Connected but Lonelier

Abstract

We have more ways to reach people than any generation before us. We have hundreds of contacts, endless group chats and followers on every app, and yet more and more people say they feel lonely. This article looks at that gap. It uses the World Health Organization's 2025 report on social connection and the US Surgeon General's 2023 advisory to show how common loneliness has become and who it hits hardest. It also looks at how much less time young people now spend with friends in person, and at research on what phones do to the conversations we still have face to face. It then touches on Pakistan, where loneliness is barely measured at all. It ends with a few small, realistic ways to actually be with people again.

We Have More Connection Than Ever

Think about your phone for a second. Most of us have a couple of hundred contacts saved, a bunch of WhatsApp groups (family, college, that one group nobody remembers making) and followers on Instagram or wherever else. Anyone you know is just one message away. On paper, nobody in history has ever been this connected.

And yet so many people still feel alone. In 2025, the World Health Organization's Commission on Social Connection found that 1 in 6 people worldwide experience loneliness. The part that surprised me is who it hits the most. You would expect it to be old people living by themselves, but it is actually most common among teenagers and young adults, around 1 in 5 of them, which is the same age group that is online the most. It is also much higher in low-income countries, where about 24 per cent of people reported feeling lonely, compared to around 11 per cent in high-income countries.

So we have all this connection, and somehow it isn't doing what we thought it would do.

Being Lonely Is Different From Being Alone

A lot of people mix these two up. Being alone just means nobody is around you. Loneliness is a feeling. WHO describes it as "the painful feeling that arises from a gap between desired and actual social connections." In simple words, it is the difference between the closeness you want and the closeness you actually have.

That is why you can feel lonely in a house full of people, in a joint family, in a full classroom or in a group chat that never stops buzzing. You can be talking to people all day and still feel like nobody really knows what is going on with you. Therefore, having a lot of people around and having people you can actually talk to are two very different things, and our phones are very good at giving us the first one.

We Stopped Actually Meeting People

One thing that has quietly changed is how much time we actually spend with friends in person. In 2023, the US Surgeon General, Dr Vivek Murthy, put out an advisory on what he called an epidemic of loneliness and isolation. One of the numbers in it is honestly a little bit scary. For people aged 15 to 24 in America, time spent with friends in person went down from about 150 minutes a day in 2003 to just 40 minutes a day in 2020. That is almost a 70 percent drop. The same report says that in 2021, almost half of American adults said they had three close friends or fewer, when back in 1990 it was only about a quarter.

That data is from the US, so I won't pretend it is exactly the same here. But I think most of us can recognise the pattern. Plans that used to be "let's meet" are now "send it on WhatsApp." We see someone's stories every day, so it feels like we know what is going on with them, and then we realise we haven't actually sat with that person in months. When Murthy was asked why young people were hit the hardest, his answer was pretty simple. He said young people spend a lot of time online, and that is time taken away from being with people in person.

A study from the University of Pittsburgh in 2017 looked at 1,787 young adults in the US, aged 19 to 32. The ones who used social media for more than two hours a day had twice the odds of feeling socially isolated, compared to people who used it for less than half an hour a day. To be fair, the researchers themselves said they don't know which comes first. It could be that social media makes people feel isolated, or that people who already feel isolated end up scrolling more. Either way, the two clearly go together.

Sitting Together While Everyone Is on Their Phone

Even when we do meet, the phone usually comes with us. If you have been to any desi dawat (dinner gathering) lately, you know the scene. Everyone is sitting in the same room, the food is there and the elders are talking, and half the people are looking down at their screens.

Researchers have actually watched this happen. In a study published in 2019, a team that included researchers from Tilburg University in the Netherlands secretly observed 100 pairs of students having a ten minute conversation in a student restaurant. In 62 of those 100 conversations, at least one person used their phone. (This is called phubbing, short for "phone snubbing," which means ignoring the person in front of you for your phone.) The interesting part is that afterwards, most of the students couldn't properly remember whether anyone had used a phone at all. We don't even notice we are doing it. But the other person still feels it, because when someone's partner had been on their phone, they rated the conversation as less close and personal.

So we are physically together, and the conversation still feels thinner than it should. We are at the same table without really being with each other.

What It Actually Does to Us

Loneliness sounds like just a bad mood, something you sleep off. The research says it is a lot more serious than that. The WHO report linked loneliness to an estimated 100 deaths every hour, more than 871,000 deaths every year. It also says people who are lonely are twice as likely to get depressed, and that loneliness can lead to anxiety too. The US advisory made an even bigger comparison. Based on earlier studies, it said that being socially isolated raises the risk of dying early about as much as smoking up to 15 cigarettes a day.

These are links found across big groups of people, so it does not mean one lonely evening will hurt you. But it does mean we should stop treating loneliness as a small personal thing that people should just deal with quietly.

What About Pakistan?

Here is the honest part. Pakistan barely measures loneliness. The only survey I could find that even asked about it was a school students' health survey back in 2009. Apart from that there are only a few small studies done in universities, and nothing recent that tells us how many Pakistanis actually feel lonely. That in itself says something, because we usually don't measure what we don't take seriously.

What we do have is a culture where people are almost always around each other, through joint families, relatives dropping in and weddings that never seem to end. You would think that protects us, and maybe in some ways it does. But being surrounded by family is not the same as being able to talk to them, and I think a lot of young people would say there are things they would never tell anyone at home. So we might be one of those places where nobody is ever alone, and still plenty of people feel lonely.

Small Ways to Actually Be With People Again

I'm not going to tell anyone to throw their phone away, because I won't be doing that either. But a few small things can make a real difference.

Murthy himself talks about keeping phone free times in his life, like dinner with family or time with friends, where he is with people and not with technology. He also says he now makes a point of actually picking up when his friends call, instead of sending a text later. Both of these sound almost too simple, and that is kind of the point. At the next dawat, keep the phone in your pocket for the first hour. When a friend pops into your head, call them instead of just reacting to their story. Turn "we should meet sometime" into an actual day and time.

We have more connection than anyone before us ever had. The least we can do is use some of it to actually show up for each other.

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