Chapter 1

Connecting in the World Today

"We are all dependent on one another, every soul of us on earth."

~George Bernard Shaw, The Devil's Disciple

Only the Lonely

If you're lonely, you're not alone. In fact, fully 50% of U.S. adults feel lonely.[1] And loneliness is terrible for our physical, mental, and emotional health. We are increasingly disconnected, dissatisfied, and disengaged, and this manifests itself in record-breaking levels of depression, anxiety, and suicide at all ages.

The stats about our discontent are sobering, but we must start with a clear-eyed look at our peril and our challenges, so we can understand them fully enough to develop solutions and get through to the other side. As the saying goes, "If you're walking through a swamp, it's best to just keep going." Things are tough, but we're wise to look around, accept reality, and determine how we can improve it and persevere.

And while the pandemic seems very much in our rear-view mirror, the residual impacts remain. In particular, the pandemic has been blamed for increasing loneliness, based on the collapse of social connections. Research[2] found that 30% of people were lonely during the pandemic, which was an increase compared to pre-pandemic experiences.

But loneliness and mental health issues reach far beyond the pandemic. Multiple additional studies find that loneliness is alarmingly high. One national survey[3] of almost 10,500 adults found that 61% said they felt lonely. This was a 7% increase compared with 2018.

In addition, another study[4] found 36% of people said they felt lonely frequently or almost all the time, and the number was even higher, 61%, for those ages 18–25. In addition, 51% of mothers with young children said they were lonely frequently or almost all the time. Loneliness was exacerbated during the pandemic when social connections dissolved, but this data shows that loneliness has increased substantially in recent years as well.

Broad swaths of people suffer with loneliness, and while it is widespread, it is also concentrated in key groups. In fact, the issue of loneliness is especially concerning among college students. A comprehensive survey of 33,000 students[5] found that about 67% of students said they were lonely or felt isolated. This is an all-time high. Students in the study aren't just lonely, they are also *more lonely* than they've ever been. And we can see the tie between loneliness and mental health with 83% of students who reported their mental health had a negative effect on their academic performance during the past month. Loneliness is affecting students substantially, and isolation is a regular part of their lives.

Older adults are also struggling. A 2024 study[6] found similarly concerning results. In particular, 33% of older adults ages 50–80 were lonely. While this was the average rate among all respondents, there were factors that exacerbated loneliness. For example, this study showed a link between mental health and loneliness. When respondents said their mental health was only fair or poor, 75% of them also said they were lonely.

In addition, there was a link with physical health. Specifically, 53% of those who said their physical health was fair or poor were also

more likely to be lonely. Another factor affecting loneliness was engagement in work. In fact, 52% who didn't work (either those who were receiving disability or who were retired) were lonely. Significantly, the rates of loneliness were double compared to the older adults with better physical and mental health and those who were working.

And like the stats about the students, the data isn't just significant on its own, it also shows that each of these percentages had increased compared to 2018 data. Like students, older adults aren't just lonely, they are *more lonely* than they've been before. The study also found there were additional factors that affected loneliness. Specifically, those who earned less and lived alone were more likely to report higher levels of loneliness.

The overall data on loneliness was reinforced in another study.[7] Among 3,000 people, 35% of those over age 45 were lonely. But the study also pointed to the importance of community. It looked at embeddedness by exploring whether people had moved recently. The hypothesis was that if respondents had just moved into a neighborhood or city, they would be less likely to have established connections. Not surprisingly, 45% of those who had lived at their current residence less than a year were lonely. This was a higher number than those who hadn't recently moved.

For loneliness, it also matters tremendously how we interact and the extent to which we feel like we can talk, connect, or dialogue with others. In the study, among those who were lonely, 13% said they were having fewer deep conversations, compared with 6% of those who weren't lonely.

Feeling connected and interacting regularly can be a feature of our relationships with friends and coworkers, but also with a spouse. And the study found that marriage acted to mitigate loneliness. Only 29% of those who were married reported they were lonely compared with 51% who had never been married. Having a person to spend time with and interact with regularly tends to reduce loneliness.

Income levels were also related to loneliness. The data showed that those with higher incomes were less likely to be lonely compared to those with lower incomes. In addition, those who were more involved in activities like religious events, volunteer opportunities, or community organizations were less likely to be lonely. Even spending time on a hobby reduced the incidence of loneliness. The factors of income and activity levels may be related, as those with greater discretionary income are probably more likely to have transportation to attend the club meetings, pay for pickle ball lessons, or go out with friends.

The State of Friendship

Activities and hobbies have positive effects on feelings of connection, and so does spending time with friends. So, what is the status of friendship today? Does the current state of friendship help with loneliness?

Unfortunately not. With so much loneliness, it's not surprising that people don't have as many friends as they used to. And when they're in need, people may not turn to friends as much as in prior decades.

In 1990, about a quarter of people in another study[8] reported that a friend was the first person they went to when they had a personal problem. But by 2021, only 16% turned to friends first, and instead turned to parents, siblings, or family members.[9] Notably, younger people are more likely to turn to friends first, with 25% of those between the ages of 18–29 who turn to friends first in times of trouble.

When you have problems, being able to rely on someone you trust is vital. If you're able to get support from family, that's great. But this data shows people may have fewer friends they can lean on. The lack of a support network or a feeling that we don't have our people can leave us feeling unmoored, bereft, and lonely.

People also report they have few *close* friends today. Only about half of Americans, 53%, report they have between one and four close friends and only 38% say they have five or more friends. Fully 8% of people say they have no close friends. This is an increase compared to only 3% who said they had no close friends in 1990.[10] Friendship is eroding, both in terms of the number of friends we have and the nature of the relationships.

Fully 59% say they do have a best friend. This may seem encouraging, but it leaves 40% who do not. And again, the data is sobering when we consider it today but especially compared to where we used to be. In 1990, 75% of people said they had a best friend.[11]

Should you have a best friend? Yes, certainly. A best friend is someone who knows you well and who appreciates you even when they understand your flaws. A best friend is the person you can call when you're really down or when you're celebrating a wonderful accomplishment. They'll be with you in the valleys and cheer you on enthusiastically when you succeed. A best friend helps you feel seen and supported, and these are fundamental both to individual well-being and to social bonds across groups and societies.

In addition to overall data on friendship, it's also possible to look at patterns of relationships and see which groups are struggling most with friendship. In fact, the younger that people are, the more likely they are to say they have few close friends. Only 32% of those who are younger than 30 say they have five or more close friends. This is compared with 34% of those ages 30–49, 40% of those ages 50–64, and 49% of those over age 65.[12] There is clear correlation between age and number of friends.

Another pattern in friendship is gender. Men's friendships have declined more than women's over the past decades. In 1990, 55% of men said they had at least six close friends, but by 2021, only 27% said the same. In addition, the number of men who say they have no

close friends is up to 15%, which is five times more than men who said the same in 1990.[13]

Men are also less likely to report they get emotional support from friends. In fact, only 20% of men get support from friends compared with 40% of women. And men are less likely to share personal feelings related to their problems, with 30% of men compared to 47% of women who share feelings. Men are also less likely to tell a friend they love them. Only 25% of men compared with 49% of women have proclaimed their love to a friend.[14]

Common opinion has always held that men and women relate to each other differently. Men, we're told, tend to interact around activities rather than spending time in deep conversation. But regardless of pattern style, or bias in our beliefs, the data about the decline of friendship is especially significant for men.

Lack of friendships and loneliness may also be related to broader social values and approaches. In fact, a cultural emphasis on independence matters. Specifically, a penchant for autonomy has been linked with feelings of loneliness. One study[15] looked at 46,000 people between the ages of 16 and 99 in 237 countries. The researchers concluded that people who were in societies that were more individualistic, compared with those that were more collectivist, tended to report greater levels of loneliness. This was especially true among those who were younger and male.

The time you spend with others is a significant driver of friendship and intimacy. When you spend more time with people, you build relationships with them. But in studies of how we spend our time, people are spending more time alone and significantly less time with friends, coworkers, children, or family.

Since 2010, the average hours per day that people spent alone was less than four hours. But in 2023, that number had risen to an average of eight hours per day spent alone. And in a telling pattern,

time with friends, coworkers, children, or family has dropped to less than an hour a day on average.[16]

The time we spend with others has eroded, and this has negative effects on the number of friends we have, how close we feel to others, and the extent to which we are embedded in a support network. It's a pattern that has significant negative implications for loneliness and mental health.

Friendship is also related to satisfaction with life. When people have more friends, they say they are more satisfied. With less friends they report lower satisfaction. The relationship is linear. Having more friends translates into greater satisfaction in a predictable pattern.[17]

A similar finding[18] demonstrated that 42% of people don't feel as close to their friends as they would like, and they experience reduced satisfaction. And 62% of people reported they don't feel connected to their community.[19] This too translates into lower levels of satisfaction.

Disconnection and the Decline of Mental Health

People are struggling with loneliness, friendship, and mental health. But why is there such a strong relationship between these?

It has everything to do with belonging and our fundamental human needs for togetherness. Overall, if we lack a sense of belonging or connection, we are more likely to feel depressed.[20] The need for connection is significant. We deeply desire relationships, and we also experience pain when we don't have the necessary interactions.

One study[21] found that not only do we crave relationships with others, but we experience this craving in the same parts of our brains where we feel physical desires. Studies found that isolation was associated with obesity and nicotine addictions. But with a return to

social interaction, there was a reduced experience of craving for food or nicotine, according to another study.[22]

So we crave belonging, and in addition, if we experience exclusion from others, we feel the pain in the same parts of our brains where we experience physical pain.[23] This is true in many contexts but has also been studied in the work environment. One research effort[24] found that when employees experience ostracism at work, it can result in a decline in both job satisfaction and health.

We are wired for connection and relationships, and we have a neurological response to these. The field of social neuroscience examines how our brains change based on social interactions. And this reality is apparent in brain patterns that shift when we're lonely.

One study[25] used MRIs to track brain patterns while people thought about themselves and then when they thought about their close friends, acquaintances, and celebrities. The closer the relationships, the more similarity there was in the brain patterns of thinking about the self, compared to thinking about others. But when people were lonely, the brain patterns weren't as similar to the self-thinking patterns, indicating that loneliness produces a perception of distance, dislocation, and disconnection from others.

Differences in neurological patterns were also evident in additional research[26] that used MRI testing. The research determined that when lonely people interact socially, they have less activation in the parts of their brain associated with rewards. So social interaction doesn't feel as good when people are lonely.

It's a vicious circle. When people are lonely, interactions can help, activating feelings of reward and positive mood. But if we're lonely, our brain chemistry may hamper the experience of happiness or satisfaction. With reduced reward for the experience, we'll be less motivated to repeat it and wind up more alone and isolated.

Compellingly, there is a clear connection with loneliness and mental health. Distance and disconnection are rife, half of us are

lonely, and mental health is deteriorating. Studies[27] show that loneliness causes depression, and it creates neurobiological changes. Specifically, feeling social isolated impairs executive functioning (think: judgment and decision-making), sleep, mental well-being, and physical health. These in turn increase morbidity and mortality.

The degradation of mental health is nothing short of shocking. One research effort[28] looked at 60 different studies on mental health across the globe, covering more than 226,000 people. Taken together, 24% of people reported depression and more than 21% reported anxiety. That's one in four people who suffered with depression and one in five who struggled with anxiety. The effects were related to the social distancing and isolation that was a response to the pandemic, but the study's authors suggested these effects should also be considered their own current epidemic.[29]

Our instinct when we are in trouble is to band together, gather with our people, and protect the group. This is known by anthropologists as *mutualism*. We believe there is safety in numbers, and we value unity and loyalty to the group.

Mutualism is evident even in this unexpected example: When we were visiting Roatan, Honduras, one of our favorite vacation spots, my husband and our son went on a midnight snorkel to see sharks. Each person in the amateur group was given a tin can with some coins in it. They were told to use it as a noise maker if they saw a predatory fish. (This wasn't a method that inspired confidence!) But the snorkelers were also instructed to swim together in a group if they saw a shark.

Among fish, this strategy apparently works. When smaller fish swim together, they confuse a piranha into believing he is seeing a larger creature. Apparently, many types of predator fish don't have terrific visual acuity, so when they see a large shadow, they assume it's another big fish and leave it alone. Luckily, it worked for my

husband and our son. But it speaks at a deeper level to our instinct to stick together under threat.

As we seek to band together in times of stress, there's also a new trend on social media called *body doubling*. People who have trouble concentrating or who struggle with stress or anxiety ask a friend to stay with them while they're working. Or virtually, people will work together with an open chat or an open camera, so they can check in with each other regularly and feel the presence of their friend or coworker. Like the buddy system, the friend's role is to support and offer comfort through their presence.

And some of us will remember swimming at summer camp and the instruction to never go into the water without a buddy. Partway through swimming time, counselors would call for a buddy check when you had to raise hands with your person to show everyone was paired up, safe, and accounted for. Banding together, working in tandem, and supporting each other through hard times are certainly examples of this kind of social care.

Our brain chemistry has a role to play in our desire to be together. Oxytocin is released with physical touch and also when we spend time with trusted friends and family. And it is evident in childbirth, breastfeeding, and sex. Its release produces feelings of calm, happiness, and well-being.

Oxytocin also drives a preference to protect others who are similar to us and to come together for the good of the group. When people felt danger or threat during the pandemic, and they weren't able to fulfill the instinct to come together, it produced feelings of discontinuity and mismatch, and therefore greater anxiety and mental health challenges. Today, as we work and interact at a distance, the disconnection continues, along with the cycle of discontent and emotional challenges.

Another study[30] reinforces the case that social disconnection makes us distant from each other and therefore lonely. The research

assessed more than 3,000 adults in the U.S. in a longitudinal analysis. It explored whether people were socially disconnected by examining numbers of social contacts and frequency of interaction. It also assessed people's levels of loneliness and the extent to which they felt supported, along with their levels of depression and anxiety.

Researchers found that when people were more socially disconnected, they experienced greater feelings of isolation and in turn, they had higher levels of both depression and anxiety. The relationship between these also went in the other direction. When people were more depressed or anxious, they tended to feel more isolated, and they were less likely to connect socially with others. Another survey[31] reinforced this finding. Fully 63% of respondents said they suffered with mental health problems because they had a lack of social connection. And 57% said it was because they feel isolated.

Loneliness is related to mental health issues, and likewise, mental health issues are related to loneliness. The two reinforce and exacerbate each other. Another research effort[32] studied almost 2,000 people and their experience of loneliness. They found that 27% were struggling with feeling isolated and alone. And when people were clinically depressed or weren't able to manage their emotions, they were more likely to also report feeling lonely.

The study also identified factors that affected depression and loneliness. Similar to the research we mentioned earlier in which certain demographics affected loneliness, this study found that when people were younger, separated or divorced, or reported poor-quality sleep, they tended to also report greater loneliness. On the other hand, when they had more social support, were married or cohabitating, these factors tended to mitigate the experience of loneliness.

Empathy is critical to understanding others and feeling connected, and it too has declined. A meta-analysis[33] examined 72 different studies covering 30 years and found that empathy has dropped

by 40% over the years of comparisons. We feel lonely when it seems like no one is around to support us, but we also feel lonely when we fail to identify with others.

Strikingly, our need for social connection is so significant, that it is evident in physical health outcomes.[34] Having strong social relationships and a few good friends reduces the risk of death by 50%. Social relationships are more influential for health than factors like obesity or physical activity. And having a few close friends affects health about as much as smoking or drinking habits, according to a variety of studies.[35] In addition to longevity, the research has also found that the nature of our relationships is correlated with heart disease, blood pressure, cancer, dementia, susceptibility to viruses and respiratory illnesses, and mental health.[36]

In another survey,[37] loneliness was correlated with health as well. Only 25% of those who said their health was excellent reported they were lonely. But when people said their health was poor, 55% said they were also lonely.

Disheartened at Work

We've talked about the rise of loneliness and the reduction of friendship. In addition, we've discussed the links between loneliness and mental health as well as the importance of friends and community for well-being. Now, let's turn to a discussion of work, because it's a key nexus for relationships. And it has a large bearing on our feelings of connection, or disconnection.

For 76% of people, work is one of the primary places they make friends.[38] But this connection point is eroding. In fact, people largely don't believe others care about them at work. One study[39] found that only 38% of people thought that colleagues cared about them, down from 47% in 2020. In addition, 68% of people said they felt they knew their coworkers on a personal level. While this doesn't seem so

bad, another study[40] showed there has been a decline since 2019, when 79% felt they knew their coworkers.

In addition, the data[41] found that 43% don't feel connected with their coworkers at all. And 22% said they don't have a friend at work. But do people want improved relationships with coworkers? Yes, based on 69% who say they are unsatisfied with their social connections at work.

Even if you're not BFFs (best friends forever) with your colleagues, you want to be seen and feel a sense of community in the workplace. Data from another survey[42] reinforces this finding, with 55% of people in that survey saying they lack connection with coworkers and 58% who say they don't feel connected with their company.

The survey also links loneliness, mental health, and well-being. It found that when people felt disconnected from colleagues, they were 49% more stressed, 78% more burned out, 107% more anxious, and 128% more lonely.

Distance may also impact negatively on career advancement as well. Another survey[43] found that people who worked away from the office were 31% less likely to get a promotion. This is corroborated by data,[44] which found that people who didn't work in the office were 24% less likely to receive a promotion. It seems logical: Promotions are often based on relationships with leaders and colleagues who can recommend and advocate for your advancement, and if they don't know you as well, they won't be as likely to take actions to help your career.

Work is a place to come together, collaborate on projects, and make friends. But today's work experience isn't always a source of connection.

The Damage to Gen Z

In addition to considering the context of work, generations are also a lens to understanding the experience of loneliness. We talked

earlier about the fact that younger people are more lonely and have fewer close relationships with friends, but the problem is so significant, it's necessary to dig in a little more.

Gen Z (those born in 1997 through 2012) is tremendously stressed and suffering. A nationwide survey[45] found that 91% of Gen Zs felt stress and 98% felt burned out. Another survey[46] reported that among those ages 18–34, 62% of women and 51% of men were completely overwhelmed by stress.

To go along with their general stress, 71% of Gen Zs say they are evaluating their life priorities. While this kind of reflection is certainly healthy, 34% of Gen Zs report they have worries about the future. They're concerned about many issues, but top among these were apprehensions about a lack of jobs and lack of learning opportunities.

We've talked about the role of work and people's desires to be connected to colleagues, and Gen Z also has priorities for health and positive work experiences. Unfortunately, they're not necessarily getting these needs met.

In the face of their worry and stress, Gen Z is focusing especially on well-being. Fully 78% of Gen Zs say that their well-being is just as essential as their salary according to a survey.[47] And additional data[48] reinforces this, with 82% of Gen Zs who say they value well-being as a top priority in their work.

In an added view of their unmet needs, another survey[49] found Gen Z wants meaning from work, with 37% saying it's primary and 12% who want to make a positive impact. But 25% said that when they are working, they aren't fully engaged, even if they are physically present. Fully 48% said that work feels transactional, because they don't feel a bond with their colleagues.[50]

There's a lot of press today about what Gen Z is demanding from employers. The oldest Gen Zs graduated from college in 2019, so even those at the older edge of the generation have little experience

with a traditional approach to work. They don't have a reference point for going into an office each day and working side-by-side with colleagues. Perhaps this is what drives the myth that Gen Zs want to work exclusively from home and avoid coming into an office.

Despite the narrative and even with their absence of experience, they want to work collaboratively. In fact, Gen Zs reported[51] that the factor they need most in order to thrive is an environment that includes collaboration and teamwork. And 78% view work as a significant place to create social connections, community, and a sense of belonging. This sense of connection is a top priority for 62% of Gen Zs, along with 62% who also highly value family and relationships.[52]

Ultimately, the generational lens provides guidance on where we should look to understand the biggest problems with connection and community and how we must support the generations to move toward better and more rewarding relationships.

The Decline of Social Skills

Exacerbating the issues of connections across generations, social skills are atrophying. As people are less connected, they are interacting less, and skills tend to wane. And when skills wane, confidence does as well, causing people to avoid social situations. It's a damaging cycle.

Fully 37% of people say they lack communication skills.[53] In addition, people lack confidence in interacting and relating. In another survey,[54] 20% reported that they are both anxious and self-conscious. In addition, 18% say they feel awkward, 13% say they are overwhelmed or uncomfortable in social settings, 11% say they are apprehensive, and 2% say they are terrified when they are in social situations.

It can indeed be scary. A room full of strangers can be overpowering and moments to mingle or make small talk can seem daunting.

Social skills are like a muscle, and when people aren't using them as much, they can deteriorate. It's *social jet lag*.

The locations that people work also play a role in their level of confidence with social skills, because work is a source of interactions. When people do their jobs remotely, 25% of them say they experience a decline in their social skills. Those who also live alone and those who are Millennials have had the greatest declines in their skills, according to the survey.[55]

People also grapple[56] with the specific mechanics of interactions. For example, 27% reported that they had trouble making small talk. In addition, 18% weren't sure how to start a conversation. Another 16% said they had a difficult time maintaining eye contact, and 15% struggled to carry on a conversation or be part of a group discussion.

Another of the mechanics of social skills is the ability to read and recognize emotions in others. According to research,[57] when people were better at expressing their own emotions, they could read others' reactions more quickly. The opposite was also true. When people were less confident expressing their own emotions, they had more uncertainty in reading others' as well. There was a reciprocal relationship between expressing and recognizing emotions.

Speed is a factor as well. When people show facial expressions more immediately, they are also better able to recognize emotions in others.[58] They can therefore mirror, empathize, and relate more effectively.

This is relevant as we consider the self-awareness that is fundamental to *EQ*, or the *emotional quotient* in relating with others. Higher levels of personal consciousness and connection with the self tend to positively impact connections with others.

The decline in our social skills and our difficulties in relating and interacting are linked with more stress, greater loneliness, and declines in physical health as well.[59] People who don't feel like they understand

others or relate to them may feel less connected, more detached, and pay the price in terms of mental health and loneliness. But when people are more confident and capable with their social skills, they experience greater well-being and even success in their careers.[60]

Alarm Bells

It's critical to say that there is no judgment toward people who are lonely, disconnected, stressed, lacking confidence with social skills, or struggling with mental health. In fact, these are all signals that something is wrong at a community and social level. Like a fever, they point to issues with our patterns of living and relating, that demand a response.

Unfortunately, we tend to define these issues at the individual level and seek to solve them on our own. We privatize our pain. But these are collective problems, and they require shared solutions. Rather than concluding that something is wrong with the person who suffers, it is necessary to honor the pain and consider the broader issues that get in the way of connectedness, so we can work toward solutions.

It's a rough road we're on, but by understanding the conditions, we can prepare for the journey and support each other to get through to the other side.

Key Points for Reflection

Here are important ideas to keep in mind from this chapter.

- Loneliness is significant for people throughout our society and communities.
- We have seen declines in mental health based on disconnection from each other.
- Loneliness is pervasive in many contexts including within our workplaces.

- Gen Z has been hit especially hard in terms of loneliness, disconnection, and mental health.
- Social skills have declined.
- Today's issues are alarm bells that alert us to the need for empathy, responses, and solutions.

In the next chapter we'll turn to a discussion of our disconnected reality and the dynamics that are contributing to our loneliness and mental health issues.