

# Our Epidemic of Loneliness and Isolation



2023

---

The U.S. Surgeon General's Advisory on the  
Healing Effects of Social Connection and Community



The background of the slide is a light beige color, populated with numerous small, stylized human figures. These figures are rendered in a variety of colors including red, orange, yellow, green, blue, and purple. They are depicted in various poses and activities, such as walking, standing, and interacting with each other, creating a sense of a diverse and active community.

# **What is Social Connection ?**

Our relationships and interactions with family, friends, colleagues, and neighbors including our connection through our neighborhoods, digital environments, schools, and workplaces.



The background of the slide is a light beige color, populated with numerous colorful, stylized silhouettes of people in various poses and sizes. These silhouettes are scattered across the entire frame, creating a sense of a diverse and active community. The colors used for the silhouettes include red, orange, yellow, green, blue, purple, and pink. Some silhouettes are simple, while others show more detail like a person walking a dog or a person using a cane.

# **Why Social Connection Matters**

Social Connection is critical for:

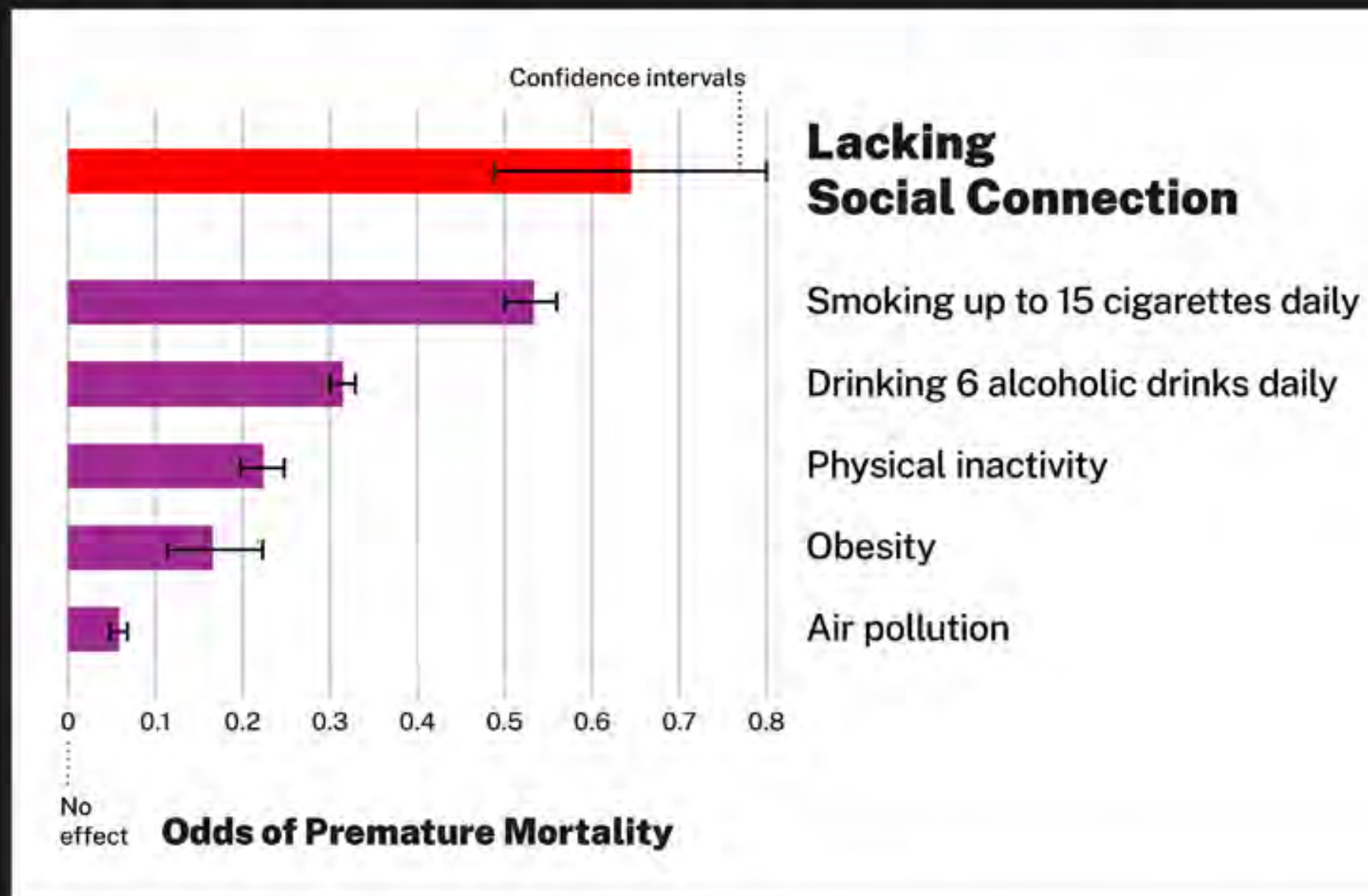
- individual health
- population health
- community safety
- resilience
- prosperity



# Individual Health Outcomes

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

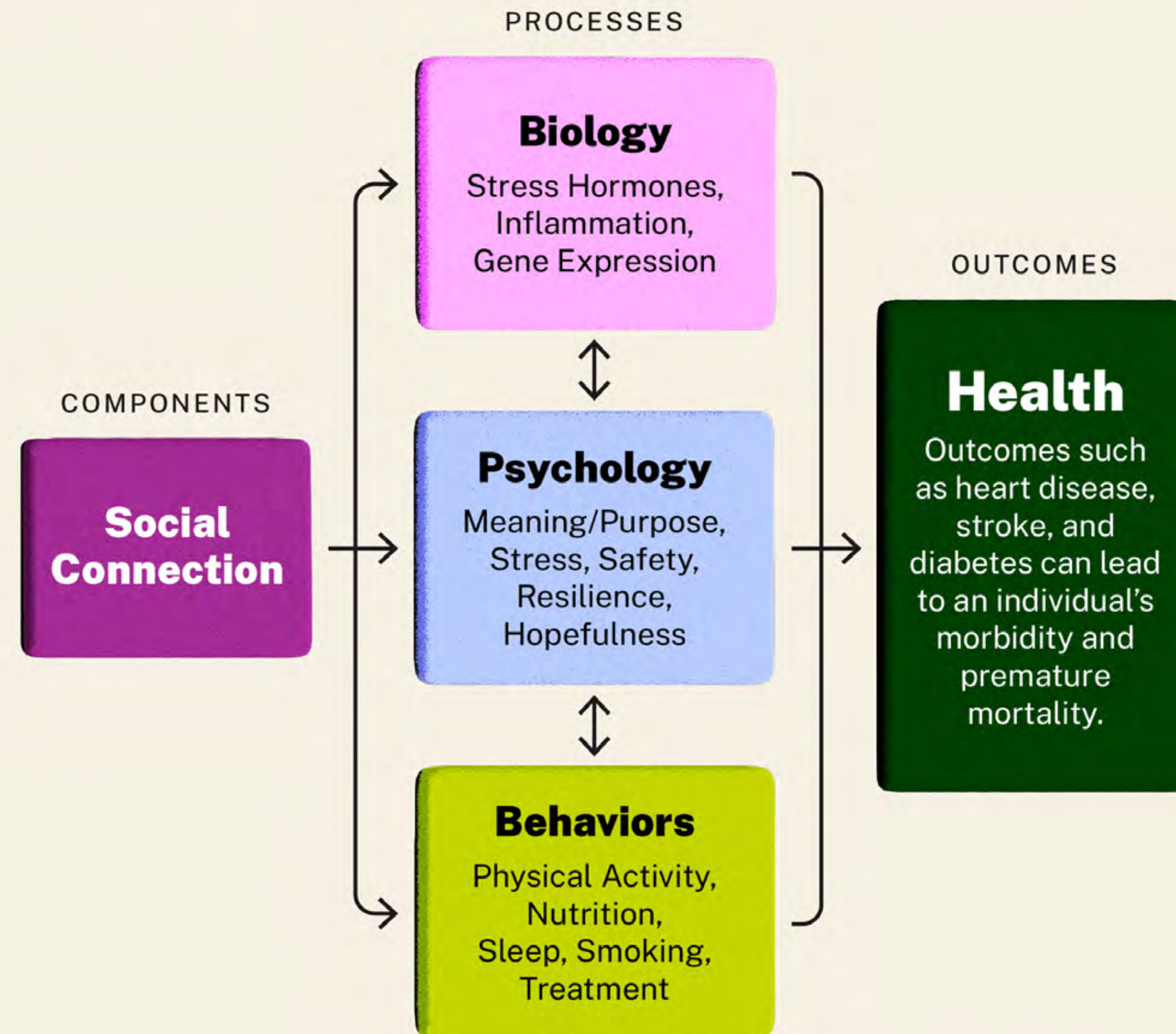
cardiovascular disease  
hypertension  
diabetes  
infectious diseases  
cognitive functions  
depression and anxiety  
suicidality and self-harm





# How Does Social Connection Influence Health?

Social connection influences health through **three principal pathways**: biology, psychology, and behavior.





The background of the slide features a dense, colorful pattern of stylized human silhouettes. These figures are rendered in a variety of colors including red, orange, yellow, green, blue, and purple. They are depicted in various poses and activities, such as walking, standing, sitting in a wheelchair, and interacting with each other, creating a sense of a diverse and active community.

# Community Health Outcomes

population health

natural hazard preparation and

resilience

community safety

economic prosperity

civic engagement and

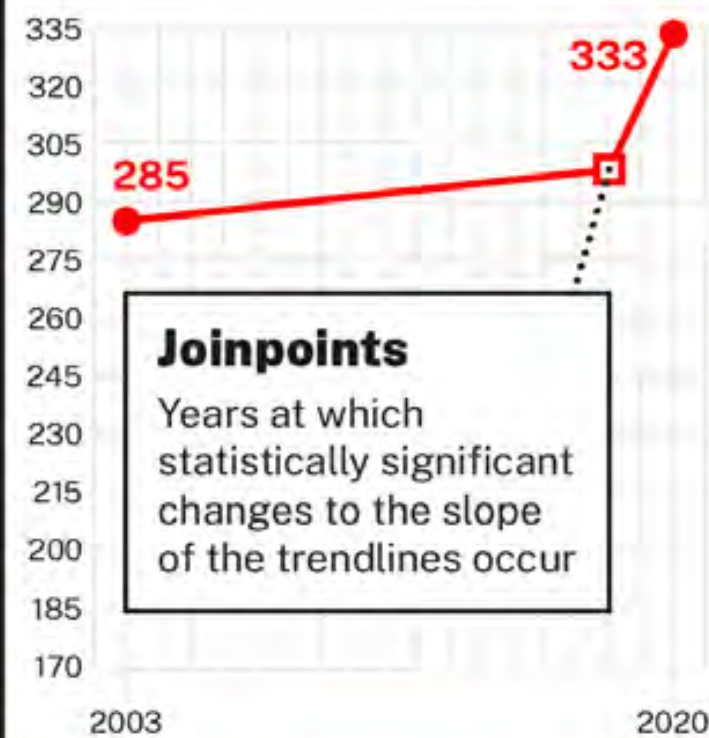
representative government



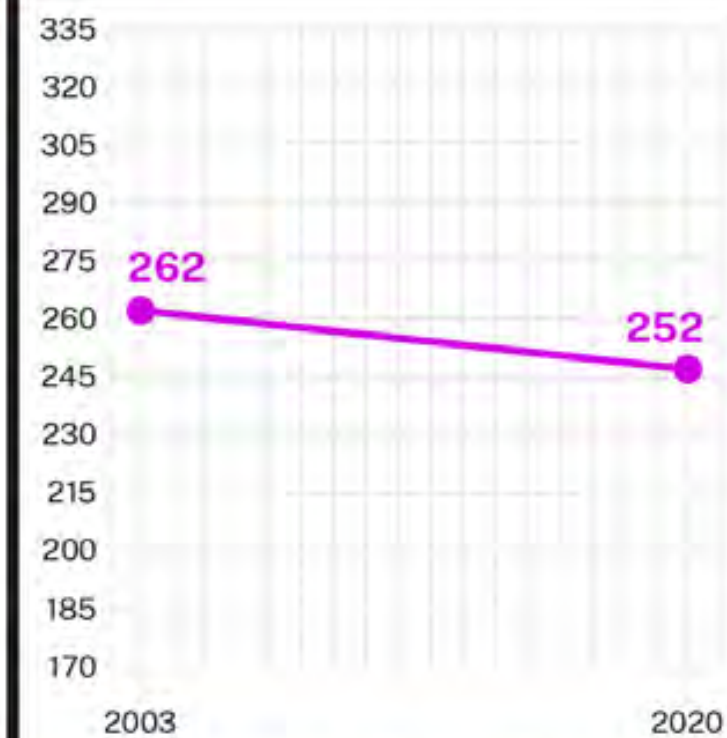
# National Trends for Social Connection

From 2003 to 2020, time spent alone increased, while time spent on in-person social engagement decreased.

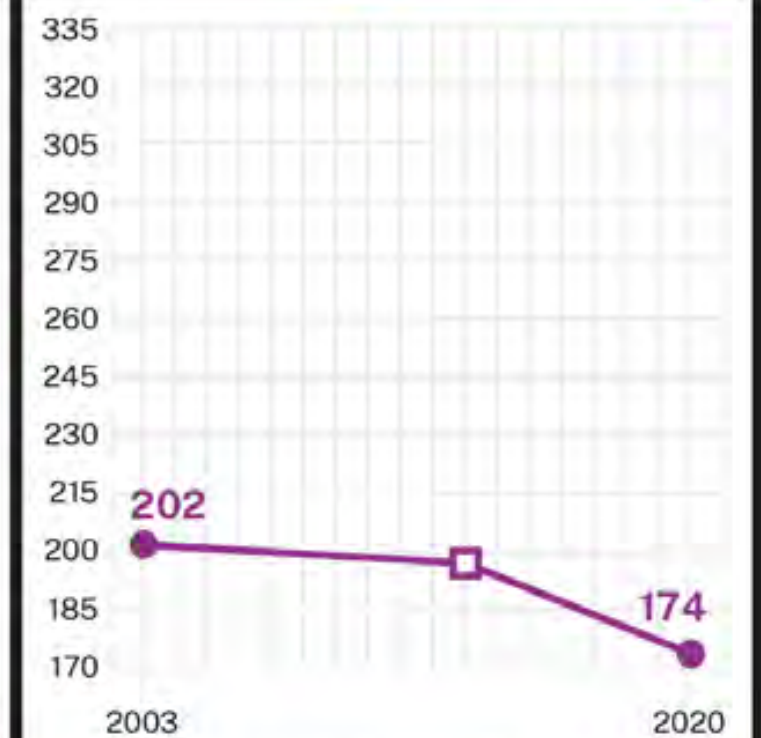
ANNUAL DAILY AVERAGE IN MINUTES



**Social Isolation**  
an increase of  
**24 hours** per month



**Household Family Social Engagement**  
a decrease of  
**5 hours** per month



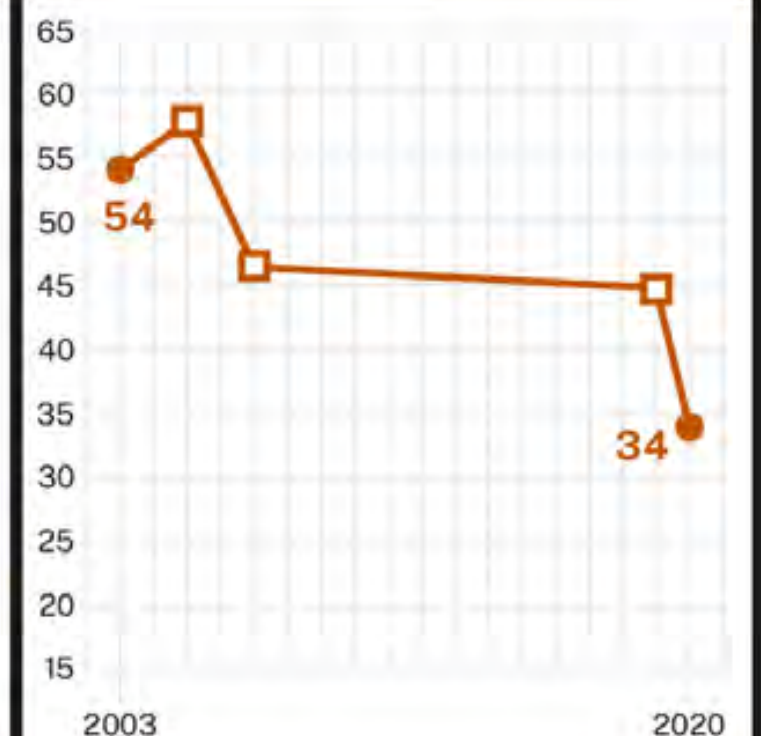
**Companionship**  
a decrease of  
**14 hours** per month  
Companionship refers to shared leisure for the sake of enjoyment and intrinsic satisfaction



**Social Engagement with Friends**  
a decrease of  
**20 hours** per month



**Non-Household Family Social Engagement**  
a decrease of  
**6.5 hours** per month



**Social Engagement with Others**  
a decrease of  
**10 hours** per month

YEAR



# The Three Vital Components of Social Connection

The extent to which an individual is socially connected depends on multiple factors, including:

## Structure

The number and variety of relationships and frequency of interactions

### EXAMPLES

Household size

Friend circle size

Marital/partnership status

## Function

The degree to which relationships serve various needs

### EXAMPLES

Emotional support

Mentorship

Support in a crisis

## Quality

The positive and negative aspects of relationships and interactions

### EXAMPLES

Relationship satisfaction

Relationship strain

Social inclusion or exclusion



Individual

Relationship

Community

Society

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

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

- Structure, function, and quality
- Household size
- Characteristics and behaviors of other
- Empathy

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



# The Six Pillars to Advance Social Connection

**1**

## Strengthen Social Infrastructure in Local Communities

Design the built environment  
to promote social connection

Establish and scale community  
connection programs

Invest in local institutions that  
bring people together

**2**

## Enact Pro-Connection Public Policies

Adopt a “Connection-in-  
All-Policies” approach

Advance policies that minimize  
harm from disconnection

Establish cross-departmental  
leadership at all levels  
of government

**6**

## Build a Culture of Connection

Cultivate values of kindness,  
respect, service, and  
commitment to one another

Model connection values in  
positions of leadership and  
influence

Expand conversation on social  
connection in schools,  
workplaces, and communities

**5**

## Deepen Our Knowledge

Develop and coordinate a  
national research agenda

Accelerate research funding

Increase public awareness

**4**

## Reform Digital Environments

Require data transparency

Establish and implement  
safety standards

Support development of  
pro-connection technologies

**3**

## Mobilize the Health Sector

Train health care providers

Assess and support patients

Expand public health  
surveillance and interventions



# What Individuals Can Do (Part 1)

- **Understand the power of social connection and the consequences of social disconnection** by learning how the vital components (structure, function, and quality) can impact your relationships, health, and well-being.
- **Invest time in nurturing your relationships** through consistent, frequent, and high-quality engagement with others. Take time each day to reach out to a friend or family member.
- **Minimize distraction during conversation** to increase the quality of the time you spend with others. For instance, don't check your phone during meals with friends, important conversations, and family time.
- **Seek out opportunities to serve and support others**, either by helping your family, co-workers, friends, or strangers in your community or by participating in community service.
- **Be responsive, supportive, and practice gratitude.**<sup>314,315</sup> As we practice these behaviors, others are more likely to reciprocate, strengthening our social bonds, improving relationship satisfaction, and building social capital.
- **Actively engage with people of different backgrounds and experiences** to expand your understanding of and relationships with others, given the benefits associated with diverse connections.
- **Participate in social and community groups** such as fitness, religious, hobby, professional, and community service organizations to foster a sense of belonging, meaning, and purpose.



# What Individuals Can Do (Part 2)

- **Reduce practices that lead to feelings of disconnection from others.** These include harmful and excessive social media use, time spent in unhealthy relationships, and disproportionate time in front of screens instead of people.
- **Seek help during times of struggle** with loneliness or isolation by reaching out to a family member, friend, counselor, health care provider, or the 988 crisis line.<sup>316</sup>
- **Be open with your health care provider** about significant social changes in your life, as this may help them understand potential health impacts and guide them to provide recommendations to mitigate health risks.
- **Make time for civic engagement.** This could include being a positive and constructive participant in political discourse and gatherings (e.g., town halls, school board meetings, local government hearings).
- **Reflect the core values of connection** in how you approach others in conversation and through the actions you take. Key questions to ask yourself when considering your interactions with others include:  
How might kindness change this situation?  
What would it look like to treat others with respect?  
How can I be of service? How can I reflect my concern for and commitment to others?



# What Parents and Care-Givers Can Do

- **Invest in your relationship with your child or loved one** by recognizing that strong, secure attachments are protective and a good foundation for other healthy relationships.
- **Model healthy social connection**, including constructive conflict resolution, spending time together, staying in regular contact with extended family, friends, and neighbors, setting time aside for socializing away from technology or social media, and participating in community events.
- **Help children and adolescents develop strong, safe, and stable relationships with supportive adults** like grandparents, teachers, coaches, counselors, and mentors.
- **Encourage healthy social connection with peers** by supporting individual friendships, as well as participation in structured activities such as volunteering, sports, community activities, and mentorship programs.
- **Be attentive to how young people spend their time online.** Delay the age at which children join social media platforms and monitor and decrease screen time in favor of positive, in-person, connection building activities.
- Identify and aim to **reduce behaviors and experiences that may increase the risk for social disconnection**, including bullying and excessive or harmful social media use.
- **Talk to your children about social connection regularly** to understand if they are struggling with loneliness or isolation, to destigmatize talking about these feelings, and to create space for children to share their perspective and needs.
  - Look out for potential warning signs of loneliness and social isolation,
  - Connect youth to helpers like counselors, educators, and health care providers if they are struggling with loneliness, isolation, or unhealthy relationships.



# What Community-Based Organizations Can Do

- **Create opportunities and spaces for inclusive social connection** and establish programs that foster positive and safe relationships, including among individuals of different ages, backgrounds, viewpoints, and life experiences.
- **Embed social connection** in internal policies, practices, programs, and evaluations.
- **Actively seek and build partnerships** with other community institutions (schools, health organizations, workplaces) to support those experiencing loneliness and social isolation, and to create a culture of connection in the broader community.
- **Advance public education and awareness efforts** to introduce and elevate the topic of social connection and disconnection among community members.
- **Create and provide education, resources, and support programs** for community members and key populations such as parents, youth, and at-risk populations. These could include community-wide social events, volunteering and community service activities, network-building professional development, and organizational opportunities for involvement by the community.
- **Foster a culture of connection in the broader community** by highlighting examples of healthy social connection and leading by example.