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# The Impact of Social Isolation on Mental Health

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✓ [Medically reviewed by Steven Gans, MD](#)



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Social isolation involves being cut off from contact with others. This can involve physical isolation but also refer to feeling emotionally disconnected from social interaction.

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People can become socially isolated both intentionally and unintentionally. While levels of social contact can vary over time, extended periods of social isolation can harm mental and physical well-being.

**People are social creatures, and lacking support and contact with others can contribute to loneliness, cognitive decline, anxiety, and depression.**

Isolation has also been connected to a greater risk for medical conditions such as heart disease, high blood pressure, weakened immunity, and reduced overall longevity.<sup>[1]</sup>

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## The Relationship Between Social Isolation and Mental Health

Research has long noted the link between social isolation and mental well-being. People who have solid social connections have a lower risk of depression than those who lack strong social and emotional support.<sup>[2]</sup>

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People who are socially isolated also tend to experience a higher amount of work-related stress, are more likely to misuse drugs and alcohol, and have lower satisfaction with their life. <sup>[3]</sup>

Social isolation and mental health have a bidirectional relationship. Isolation can also lead to changes in the brain that might contribute to the onset of mental health conditions. <sup>[4]</sup> Poor [social support](#) can make it more challenging for people to manage stress, which can also significantly affect health and well-being.

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At the same time, social contact and support may play a role in helping people combat symptoms of stress, anxiety, depression, and other mental health issues. Spending time with others and feeling connected can cultivate a sense of [belongingness](#).

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## Recognizing the Signs of Social Isolation

Social isolation became more common during and even after the COVID-19 pandemic. As people continue to work more often from home, less social contact is often a common side effect. If you are spending more time on your own, it is essential to recognize the signs that you are getting too isolated from other people.

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### What Social Isolation May Look Like

Some signs that you or someone you know might be socially isolated include:

Dropping out of social activities or events that you used to participate in

Spending a great deal of time each day alone with little to no contact with other people

Having no one to turn to when you need help, advice, or just a friendly person to talk to

Rarely communicating with other people by text, phone, or video call

Lack of meaningful, close, intimate connections with other people

Feeling lethargic, sad, or rejected

Hypersensitivity to environmental stimuli<sup>[5]</sup>

**Related:** [Loneliness: Causes and Health Consequences](#)

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### Social Isolation vs. Loneliness

It is important to recognize, however, that while connected, there is a distinction between social isolation and loneliness.

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**Social isolation** refers to being separate from others and lacking social contact.

**Loneliness**, on the other hand, is a more subjective experience. People who are lonely feel cut off from others, even if they have regular physical, and social contact. A person can be surrounded by people and still feel lonely.

Loneliness is also distinct from [solitude](#), which is voluntary and involves enjoying spending time alone.

### Recap

While distinct, both social isolation and loneliness can negatively impact a person's psychological health.

## The Impact of Social Isolation on Mental Health

Social isolation and loneliness can significantly impact mental health, mainly if they are prolonged.

Some of the potential consequences of social isolation and loneliness include: <sup>[6]</sup>

- Increased alcohol and substance use
- Poorer physical health
- Increased risk for depression
- A higher risk for suicide
- Changes in brain function
- Antisocial behavior
- Heart disease <sup>[7]</sup>
- Higher stress levels

Social isolation can also affect a person's health habits, further influencing mental and physical health. People who are socially isolated tend to exercise less, sleep more poorly, and [consume more dietary fat](#). <sup>[8]</sup>

## Causes of Social Isolation

Social isolation sometimes has a direct and apparent cause, such as divorce or illness. In others cases, it happens gradually and may be a sign of other problems in a person's life.

The reality is that many factors often contribute to social isolation including:

- Depression

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### Depression

Social isolation is a common [symptom of depression](#). People who are depressed often experience low mood, loss of interest, fatigue, hopelessness, and loss of motivation, all of which can make it difficult to maintain social connections.

### Illness

People can also become isolated as a result of [chronic health conditions](#). Such conditions can affect mobility, making engaging in social activities difficult. Factors such as [stigma](#) or shame can lead people with health conditions to avoid social situations.

### Social Anxiety

[Social anxiety](#) causes people to experience intense fear associated with social situations. People who have this type of anxiety tend to deal with it by avoiding socializing. This can dramatically limit their ability to maintain relationships and social connections.

### Stress

Major life stressors are a common cause of social isolation. [Divorce](#), for example, often leads to the loss of social connections and may cause people to withdraw.

The loss of a spouse, financial problems, [job loss](#), and retirement can also lead to changes in a person's sociability.

The COVID-19 pandemic was a stressful event that contributed to increased social isolation for people of all ages worldwide. Social distancing, quarantines, and remote work left many cut off from their normal sources of social connection and support.

### Effects of the Pandemic

Some research suggests that social isolation caused by the pandemic has played a role in increased rates of anxiety, depression, sleep disturbances, and substance use. <sup>[9]</sup>

Even stressors that are often considered "[good stress](#)," such as going to college or [getting married](#), can create significant life changes that interrupt a person's social functioning.

### Trauma

It is common for people who have experienced a traumatic event to isolate themselves to cope.

Depending on the nature of the trauma, some people may struggle to trust others and fear being hurt again. Those experiencing symptoms of [post-traumatic stress disorder](#) (PTSD) may avoid social activities that trigger memories of the traumatic event.

## Coping with the Effects of Social Isolation

Combatting social isolation isn't always easy. However, there are things that you can do to begin rebuilding your connections with other people

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If you or someone you know is experiencing social isolation, talking to a doctor or mental health professional can help. They can diagnose medical or mental health conditions contributing to social isolation.

A [therapist](#) can help you address emotional issues that lead to social isolation and develop strategies to combat isolation and strengthen your social skills, all of which may help you to feel better about engaging in social activities.

### Look for Ways to Become Socially Engaged

Start by taking small steps toward reconnecting with others. This might involve [calling or texting friends or family members to reconnect](#). One study found that even a [brief video call](#) significantly reduced feelings of isolation and loneliness. <sup>[10]</sup>

Check out your community events board for upcoming activities that might interest you. Volunteering for organizations that align with your interest can also be a great way to reconnect.

### Enlist Help

Reach out to your closest connections, even if you've grown distant. Consider talking to them about how you are feeling, and suggest that you would enjoy the chance to talk to them or even meet up in person.

Social activities don't always need to revolve around major events. Instead, just having the chance to talk regularly, whether it's a text, phone call, or video chat, can help you feel more connected to other people.

### Consider Adopting a Pet

If you can care for one, adopting a pet can be great for combatting feelings of isolation. Animal companionship can have a number of mental health benefits, including lowering stress and improving mood.

In one study, researchers found that having a dog encouraged older adults to spend more time with other people while they were out walking their pets. <sup>[11]</sup>

**Related:** [How Owning a Pet Can Reduce Stress](#)

### Join a Support Group

You might also consider [joining a support group](#), either online or in person, where you have the chance to talk to others who might be going through the same things as you. This can be a great way to meet new people while also getting support, encouragement, and helpful advice.

### Care for Yourself

Reaching out to others is important for overcoming social isolation, but it is also essential to make sure you are caring for yourself. Isolation can often lead to a breakdown in normal routines, so focus on bringing structure to your day.

[Create a routine](#) that ensures you are getting enough rest, staying physically active, eating a balanced diet, and taking the time to do the

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### A Word from Verywell

Coming out of a period of social isolation takes time, so it is important to be patient while pressing on even when things seem difficult. Remind yourself that building friendships and maintaining [interpersonal relationships](#) is something that many adults struggle with.

Don't be afraid to reach out for support, whether it is from your loved ones or a mental health professional. Be kind to yourself and remember that you deserve to have compassionate, supportive people in your life.

**Read Next:** [How to Cope With Social Awkwardness After COVID-19](#)

11 Sources 



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