

Can loneliness kill? ^[1]

Dear Alice,

I've thought and thought about this, but can loneliness kill you? I've lived through my teenage years, twenties, three-quarters of my thirties, but am still hoping that just around the corner will be the one. If not — can loneliness kill you?

Answer

Dear Reader,

Ironically, you're not alone in feeling lonely. People all over the world experience loneliness, or the subjective and personal experience of being socially isolated. While social isolation is measured by number of contacts with family or friends and level of community involvement, loneliness is possible even when in the presence of others. Some describe loneliness as the difference between the social relationships you have and the relationships you want. And even though loneliness can be, well, lonely, it won't actually kill you. That being said, both loneliness and social isolation can have a negative impact on your well-being and even lead to physical conditions that may increase your risk of mortality, such as cardiovascular disease and diabetes. Read on for more about the physical and mental impacts of loneliness, as well as suggestions for increasing social ties.

Research shows that being alone (or feeling that way) causes the human brain to sense and be more aware of threats in the environment, leading the body to activate stress hormones (such as cortisol). These hormones orchestrate physiological changes in the body such as increased heart rate, increased muscle tension, and shortness of breath. Because the body can't discern the source of stress — whether from a threat or from loneliness — its response is the same. As you can imagine, there are several ways that the response to loneliness and social isolation influence health and well-being. Physically, stress has been shown to increase risk for cancer, high blood pressure, cardiovascular disease, malnutrition, hypertension, and diabetes. Researchers have also found that people who feel lonely on a consistent and severe basis are at just as much risk for these conditions as those who are obese or smoke heavily. In fact, loneliness may even have the same effects on the cardiovascular system as smoking 15 cigarettes a day.

Loneliness and social isolation also have mental and emotional implications. The stress

associated with these states may contribute to anxiety, depression, substance abuse, cognitive impairment, and disrupted sleep. It's also possible for loneliness to lead people to become less motivated to take care of themselves, less likely to seek out social support, and more likely to engage in self-destructive behaviors.

Not only can reducing loneliness and social isolation counteract these negative effects — doing so also has a variety of health benefits. Social networks have the potential to encourage healthy behaviors (such as physical activity and sleep) and discourage unhealthy ones (such as drinking alcohol in a [high risk manner](#) [2]). Social ties may also give you access to a wider network of health-related resources and, ultimately, lower your risk of mortality. These benefits might be achieved by having even one or two close relationships, highlighting the quality of connections rather than the quantity. And while meeting “the one” is one way to make a meaningful social connection, all sorts of relationships — such as those with friends, family, or other members of your community — may have a positive impact on your health.

So, how do you build up your social network? Here are some ideas to get you started:

- Volunteering
- Attending religious services
- Initiating activities such as staff lunches or outings with coworkers
- Picking up a new hobby, such as joining an improvisational comedy group, taking a cooking class, or going to a book club
- Throwing a potluck and inviting people you'd like to know better
- Organizing a family vacation
- Using social media to reconnect with old friends or alumni from your school or university
- Joining a meetup for people in your area with similar interests
- Online dating or attending local speed-dating events to help you in your search for a romantic partner

You may find that gradually initiating regular social interactions increases numbers of social ties and feelings of connectedness, thereby decreasing loneliness. If you feel like you need additional support in this process, consider consulting with a mental health professional — something that could have the added benefit of making you feel less alone while you address your loneliness! You may also find reading the related Q&As and questions in the [Go Ask Alice! Relationships](#) [3] archives to be helpful to expand your knowledge about building and navigating social connections.

Best of luck in reaping the rewards of relationships,

Alice!

Category:

[Emotional Health](#) [4]

[Blues & Depression](#) [5]

[Stress & Anxiety](#) [6]

[Relationships](#) [3]

[Friendship](#) [7]

[Relationship Stuff](#) [8]

Related questions

[What does "self-acceptance" feel like?](#) [9]

[Looking for the right person](#) [10]

[Homesick and having trouble adjusting to college life](#) [11]

Resources

[Counseling and Psychological Services \(CPS\) \(Morningside\)](#) [12]

[Mental Health Services \(CUIMC\)](#) [13]

Published date:

May 23, 2014

Last reviewed on:

May 31, 2019

Footer menu

▼ [Contact Alice!](#)

- [Content Use](#)
- [Media Inquiries](#)
- [Comments & Corrections](#)

▼ [Syndication & Licensing](#)

- [Licensing Q&As](#)
- [Get Alice! on Your Website](#)
- [Full Site Syndication](#)
- [Link to Go Ask Alice!](#)

Go Ask Alice! is not an emergency or instant response service.

If you are in an urgent situation, please [visit our Emergency page](#) to view a list of 24 hour support services and hotlines.

Source URL: <https://goaskalice.columbia.edu/answered-questions/can-loneliness-kill-0>

Links

[1] <https://goaskalice.columbia.edu/answered-questions/can-loneliness-kill-0>

[2] <https://www.rethinkingdrinking.niaaa.nih.gov/How-much-is-too-much/Is-your-drinking-pattern-risky/Whats-At-Risk-Or-Heavy-Drinking.aspx>

[3] <https://goaskalice.columbia.edu/category/relationships>

[4] <https://goaskalice.columbia.edu/category/emotional-health>

[5] <https://goaskalice.columbia.edu/category/blues-depression>

[6] <https://goaskalice.columbia.edu/category/stress-anxiety>

[7] <https://goaskalice.columbia.edu/category/friendship>

[8] <https://goaskalice.columbia.edu/category/relationship-stuff>

- [9] <https://goaskalice.columbia.edu/answered-questions/what-does-self-acceptance-feel-0>
- [10] <https://goaskalice.columbia.edu/answered-questions/looking-right-person>
- [11] <https://goaskalice.columbia.edu/answered-questions/homesick-and-having-trouble-adjusting-college-life-0>
- [12] <https://goaskalice.columbia.edu/resource/counseling-and-psychological-services-cps-morningside>
- [13] <https://goaskalice.columbia.edu/resource/mental-health-services-cuimc>