Address Loneliness in Patient Care

By Emily Thoreson

U.S. Surgeon General Dr. Vivek Murthy established six pillars of reform in his advisory, released on May 23, declaring the U.S. to be in an epidemic of loneliness. Murthy outlined six solutions to foster connections between Americans.

“Patients often feel

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In a country crippled by loneliness, many believe the instigator of the problem lies in a simple lack of social infrastructure and social media. However, the opposite may be true, and hospitals may be partially at fault for fostering isolated and depressed environments. Mental illnesses often develop as a result of loneliness, and hospital environments do little to prevent patients from feeling isolated.

In order to keep patients safe in a hospital, strict health codes are implemented to establish protective barriers between patients and the outside world. However, this enforced isolation can cause patients to feel utterly alone as they grapple with health issues in the hospital. Murthy emphasized the importance of fostering connection for long-term patients in his advisory. “We must also create systems that enable and incentivize health care providers to educate patients as part of preventative care, assess for social disconnection, and respond to patients’ health-relevant social needs.”

Despite the dozens of doctors bouncing in and out of a patient’s room, a

WIFED

during their hospital visits.”

patient still manages to feel alone. And this is by no mistake: doctors are specifically trained to create an emotional barrier between patients and themselves. A study by the University of South Carolina analyzed the doctor-patient dynamic, and how patients often feel objectified during their hospital visits. “Both parties feel rushed during the typical 15 minutes of appointment time, which is inadequate for real relationships to form. They found that primary care patients had only 12 seconds to speak before being interrupted by their physician.”

Doctors tend to grow desensitized to patient care, often viewing their vulnerable patients as mere tasks to accomplish. For the patient, however, they may feel scared or stressed as they grapple with an illness. Doctors are trained to provide necessary medical care, but they often fail to provide genuine comfort or affirmation to their patients. Psychology author Charles G. Morris explained the importance of empathy, and how sensitivity is crucial when dealing with patients. “Empathy depends not only on one’s ability to identify someone else’s emotions but also on one’s capacity to put oneself in the other person’s place and to experience an appropriate emotional response.”

The isolating environment in hospitals has only gotten more extreme since March of 2020 when hospitals across the globe went into lockdown. There was a huge influx of patients, yet visitors were no longer allowed into the hospital for fear of spreading COVID-19 to already compromised patients.

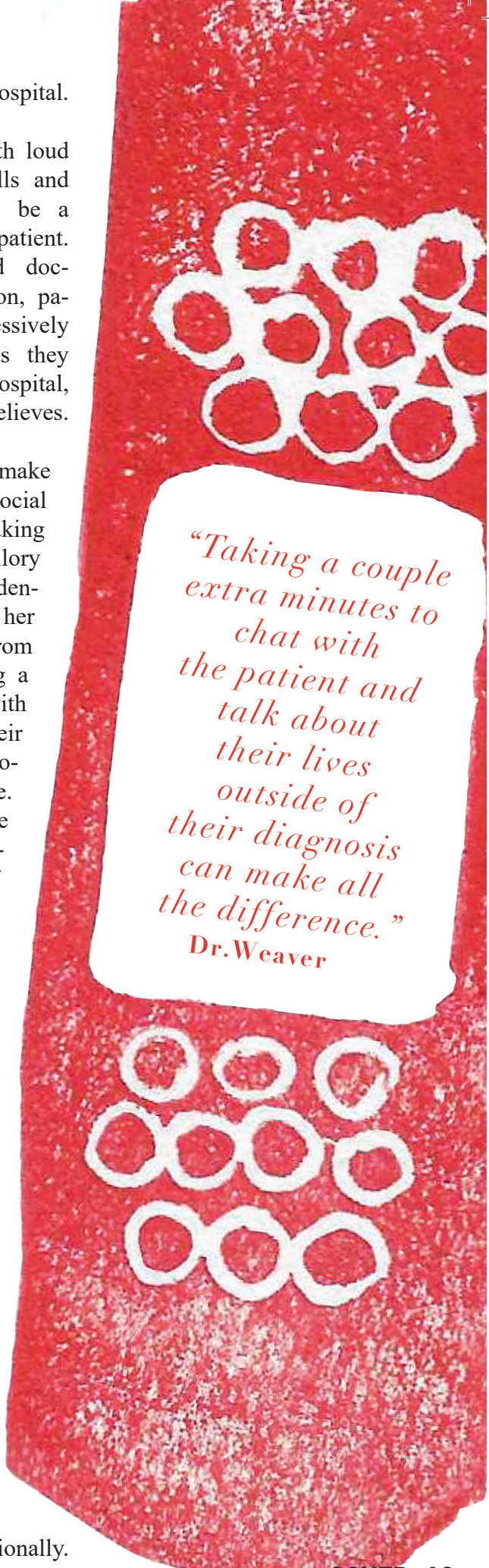
Now, almost three years later, many hospitals are still limiting visitors, only amplifying the isolation patients already feel in the hospital. Social connections within hospitals are vital to emotionally support sick patients as they deal with the stress and

unknowns of being in the hospital.

A cramped room echoing with loud noises, bearing colorless walls and meaningless decorations can be a hostile environment for a patient. Combined with desensitized doctors and no human connection, patients are bound to feel excessively scared and uncomfortable as they deal with illness in the hospital, as Dr. Mallory Weaver believes.

However, there are ways to make the hospital a place where social interaction is encouraged, making for happier patients. Dr. Mallory Weaver, a student in the residency program in Peoria, shared her thoughts on the epidemic. “From a provider perspective, taking a couple extra minutes to chat with the patient and talk about their lives outside of their diagnosis can make all the difference. For pediatric patients, child-life specialists are fabulous at providing activities and a sense of normalcy to absolutely abnormal situations. I wish for a version of child life for adult patients, especially those with anxiety and depression.”

The surgeon general recommends that new programs be integrated into the yearly classes doctors take to renew their medical licenses. These programs would give healthcare providers resources to understand how to emotionally support patients while also taking care of their physical health needs. By increasing the education of loneliness in the medical field, healthcare providers can better serve the needs of their patients, both physically and emotionally.



“Taking a couple extra minutes to chat with the patient and talk about their lives outside of their diagnosis can make all the difference.”

Dr. Weaver

Changing Digital Landscapes: The Urgent Need for Reform in Virtual Spaces

By Abigail Moroney

Teenagers spend, on average, at least 4 hours a day on social media. Social media platforms like Instagram and Snapchat have seen exponential growth in users since their conception in 2010 and 2011, respectively. Despite the fact that social media's creation is relatively recent, its impact has been tremendous. The

rise of technology, specifically social media, has had profound effects across the world by connecting communities that would have otherwise never been associated with one another.

Technology has had an arguably positive impact on everything in people's lives, from school to work and even entertainment. But its role in cyberbullying, decreased privacy and gaming addictions seem to be overlooked. During the Covid-19 pandemic, technology use saw an all time high; doctor's appointments, jobs and essentially all forms of communication were only available through technology. As a result, the national average

screen time per day almost doubled.

While social media does not directly cause depression, numerous studies, such as one by the Child Mind Institute, found that excessive social media use is correlated to mental illnesses like anxiety and depression. Time spent scrolling on social media can cause feelings of social isolation, as users become preoccupied by comparing their lives to those of influencers they see on their feeds.

In addition, users often find themselves so distracted by their online presence that they forget to maintain their in-person relationships which can have devastating effects



on mental health. Caroline Miller, the editorial director of the Child Mind Institute, shared that “In several studies, teenage and young adult users who spend the most time on Instagram, Facebook and other platforms were shown to have a substantially (from 13 to 66 percent) higher rate of reported depression than those who spent the least time.”

In addition to its role in causing mental illness among users, technology has also facilitated bullying in a new way: cyberbullying. Cyberbullying allows bullies to hide behind a screen, giving them full reign to be vicious, often without repercussions. Cyberbullying is not hindered by distance either, as technology allows for instant and widespread sharing of information, or in this case, social negativity.

Evolve Adolescent Behavioral Health, a research clinic dedicated to research in adolescent cognitive function, stated, “Social media cyber bullying puts teens at a higher risk of developing depression and anxiety. It can affect their self-esteem, cause them to isolate themselves from peers, or push them to turn to substances as a way to self-medicate the effects of cyberbullying.”

More problems arise with technology and social media as platforms develop tactics to capture users’ attention. Addiction is a key concern for many as users’ screen time increases. Data sharing is a tactic that social media platforms use, allowing algorithm analytics to collect information about individual users. These algorithms can then craft individualized content that appeals to the user, such as ads and video recommendations. This personalization of content makes the social media rabbit hole a difficult one to crawl out of.

These algorithms also present a threat to one’s personal information. Spam websites and hackers can easily obtain this stored information and personal data, putting many peoples’ online information at risk for exploitation. As a generation that spends the most time on social media comparatively, Gen-Z is the most susceptible to online scams and identity theft. Senior Gracie Collins posts on social media frequently. She shared her experience with the dangers of putting one’s information up for public display. “I do not accept cookies from websites. I don’t know what information they are taking from me but I do know that unsecured access may let in hackers.”

With a new and better understanding of technology, problems like social disconnection, cyberbullying and data breaches can be solved.

Technology has changed society in many ways, but in order to mitigate its adverse effects on socialization, research emphasizes the importance of forming in-person relationships, rather than online ones.

“This personalization of content makes the social media rabbit hole a difficult one to crawl out of.”

In his public health advisory, U.S. Surgeon General Dr. Vivek Murthy restated the importance of social media awareness. “Advancing research in this area is essential. With that said, the existing evidence illustrates that we have reason to be concerned about the impact of some kinds of technology use on our relationships, our degree of social connection, and our health.”





The American Way: Unveiling Western Culture's Role in Loneliness

By Chloe Kramer

Upon turning 18 in the United States, there is a set of steps one is expected to follow, thought to be designed for success. One is expected to graduate high school, attend a 4 year university, completely detach from parental dependency and become a fully functioning adult overnight. This rapid process offers little time for adjustment, leaving young Americans stuck in the crossroads of youth and maturity. But what are the consequences of these huge lifestyle changes on young Americans?

U.S. Surgeon General Dr. Vivek H. Murthy recently released a report declaring that the country is facing a new epidemic; one of loneliness. The advisory emphasizes the necessity of a cultural shift in order to promote connectivity, also touching on the isolating culture of rapid growth.

The report focuses on American culture, specifically its contribution

to the loneliness felt across the country. Society creates conditions which result in unintentional isolation, threatening physical and mental consequences from heart disease to depression.

Major changes in Americans' lives, such as going to college or starting a new job, can trigger feelings of stress over a loss of control, and can even cause a temporary condition called adjustment disorder. Those suffering from the condition experience abnormal sadness, anxiety and trouble sleeping. As Americans are rapidly pushed to make significant changes in their lives, adjustment disorder increasingly emerges as a risk.

Around the world, different cultures maintain norms for when a child moves out of their parents' home. In traditional Asian and Middle Eastern countries, it is natural that a child only moves out when they get married. Even in a relatively modernized country like Italy, the average age of a child moving out of their parents' home is 26 years old.

A professor at Yale University, Dr. Laurie Santos, was asked about if she sees this epidemic in young people in a PBS interview. She said "Nationally, among college students, we see levels of loneliness around 60 percent, which was so striking to me. These are students who are young, who are living on campus, often in the dorms with other students". This lack of abridging between high school and college leaves American youth feeling panicked, confused, and utterly alone.

But the U.S.' culture of independence transcends the rite of passage of moving into a dorm or getting a new job. The saying "it takes a village" is heavily applied in other cultures. When a new mother gives birth in many Latin American

countries, a tradition called La Cuarentena is enacted where family members of the new parents take care of the budding family for a month. This care includes cooking, cleaning and serving the family's every need so the parents can focus on bonding with their new child.

Cultural practices like La Cuarentena are a pillar of connectivity in other countries, forming bonds and strengthening social connections and reliance. Murthy said in an interview with Vox "What I realized is that whether people were struggling with addiction or depression or violence in their communities, what was weighing on them most was the sense of having to deal with these challenges all alone."

Murthy's proposed solution first aims to bring awareness to this nationwide problem through the power of information. He emphasizes the importance of the development of a national research program to obtain data and information regarding loneliness and social disconnection in the United States.

"Public understanding of the essential role of social connection in health and well-being is critical to...understanding the driving forces of connection and disconnection, and how we can be more effective and efficient in addressing these states," Murthy stated in the advisory. Combating social isolation and restructuring American culture to promote connectivity and community is emphasized in the advisory as a method of curing the U.S.' loneliness epidemic, and establishing a stronger, interconnected society.

Trapped in Isolation: The Importance of Establishing a Culture of Connectivity

By Odelia Ayika

Life can be a torrential downpour of distractions, pulling people away from what matters most: relationships, meaningful connections and core values. However, there are many other factors contributing to the growing epidemic of loneliness in America, and some demographics including queer people, immigrants and young adults seem to be disproportionately affected by this wave of isolation.

Meaningful connections are indisputably vital to thrive and flourish as a human being. However, today's society arguably is not the most conducive environment for building and maintaining deep relationships. There are many detriments caused by social isolation that stem beyond its psychological disadvantages.

According to the Center of Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), prolonged social isolation or feelings of loneliness can lead to an increased risk of stroke by 32%, heart disease by 29%, dementia by 50% and can even cause type 2 diabetes. While subconsciously, the concepts of physical and mental wellbeing are often separated into different categories, they are inextricably linked in a way that simply does not allow one to have no impact on the other.

Psychology teacher Ann Berger detailed the dangers of isolation. "Isolating ourselves from our number one most important biological need -connection with other people- is dangerous to our psychological well being but also our physiological well being." Lack of social connection can also lead to an increased risk of depression, anxiety, addiction, suicide and self harm. "The body keeps score of what happens to us emotionally and psychologically." Berger explained.

There are a multitude of factors responsible for the recent rise of loneliness in the US, affecting citizens across the country. But some groups of people are inherently more susceptible to loneliness. For instance, studies have reported that people of the LGBTQ community have higher levels of loneliness in comparison to their cis-gendered, heterosexual counterparts. This often stems from lack of family support or discrimination, as well as many other factors. Immigrants are also significantly more vulnerable to feelings of isolation due to language barriers and discrimination.

Young people are also among the most vulnerable to isolation because of the stage of life they are in. Many are just discovering their identities, passions and friends, and the sudden shift of leaving home for university can be extremely daunting. Senior Jayden Conner reflected on the effect the epidemic has on young adults. "As a senior, it's very hard because it's easy to overthink the rest of your life, especially if you don't have it all figured out, and that can be very lonely," she stated.

Fostering social connectedness as a society can occur in many forms, such as maintaining and pursuing interpersonal relationships and building community-centered connections. When regularly practiced, these core values - service, respect, kindness and empathy- allow people to come together and build strong relationships. "If we have to see each other's humanity and actually participate in it in real time, I think we would perhaps see a decrease in vitriol towards each other in our treatment of each other." Berger reflected.

Research has shown that committing acts of service for others not only benefits those in need: it also brings a sense of belonging, connection and happiness for both people involved. People may come from different economic, religious and ethnic backgrounds, but by choosing not to condemn people for their differences and instead treating all people with respect and kindness, a culture of community can emerge in place of loneliness and. Ex-

pers say consistently enacting these virtues in all aspects of society is a major step that needs to be taken in order to combat this epidemic of loneliness in the U.S.

