

HEALTH

STRENGTH IN SOCIALIZING

Overlooked social connections can prevent suicide

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KFF Health News (TNS)

If you or someone you know may be experiencing a mental health crisis, contact the 988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline by dialing or texting "988."

Nearly every Tuesday for a decade, Steve Siple attended a bar trivia night with friends in Birmingham, Alabama. After moving to North Carolina, he developed a new ritual — joining other Charlotte locals on Saturdays to pick up trash along the city's light rail.

These are more than fun outings to Siple. They help keep him alive.

Siple has battled suicidal thoughts in the past. He lost his father to suicide, and one of his sons has struggled with thoughts of hurting himself.

That's made Siple vigilant about protecting himself and his family. In addition to seeing a counselor regularly and speaking openly about mental health, he prioritizes social connection.

"Loneliness was, over my lifetime, one of the greatest risk factors" for suicide, said Siple, a former board chair for the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention.

To some, this concept may seem obvious. Yet in the overall approach to suicide prevention, it's often overlooked. Treatment of a serious mental illness that can lead to suicide, such as major depressive disorder, often centers on medication and talk therapy with little or no consideration of factors such as social isolation or financial duress. Now, there's a growing movement to address loneliness not just through personal choices but also through public policy.

The research is clear: Among the various complex issues that contribute to suicide, loneliness is a big one. It's a particularly strong predictor for older adults, who have the highest rates of suicide, and for youths, for whom suicide is the second-leading cause of death.

Humans are social animals. When we feel cut off from one another, our stress levels increase, our immune systems are disrupted, and ultimately we're likely to die earlier (by suicide or of other causes). An oft-cited study concluded that being socially disconnected is as harmful to one's health as smoking up to 15 cigarettes a day.

And it's getting worse.

Mental health researchers and clinicians say a variety of factors are fueling increased rates of loneliness in America, including the rapid growth of technology,

such as smartphones and artificial intelligence; increased political polarization; the shift to remote work since the covid pandemic; and decreased participation in religious institutions.

With suicide rates remaining stubbornly high — often ranking among the top 10 causes of death in America — some advocates and people who have lost loved ones to suicide say increasing pathways to social connection could be a new frontier.

In this ongoing series, KFF Health News is examining new approaches to suicide prevention that shift the focus from stopping harm in moments of crisis to efforts that give people reasons to live well before they make fateful choices.

"If we want to reduce suicide rates in our country, which is absolutely essential, then a key part of that has to be fostering social connection," said Vivek Murthy, who served as surgeon general under Presidents Barack Obama and Joe Biden. "We have more than enough data to support this as being an important area of focus."

In 2023, Murthy released the first U.S. Surgeon General's Advisory on loneliness as a public health issue, with more than 300 supporting citations. He's also written a book on the topic and is touring the country discussing the value of social connection.

"To help someone else feel less alone, to help them feel seen and understood and valued," he told KFF Health News, "that can be one of the most powerful interventions that we make."

A ROLE FOR ELECTED OFFICIALS

Curing loneliness may seem like the responsibility of families and neighbors, people making one-to-one connections. But Murthy says elected officials have work to do, too.

They can use their bully pulpits to turn this into a mainstream issue, he said. They can create microgrants to support grassroots ideas from community entrepreneurs and invest in "social infrastructure," he added.

That term refers to things in the community that support the development of social connection, from physical spaces, such as libraries and parks, to policies and programs, such as building public transportation and fostering volunteer groups.

"These all matter and impact whether people gather," Murthy said.

However, investing in public institutions and infrastructure is a costly

endeavor that can seem unreasonable when local officials are struggling to balance budgets without increasing tax burdens.

That's where creativity can kick in.

A health system and a museum in Charlotte have teamed up to provide "prescriptions" for people to attend art classes or live performances together. In Tennessee, the city of Chattanooga is funding community ideas to increase connection and time in nature, including benches where people can speak with volunteer listeners. And across the country, men's sheds have popped up as places where men can work on projects side by side and discuss their mental health.

MEAL DELIVERIES AND VALENTINES

Marcie O'Neal knew she wouldn't have much money at her disposal. She was hired in 2024 to lead suicide prevention efforts in the rural Pennyryle region of western Kentucky after local leaders saw a rise in suicides among the elderly. Her grant was about \$280,000 — less than \$3 per person in the region.

But she knew the nine-county area had other strengths, such as dedicated meal delivery programs and high school clubs.

Drivers who drop off prepared meals to homebound residents "can be the only person that an older adult sees in the week," O'Neal said.

The state had already been training some of those drivers to recognize warning signs of suicide among older people and alert county agencies to follow up with them. O'Neal thought there could be another connection.

She reached out to high school Beta clubs, which focus on fostering leadership skills and volunteerism, across the nine counties and asked them to write cards that could be distributed to older residents along with meals. The response was swift, O'Neal said.

About 1,200 cards were delivered last May. They repeated the gesture in February for Valentine's Day and again this May.

O'Neal said one of the older residents told her, "I don't remember the last time I got a Valentine's card."

Suicide prevention "doesn't have to be sweeping huge things," O'Neal said. "It's a little thing you can do that can kind of snowball into more things."

KFF Health News is a national newsroom that produces in-depth journalism about health issues and is one of the core operating programs of KFF — the independent source for health policy research, polling and journalism.

HEALTH CHECK

Mayo Clinic Q&A: What do I need to know about skin cancer protection?

MAYO CLINIC NEWS NETWORK (TNS)

DEAR MAYO CLINIC: A friend has had several small skin cancers removed, and that made me wonder if I'm at risk, too. What everyday habits can help reduce my risk of skin cancer?

ANSWER: Whether skies are clear or overcast, your skin is exposed to ultraviolet (UV) radiation from the sun. UVB rays are the primary cause of sunburn, while UVA rays penetrate more deeply, contributing to premature aging, such as fine wrinkles and sunspots. Both forms of UV radiation increase the risk of skin cancer.

A tan is not a sign of health; it's evidence of skin injury. There's no safe way to tan in the sun or with indoor tanning. Fortunately, daily habits can protect your skin and reduce your risk of skin cancer.

Use sunscreen consistently. Choose a broad-spectrum sunscreen that protects against both UVB and UVA rays with an SPF of at least 30. Be aware of the expiration date and replace your sunscreen regularly. Keep it out of the heat and direct sunlight, which can degrade its effectiveness.

Spray sunscreens are typically easier to apply to hairy skin. Sunscreens may contain organic or inorganic ingredients, or a combination of both.

Inorganic (mineral) sunscreens contain minerals such as titanium dioxide and zinc oxide and provide excellent, broad-spectrum protection. These ingredients tend to be thicker and may leave a whitish residue on your skin.

Organic (chemical) sunscreen filters are more common and tend to be lighter, easier to spread and less visible on the skin, but they may not have as much UVA protection as mineral options.

The Food and Drug Administration recently announced its proposal to add a new organic sunscreen ingredient, bemotrizinol (BEMT), to its approved list for use in the U.S. BEMT provides protection against both UVA and UVB, and it has low levels of absorption through the skin into the body.

Apply sunscreen whenever you're outdoors — even on cloudy days, when up to 80% of harmful rays penetrate the clouds. When applying sunscreen:

- Don't forget places like the tops of your ears and feet, the back of your neck, and areas where a beard might not be as thick.

- Reapply sunscreen every two hours.

- Remember to reapply more often with water exposure or sweating because this reduces how long the sunscreen remains effective. Water-resistant sunscreen provides protection for about 40 to 80 minutes.

- Apply more sunscreen than you think. Most people apply only a quarter to half of the amount needed to reach the advertised SPF on the product label. A simple strategy is to apply a full layer, then repeat to create a "double coat" to ensure adequate coverage.

Wear photoprotective clothing. Long-sleeved shirts, pants, wide-brimmed hats and sunglasses provide consistent protection without the need for reapplying sunscreen. Not all clothing blocks the same amount of UV rays. Test it by holding it up to the light. If you can see the light through the clothing, you'll know that UV rays can pass through, too.

Avoid intentional tanning. Indoor tanning significantly increases the risk of cancer. Tanning beds emit intense UV radiation and can increase melanoma risk by 20% with just one session. Using indoor tanning before age 35 can increase melanoma risk by 75%. Dermatologists see patients in their 30s with multiple skin cancers and advanced sun damage after extensive tanning bed use in their teens and 20s.

If you want a bronzed glow without the risk of UV rays, sunless tanning products are a safe alternative. Spray tans and lotions containing dihydroxyacetone can create the appearance of tanned skin without UV exposure.

Steven Nelson, M.D., Dermatology, Mayo Clinic, Phoenix



KFF HEALTH NEWS/TNS

Several Saturdays in the spring and fall, Steve Siple joins other locals in Charlotte, N.C., to pick up trash along the city's light rail. It's one of several ways Siple prioritizes social connection.