

Redefining the Opposite of Loneliness

December 7, 2021 | By: [Amani Echols](#), Behavioral Health Policy Fellow at AMCHP

Social connections are essential to our mental and physical health and well-being. Social isolation and loneliness are social determinants frequently explored in the [elderly population](#), linked to poor health outcomes. Interestingly, young people report loneliness at higher rates than older adults. [Nearly 80% of the Gen Z population](#)—individuals born between 1997 and 2012—reported feeling lonely in 2020, more than any other generation. Millennials are a close runner-up in reported loneliness.

We all feel lonely at times; however, people who experience social stigma for parts of their identity have an increased risk of experiencing loneliness. Some of these subgroups within the MCH population include [youth and young adults with special health care needs](#) and [LGBTQIA+ youth and young adults](#).

I am a Black, queer woman that overlaps the Gen Z and Millennial generations. The COVID-19 pandemic has challenged me mentally and physically at a level I had not experienced before, and I am not alone. 46% of Gen Zers reported their mental health worsened in 2020, a more significant drop than any other generation.

To bring life to these statistics, I asked close friends and family, a part of Gen Z and the Millennial generations, how they define loneliness. Together, they described the opposite of loneliness as:

A state where an individual's physical and mental being (by themselves or with others) sufficiently completes their personal needs. This may be due to a meaningful connection with themselves or other external beings/things, which leads to fulfillment. This can look like having people in your life you can readily seek support from and confide in, a comfort in knowing your support network is thinking of you and your needs, and intentional, genuine connections. Being lonely is different from intentionally wanting to be alone, needing space, recharging in solitude, or enjoying a solo activity.

Loneliness is subjective and looks different for everyone. Gen Zers and Millennials seek not only social connections but also emotional and spiritual intimacy within relationships. Emotional intimacy relates to candid, authentic sharing of thoughts and feelings with others. And spiritual intimacy refers to respect for others' beliefs, having a shared purpose, and nurturing each other's inner peace.

It is important to destigmatize loneliness and offer simple tools for connection. Below are eight practices I aim to uphold in my daily life based on my personal experiences:



ASSOCIATION OF MATERNAL & CHILD HEALTH PROGRAMS

1. Acknowledge your feelings and experience with no judgment. This can be achieved while also showing gratitude. Mindfulness exercises and daily affirmations can help increase this dual awareness.
2. Seek professional help from a licensed mental health therapist. It is hard to identify options and commit to therapy once a mental health need has developed, so seek help as a preventative measure.
3. Invest in [all aspects](#) of your health and well-being.
4. Reach out to your network and challenge yourself to express vulnerability and voice your needs.
5. Find purpose and joy in an activity that reminds you that you are connected to things greater than yourself (e.g., a social cause, volunteer, or join a recreational sports team).
6. Identify an activity you like to do alone. Being alone does not always mean you are lonely.
7. Unplug and recharge away from technology or digitally connect based on your needs.
8. Once a week, do something outside of your routine or something that you are afraid to do. We can unintentionally limit ourselves from experiencing new activities and forming new connections by getting too comfortable in our everyday behavior.

To learn more, explore Less-lonely.org.

###

