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The Power of Connection

We often overlook that true health and wellness go beyond eating well, staying active, and taking care of our bodies. While those physical habits are essential, well-being also includes nurturing our social health, or the quality of our relationships, and our ability to build meaningful connections with others. According to recent data, one in six Americans reports feeling lonely or socially isolated, with both men and women equally affected. Social isolation is an objective condition that refers to having little or no contact, relationships, or support from others. It carries a serious risk of a 32% chance of early death. Loneliness, on the other hand, is the emotional experience of feeling disconnected, unseen, or lacking close relationships. It also has a large impact on well-being, raising the risk of early death by 14%.

It's important to understand that persistent loneliness or social isolation is not a normal state. When someone experiences feelings of disconnection and emotional discomfort for six to eight weeks or longer, it may be a sign of depression. It is important to address this issue early with support from a mental health professional. While both men and women experience loneliness at similar rates, there are notable differences in how they respond. Women are more likely to cultivate broader support networks, turning to friends, family, counselors, or even online communities for connection. Women tend to communicate more frequently with their close friends by interacting over social media, texting, or talking on the phone than men. This proactive social engagement can serve as a buffer against the harmful effects of loneliness. For both genders, however, a spouse or partner remains the most common and relied-upon source of social support.

Interestingly, older adults (50+) report lower levels of loneliness compared to younger generations. This may be because older individuals grew up in a time when social institutions like schools, churches, workplaces, and local organizations played a bigger role in daily life. These institutions created built-in opportunities for regular face-to-face social interaction. In contrast, younger generations today engage in remote learning or work and heavily rely on digital communication for connection. While technology may seem impersonal, research suggests that even texting can foster meaningful social bonds.

When individuals feel socially connected, they are more likely to have a sense of identity and belonging, both of which promote social health. Feeling part of a group can improve mood, reduce stress, and even lower the risk of chronic illness. Building and maintaining healthy relationships is not just something “extra”; it’s a foundational part of living a long, meaningful, and healthy life.

Information comes from Kansas State University Publications.