Feeling lonely is a cruel consequence of our fragmented world, but we can make a start to combat it

By: **Kim Samuel**

Loneliness has become an epidemic of itself. Ahead, the author of On Belonging: Finding Connection In An Age Of Isolation unpicks how we got here and how we might work to get out of it.

It's a cruel irony that technology has brought us closer than ever – while at the same time driving us further apart.

In a world where you can text a friend 100 times a day, Facetime your mum at any hour or watch cute videos of your niece's first footsteps, we have connectivity, but not connection. We long to belong, but we're increasingly isolated from deep relationships.

Loneliness is hardly a new concept. Gen Z and millennials report the highest rates of loneliness, but people across generations struggle to find belonging. We are living through a crisis so acute that the UK and Japan have both named ministers of loneliness who are tasked with addressing it.

The pandemic brought social isolation into the spotlight and underscored its connection with mental health. A 2022 study on the impact of social support and social media during the height of Covid-19 found that many young people, especially women, experienced elevated depression. But they had fewer symptoms when they had more offline emotional support from friends and family and less online information, showing the importance of human connection.

Even before the pandemic, social isolation was deeply rooted in our world. In his 2000 book *Bowling Alone*, Robert Putnam pointed to dual-career families, urban sprawl and TV as reasons for increasing loneliness. The rise of social media exacerbated this trend dramatically. One pre-pandemic study of

almost 1,800 adults ages 19-32 found participants who spent more than two hours a day on various social media platforms were twice as likely to feel isolated as those who spent a half hour or less. If anything, those numbers have worsened.

How can we rebuild a sense of belonging in our world, in ourselves? It requires more than swearing off TikTok

For many, online interactions have replaced real human connections. According to psychiatrist Dr Lori Plutchik: "Social media makes people miss out on the human interaction of touching, hugging and seeing people." You can hang out online with friends, but that critical deep personal interconnectedness is lacking.

The health consequences of loneliness and social isolation can be serious. Julianne Holt-Lunstad of Brigham Young University in the US even went so far as to compare loneliness to smoking 15 cigarettes a day. Without meaningful connections to others, you're at greater risk of heart disease, dementia, depression and anxiety.

Psychiatrist Dr Sebastian Zimmermann notes that for young women especially, social media can have a particularly negative impact. The filtered selfies and 'perfect' bodies can make you feel envious and inferior. Likewise, says Dr. Zimmermann, "When you project an idealised version into the world to get likes and positive comments, there can be a gap between your real self and your true authentic self that's not healthy."

So how can we rebuild a sense of belonging in our world, in ourselves? It requires more than swearing off TikTok and putting the phone on permanent mute. Here are four places to start:

1. Seek out ways to belong – in person
It can take time and effort, but making genuine offline connections with like-minded people eases isolation.

When Emma Harries moved to Australia, she didn't know anyone. In the beginning, she felt ostracised. "It was a bit hard for me to fit in, to get into social circles. I truly felt that sense of 'I have no place here to belong.'"

She eventually started working at a holistic health centre. "I was surrounded by people and I was able to make connections," Emma says. Coming out of social isolation required lots of little steps to build connections that would flourish into friendships. But, she says: "Those connections were the best ones, because they come from a place of deep sentiment and emotion."
Once you build those connections, you can pay it forward and create belonging for others.

2. Monitor how you use social media – and how much

Social media can help ease social isolation – if used in the right way. A 2022 study showed that intimate chats and positive, funny stories can go a long way toward easing loneliness and anxiety.

In addition, consider setting time limits and being choosy about who you befriend online. A recent study suggests that who you follow, what you do and how long you spend on social media are key to preserving overall wellbeing. When a group of students was asked to limit their time on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and Snapchat, and follow friends instead of strangers, the study saw significant improvements in wellbeing.

3. Use social media for good

Too often, the cheery posts you're coming across on social media hide shame and worry. Redirecting social media toward authentic sharing can combat feelings of isolation.

After experiencing serious mental health challenges, Hannah Puralewski spoke out about her situation online. She was astonished by the response. "I couldn't believe all the people who reached out to me with their own stories or a desire to connect over a similarity that we never even knew we had," she says.

Hannah was struck by the fact that so many of us keep silent because we feel so isolated by our pain, and yet by sharing something that's deeply painful helped her connect with others. Says Hannah: "It's actually the silence and the refusal to speak of things that might cause people discomfort that keeps us isolated."

4. Find purpose in belonging

The ability to share our gifts with others gives us a 'why' that can help combat personal loneliness and isolation. The antidote to feeling less alone can be as simple as offering to help – at a food bank, animal shelter or through other activities. Studies have shown that volunteering can ease symptoms of depression; it's also an opportunity to broaden your network of friends and help build community.

There's power in pushing ourselves out of our comfort zones and connecting through purposeful work. And a good reminder that we only belong when we belong together.

Kim Samuel is the author of On Belonging: Finding Connection In An Age Of Isolation (Abrams Press)
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