



## Episode 154: The Loneliness Epidemic (Transcript)

- Ike Evans: Hi there. Welcome to Into the Fold, the mental health podcast. I am your host, Ike Evans, and today we're delighted to bring you episode 154, The Loneliness Epidemic. But first, today's mental health headline. Registration for Young Minds Matter 2023 is now open. The theme for this year's event is transforming our communities collectively. The conference features some of the most vibrant minds and cutting edge strategies for collaborating with children, youth, and families as decision makers and leaders in community transformation join us to learn how communities promote mental health and wellbeing in everyday life, and how centering young people can transform an entire community. I'll have more to say about Young Minds Matter in a little while, but for now let's get onto our main story. On today's episode, we are talking about loneliness.
- Jacki Hecht: As humans we're social beings, and throughout history our ability to rely on one another for survival was how we proceeded through generations. And the pandemic caused many of us to shelter in place creating lots of physical distancing from loved ones and from community. And so whatever loneliness people were feeling before became magnified. And what we've learned is that loneliness has real impact on our physical health and wellbeing and longevity.
- Ike Evans: In large part due to the pandemic, loneliness has emerged as a major public health issue. How major? Well, the Surgeon General Dr. Vivek Murthy issued a public advisory earlier this year on what he calls the epidemic of loneliness and isolation in the United States. To quote, "Our epidemic of loneliness and isolation has been an underappreciated public health crisis that has harmed individual and societal health. Our relationships are a source of healing and wellbeing hiding in plain sight, one that can help us live healthier, more fulfilled and more productive lives." Joining us today in the studio is Jacki Hecht, managing director of the Center for Health Equity Research at the School of Nursing at the University of Texas at Austin. She's also head of the Amen Initiative, which she will be telling us more about. Jacki, how's it going?
- Jacki Hecht: Good morning. Thank you so much, Ike, for having me come to your podcast today.

Ike Evans: So how much of a problem is loneliness? I mean, it's sort of a universal human experience, but what evidence is there that it's a matter for public health concern?

Jacki Hecht: So before the pandemic studies were done that showed about half of Americans have experienced loneliness at some time. And then since the pandemic, loneliness has been identified as on the rise worldwide. And as you indicated in your introduction, our Surgeon General Vivek Murthy has really dedicated his time in office to really explore and examine this issue. And back in 2017 he went on a nationwide tour just to find out what are some of the major health issues and concerns that people have, and overwhelmingly concepts around loneliness kept emerging. People wouldn't necessarily say that they were lonely, but they would say things like, "I feel like I have to shoulder all my problems on my own," or "I don't have anyone to turn to." And so he started to write a book called Together about the endemic experience of loneliness. And then more recently in 2023 came out with a Surgeon General advisory all around loneliness and isolation.

Ike Evans: Okay, so there's so many things that people have to worry about with respect to health, and even mental health as evidenced by the 153 podcast episodes that we've done before this one. Just so many different things that we try to make the public aware of. Why is loneliness important and why do you think that it might rise to the level of the other health concerns that folks have?

Jacki Hecht: Well, they're all interconnected. And so loneliness really associates with depression, anxiety, uncertainty, fear, so many of the mental health challenges and struggles that people go through on a regular basis. And as humans we're social beings. And throughout history our ability to rely on one another for survival was how we proceeded through generations. And the pandemic caused many of us to shelter in place creating lots of physical distancing from loved ones and from community. And so whatever loneliness people were feeling before became magnified. And what we've learned is that loneliness has real impact on our physical health and wellbeing and longevity. So for example, isolation and loneliness are prime indicators of heart disease, stroke, dementia, depression and anxiety, and premature death at similar rates to smoking on a regular basis. So it has a true impact on our physical health and wellbeing and the quality of life that we live.

Ike Evans: I guess we need to make some distinctions. There's loneliness, there is being by oneself, which aren't the same thing. There's isolation, which it's I guess a risk factor for loneliness, but not the same thing. So what is loneliness? How do you define it?

Jacki Hecht: I appreciate you bringing that up because oftentimes we talk about loneliness and isolation together but they are two very different things. So loneliness is a perception. It's a feeling that we have that we just don't have either enough or the kinds of quality of relationships that we desire. So it's something that our mind creates. It's a feeling. Isolation is an objective experience of just having

few people to interact with on a regular basis. And so for example, during the pandemic many people were isolated from family members and friends. We weren't able to gather in the same social context that we used to. And yet those people who had good quality relationships didn't necessarily feel lonely. Conversely, there's lots of people who have many people in their lives and are surrounded by people and yet still feel lonely because they don't feel connected in a quality way. And so those are the main distinctions. So really loneliness is a feeling. It's something that our mind creates about our subjective experience.

Ike Evans: Okay, and so we live here in Austin. Austin is a pretty gregarious kind of place but loneliness is a problem everywhere. And so when you look at, I guess, a specific community, what do you see as the impact of loneliness?

Jacki Hecht: Well, and the thing about loneliness is that we all as human beings will feel lonely at some times, and that's just part of the human experience. Where loneliness becomes more problematic is when it persists and it becomes much more of a pervasive thing in someone's life where they can't seem to separate themselves from these feelings of loneliness. That's where it can really impact their other mood like depression, anxiety, and then also health as well. Again, you're right, we're surrounded by lots of happy people, and for some people who don't feel quite connected to that, that can create loneliness. Social media is a place where we see a lot of people showing their best selves, and for some people who aren't part of that, that can make them feel really lonely. And so even though we may be surrounded, we could be at a party and yet still feel really lonely. It's not so much about the people around us as our inner experience of how connected we feel to other people.

Ike Evans: So have you had very many opportunities to try to influence decision makers here in Austin with respect to this issue? And what kinds of responses or conversations have ensued from you doing that?

Jacki Hecht: Well, we are very fortunate at our center, as you mentioned earlier in the introduction, I manage the Amen Program, which is an African American mental health and wellness program that's funded by Austin Public Health that we're doing in collaboration with some Black churches on the east side of Austin. And our mission is to really raise awareness around mental health and reduce some of the stigma. This was our charge before the pandemic started, and certainly through the pandemic, we had lots of opportunities to really address this. In the early days of the pandemic back in March 2020 when we received that shelter in place advisory, it made us really wonder how are we going to connect with people in the church who are really isolated and how can we make sure that we reach out to them and connect with them and make sure that they've got what they need?

And so in working with the churches, and they have a longstanding history of doing community service and taking care of their congregants, and so together we decided to create a survey and an outreach effort that we work with what we call lay health workers from within the church. These are people who don't

necessarily have a medical or health degree but they're just really passionate about serving their community. And so we worked together to create a brief assessment, if you will, that they would pick up the phone and call people and send out links where people can fill out the survey through an online link to learn a little bit more about what their needs were, especially in the early days when people were shut in we wanted to make sure do people have food? Do they have the medications that they need? Do they have connections to family members and other people to help them navigate through all the uncertainty?

And it was interesting because we did ask a couple of questions about loneliness and isolation, and people didn't report that they were feeling lonely per se but they did indicate that they were feeling somewhat isolated and that they may not have had someone that they could really rely on. But when the health workers asked if they would like for them to call them back, about 40% of the people said, "Yes, please call me back." And so that was a real indicator that they really were craving that social connection. And as an aside, when we would debrief with the health workers, they said that that activity was really meaningful to them because they also were feeling isolated and somewhat lonely and just the act of picking up the phone and calling another congregant helped them feel connected to others.

So it really worked both ways. And I think that was a really nice example of how oftentimes when we're feeling lonely, we think we're the only ones, and yet what we know is that many people are also feeling lonely too. One of the best ways of addressing that is to just connect with other people because that really helps to soften and dampen some of those intense feelings of being isolated and alone.

Ike Evans: So I can't help but wonder, Jacki, if you have ever had the experience of being lonely, however short-lived, that kind of, I guess, gave you any additional insight into the topic or how to respond to it?

Jacki Hecht: Yeah, absolutely. I've been working as a nurse researcher for about 35 years now, working with lots of different individuals and communities around health behavior change and helping them stay healthy and well. And what I've learned along the way is a couple things. One is that you can't separate out mental health from physical health. They're really interconnected. And the other is that health happens in community. We may work with individuals around their own specific health behaviors, and yet so much of our health is influenced by our friends, our family, our social networks, our healthcare and social systems around us that may support us or not in terms of staying healthy. And so when the pandemic hit and we were all forced to isolate and separate, and I had this charge with the Amen program to focus on mental health and wellness, I started to develop my own feelings of anxiety and loneliness in terms of how are we going to help keep this community safe, myself, my family, my friends, the community, during this really uncharted and uncertain time?

I felt very extreme waves of loneliness and anxiety, which really caused me to dig deeper and try to figure out how does one manage this on their own? And that's where I really started to read books and listen to podcasts and really try to learn from psychologists and other people in the field about different ways of managing loneliness and anxiety and some of the other stressors that we were feeling. So not only could I kind of nourish myself and experiment with these strategies on my own, but then also share them with the community I was working with.

Ike Evans: How do adults make friends? I often wonder that myself. I don't know that I would describe myself as particularly lonely, but I see the problem with not having very many people who I'm not related to that I can just call if I ever need somebody to talk to. There are some, but there's no one who I would just naturally think to call upon in a moment of crisis that isn't a relation or my partner, which is interesting. It feels like an untenable situation. I don't know, I guess, you're a person, you have some sense that there is a certain amount of social connection that is lacking whether you describe yourself as lonely or not, what is one thing that a person in that situation can do to help themselves as a first step?

Jacki Hecht: That's a great question. People are different in terms of what their needs are. There's these categories of people that might describe themselves as being more introverted versus extroverted, and sometimes people who are more introverted don't need as many people. But the quality of the relationships is really what matters. Other people need lots of people around them and so the quantity is maybe as important as the quality. And so people differ in terms of what those needs are. I think one of the most important things is just to become aware of what your own personal needs are. Where are you? And it sounds like you're doing some monitoring of do I have what I need, especially in a crisis?

And the other piece is to look at the quality. So do you have those kind of quality relationships? For some people if you have one or two really good quality relationships, that's enough, and that'll protect you and your health through the years. The other thing is that when you do the things you love, especially if you're in some kind of a group or you're connected whether it's virtually or in person, oftentimes that's a nice way of naturally creating new relationships because you're doing things with other people who also enjoy doing what you enjoy doing. So there's lots of different ways of making connections. And again, I think it really kind of boils down to what are your needs and how do you define what a meaningful quality relationship is and how does that nourish you and feed your needs?

Ike Evans: Okay, so in general what can people do to reduce the impact or the suffering from loneliness?

Jacki Hecht: I think the first thing is to just recognize your own signs and symptoms of when you're feeling lonely and just to label it and recognize it as a feeling. So it's not I am lonely, like this is who I am and it defines me, but I'm feeling lonely. And just

sometimes using that language of separating out this is something I'm feeling, it doesn't define me, can be helpful because it doesn't take on as much of a power as if I feel like I'm a lonely person. The next thing is to just give yourself permission to feel that because you may have good reasons for feeling lonely. There may be circumstances in your life where things are really overwhelming or you just feel like you're trying to manage a lot for one person and that can feel really lonely and that may be a valid feeling.

And so giving yourself permission to just identify it and then also feel that feeling. But what we don't want is for people to get stuck there and to get swallowed up by the feeling where it really defines them. I try to think of this as kind of like a zoom lens on a camera. Sometimes when we're feeling lonely and our mind really fixates on that, that's all we can see. We can only feel lonely. It's like we're zooming in really tight and close. But if we zoom out and look at the bigger picture we may still feel lonely but it might not have that same kind of overpowering, overwhelming feeling. We may also be able to see other things in our life, other things that are positive that we could feel grateful for. Gratitude is something that is helpful for many different kinds of mental struggles where when we're feeling either anxious or depressed or lonely, and again that's all we can really focus on, is to take a step back and think about what else in my life do I have?

What do I feel grateful for? What are some of the positive things? Because sometimes shifting our focus or our attention to some of the other things that we have in our life can help create a better balance of I may be feeling lonely right now but this feeling's going to pass and I also have other things to focus on. Because loneliness is a feeling and it's something that our mind creates, things that we can do to get out of our mind and into our body are really helpful. So going for a walk or doing any kind of physical movement, because when we can kind of shift our focus from what our mind is saying and what our body is doing, again, it kind of creates a little bit better of a balance. Listening to soothing or uplifting music, if that speaks to you, or doing something that makes you happy or that brings you joy, or just brings you calm or peace. Anything that can shift your mind's attention away from I'm feeling lonely, I'm feeling lonely, to just other things that are also happening at the same time.

Paying attention to your sleep. If you're exhausted and you're completely fatigued, your resilience and your ability to manage these feelings is going to be reduced and so making sure you're getting good quality rest, good quality sleep so that you can wake up fresh and start a new day. And so those are just some of the strategies. And then lastly, reaching out to someone else, because when you're feeling lonely there's a whole bunch of other people out there that are also feeling lonely that you might not ever know. So reach out, call one of those friends or family members. Get in touch with your immediate social community. If you don't feel like you have someone to get in touch with, if you could volunteer or go participate in some community activity and be with other people, oftentimes that can also really take down that level of intensity of feeling lonely and really soften those feelings.

Ike Evans: So where can people go just to learn more about this? What resources are there?

Jacki Hecht: Well, we talked a little bit before about the Surgeon General's advisory report. I think we'll have a link to that in the show notes. It's a fabulous resource I highly recommend. The Surgeon General also wrote a book called *Together*, which is another great resource. If you go to YouTube and you just do a quick search you can find lots of tips and ideas and exercises that you can do to help address issues around loneliness. Another really, really practical and portable strategy is to just focus on your breath. So do some really good deep inhalations. Sometimes people will hold it and then exhale. But just good deep breathing can also help regulate your body's emotions and calm your nervous system a little bit to help you feel a little bit less lonely and a little bit more grounded.

And that's something that you could do any time, any place. If you're a person of faith, prayer can be really helpful. Having some kind of a routine before bed or when you wake up first thing in the morning to say some kind of a prayer or some meaningful statement, or to just list out maybe three things you're grateful for. Again, those are great strategies for helping to shift your focus away from feeling overly lonely and connected to something much bigger.

Ike Evans: Okay, Jacki, we really do appreciate you taking the time to talk to us about loneliness. If you are feeling lonely you are not alone, there are things that you can do. It's like any other large problem, if you break it down into its smaller steps you might be amazed by the results that you see ultimately. So another takeaway from the discussion, I think. Thank you so much and take care.

Jacki Hecht: Thank you and you as well.

Ike Evans: As I said at the top, registration is open for Young Minds Matter, Transforming Our Communities Collectively. This is a free convening that is co-hosted by the Hogg Foundation and Prevention Institute. The event will be happening on November 7th, 2023 at the Harris County Department of Education Conference Center in Houston. To register, you can visit our website at [hogg.utexas.edu](http://hogg.utexas.edu). And under the events and networks dropdown, you will find a link to the Young Minds Matter page. I've also included a registration link in the show notes for this episode. The event, which happens every other year, has provided many a highlight for the podcast over the years. Perhaps the best example came in 2019 and episode 88, which was devoted entirely to capturing that year's Young Minds Matter. Here's a taste.

Marlon Lizama: Where I'm from, we live in summer. We speak in family tongues about family through neighbor's eyes. Our dialects change through ever-changing [foreign language 00:24:17]. Where I'm from, [foreign language 00:24:21] and it becomes curfews and there is no talks of American birds and bees. Reputations follow you like 14-year-old backpacks on our 14-year-old soldiers. Where I'm from education is a thought as crazy as equality. Tree branches become a sign of disciplinary actions. Moms are our mommies, tias are titis, grandpas are popos.

Fathers have always been gone. Oh man, where I'm from, music is our narrator moving us like revolution once did. Young developing flowers, shaking and stepping to beats they do not understand yet. Perversion is an uncle not allowed near the kids but it's always welcome to home. Where I'm from, the dinner table is time of conferences of who needs to go get a job, who needs to go get some water or who just needs to go [foreign language 00:25:00] our doctor.

Mosquitoes are always ignored for the immune system of our ancestors is too strong. Where I'm from necklaces tell you when it's time to go away and along with [foreign language 00:25:10] because you see where I'm from, everyone is Christian and has a Catholic neighbor. Love is what is allowed or how good a young couple is sneaking around. Babies make babies and make families close. And my [inaudible 00:25:22] is even closer. Where I'm from, my grandmother is beautiful. Aunts and uncles are extended parents and everyone has the right to beat your butt. Boom, booma. Where I'm from is yellow, purple, green, and gold. And it is beautiful.

Ike Evans:

That inimitable voice belongs to Marlon Lizama, who graced that year's attendees with his unique poetic stylings. I also tracked him down for an interview after his performance that you should also check out. I've included a link to episode 88 in the show notes, but it gives you a sense of what is on offer for this year's Young Minds Matter conference. So go to our website and register. We hope to see you there. Before we close, I would like to remind listeners that September is Suicide Prevention Month. On the website of SAMHSA, the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, you'll find a wealth of resources if you would like to get involved.

And on that, if you or someone you know is struggling or in crisis, call or text 988, or chat 988lifeline.org. But I would also like to give a shout-out to the latest episode of Mind of Texas, the new podcast that is a joint production of the Hogg Foundation NKUT. Episode three titled Community Resilience in Youth, looks at the youth suicide crisis from the point of view of two extraordinary young women, Krystal Grimes of Bastrop County Cares, a grantee partner of the Hogg Foundation, and Rue Dashnaw, a youth community leader. Here's a short clip.

Krystal Grimes:

Since 2020, and I would say coupled with my age, just some different experiences, it has hurt, it can hurt, but what it's done for me, it's kind of brought me to a place of resistance, but it's also been thrusting me to a place of solution building and solution finding. And because of youth like Rue, of my children and others, really pushing forward to say if you're not going to recognize the issues that are harming us as opposed to helping us or bringing us all together, if this is the continuation of that, then what is the alternative?

And so really looking for alternative ways for us to come together as a community to be able to solve our own problems or to be able to, from a mental health perspective, of... actually that is something that drove me to become a counselor, was the lack of clinicians that look like me, that



understood my walk in life. And so it really continues to thrust me into a space of filling that gap that is being left behind by the policies and the systems that are currently and still in place that have actually historically been in place, but that are continuing to get worse, it feels like, over time.

Ike Evans:

You can find the full podcast at [kut.org](http://kut.org) or wherever you get your podcasts. Please listen, subscribe, leave reviews. We need your support. So now for some final take home. During my conversation with Jacki, I very clumsily mentioned my own challenges with adult friendships. Well, the struggle is real, but tending to one's social connections is as much a part of wellbeing as all the other things that we do to take care of ourselves. There is plenty of good advice out there, but for many of y'all, perhaps even for myself, a good first step would be to just call someone up, shoot someone an email, propose a hangout, make follow up plans. And then in three or six months see what the world looks like. You just never know.

And that does it for this episode. We're glad that you could join us. Production assistance by Kate Rooney, Darrell Wiggins, and Anna Harris. Music provided courtesy of Anna Harris. Just as taking care of ourselves enhances our ability to help others, so it is as well that by helping others we enhance our own resilience. Leave us a review. Subscribe to us on Apple Podcasts, Google Play music, TuneIn, Spotify, wherever you get your podcasts. Taking us out now is Anna's good vibes. Thanks for joining us.