



GLOBAL WELLNESS
INSTITUTE™

ON OUR MINDS

The latest topics fueling the work of GWI's Wellness Communities Initiative

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN LONELINESS & COMMUNITY

“Even as people live longer, more are living lonely, unhealthy, and unhappy lives,” (a theme echoed in the [Build Well to Live Well](#) research report released by GWI in January).

During that same week, the United Kingdom appointed a Minister of Loneliness to address what they call an increasing epidemic of social isolation.

A couple of us in the Wellness Community Initiative have been reflecting on the effects of loneliness so it is now officially “On Our Minds.”

Gallup's Wellbeing index is seeing increasing rates of loneliness, which means that we are experiencing more social isolation and fewer social interactions. The byproduct of both is often depression and it affects all age groups.

More than nine million people in the United Kingdom report that they often or always feel lonely, according to a December 2017 report from the Commission of Loneliness – which is a staggering one in seven people.

Public-health leaders in England immediately praised the idea of taking on loneliness — and for good reason. In recent decades, researchers have discovered that loneliness left untreated is not just emotionally and psychically painful; it also can have serious medical consequences. Rigorous epidemiological studies have linked loneliness and social isolation to heart disease, cancer, depression, diabetes and suicide.

Vivek Murthy, the former United States surgeon general, has written that loneliness and social isolation are “associated with a reduction in life span similar to that caused by smoking 15 cigarettes a day - even greater than that associated with obesity.”

Community design that promotes high levels of social interaction pays off – it promotes healthy relationships, sells faster, generates better word of mouth for advertising and contributes to general happiness. Research has shown that people will do more healthy things if they are simply “nudged” in that direction. When designing communities, this is all about creating spaces where people will naturally meet. This can be done through moving cars from the centre to the periphery of the community, encouraging people on to the streets where they are more likely to encounter each other, provide street furniture like park benches, gazebos and parkour course training.

More proactive approaches involve reducing private spaces, even to the extent of smaller houses and gardens, and replacing them with higher quality shared facilities – a fully equipped shed with tools for sharing, a community garden or even a guest house for visitors. Others in the US have moved garages to the back or side of the house, and brought porches back to the front to invite people to gather.

Abraham Maslow, the famed development psychologist, was once asked how to overcome social isolation and without skipping a beat he said “an act of altruism.”

Becoming a volunteer for a cause you believe in can provide the same benefits as taking a class, like meeting others, being part of a group, creating new experiences. Volunteering also brings the [benefits of altruism](#), which can help you find more meaning. [happiness](#) and life satisfaction.

The profound psychological benefits of volunteering cannot be overstated; however, encouraging the first step for the lonely can be tricky.

- Lonely people are socially risk-averse and avoid longer term obligations but will “try” something that gives them an exit if it doesn’t work.
- Most volunteering does not enhance people’s skill sets but rather asks them in to perform menial tasks.
- Volunteering puts people in social situations in which they may be uncomfortable.
- Many lonely people are introverted and want to work behind the scenes
- The challenge is finding the door through which someone will find intriguing enough to enter while “seeing an exit.”

Finding a purpose or mission is yet another tool to combat loneliness. How does a community prompt people to connect? The backbone of creating community is communications and we are fortunate to have a communications hub called the intranet, a private “community-connecting machine.”

If there is one thing to get exactly right it is this, because of the direct positive social impact. It can to reduce social isolation and create a greater sense of belonging and acceptance.

One small town in England recognized the problem of isolation and used the local health center to identify residents who were experiencing loneliness. They recruited 500 locals (each expected to see 20 people a year) to serve as outreach people to visit and come up with a plan for each person. For each British pound they spent they saved over six pounds in health care costs amounting to over two million pounds.

We need to look no further than the Women's March to harness the political power of diverse women and their communities to create transformative social change by connecting people with like interests. They unleashed a sense of purpose and mission like we have not seen for a very long time. Or it can be simple - finding people to knit hats to keep babies warm in Afghanistan.

A private community Intranet has as many entry doors as your imagination. You can put up a button that says "volunteering" and then unfold the different ways to volunteer or you can put up a button "our kids can't read" or "our pets need your help." The principle is to open doors that respect people's psychological differences and invite them in. It is a win for everyone.

These issues are beautifully summarized in Pillar 4 from the Wellness Community Report, titled "From Me to We", a core differentiator between wellness lifestyle real estate and a wellness community:

"It is by connecting with others and with something larger than ourselves that we become a wellness community.... In a real community, people are aware of their connections to others; that their choices and lifestyles have a broader impact on the environment around them; and that they have a voice in the community and can influence the wellbeing of others." Loneliness is something that belongs in the mix of things we can and should work on when it comes to optimizing where and how we live.

Until next time, we will be building well to live well. Cheers!

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On Behalf of The Global Wellness Communities Initiative Team