

# LONELINESS AND THE IMPACT

## On your patients' mental well-being and physical health

Health care providers<sup>1</sup> and researchers have found that loneliness is a growing public health<sup>2</sup> problem – one that can affect both the physical and mental well-being of your patients.

That's because feelings of loneliness are associated with a number of chronic conditions, including depression,<sup>3</sup> heart disease<sup>4</sup> and cancer.<sup>5</sup> Some research even suggests that loneliness has the same effect on mortality as smoking 15 cigarettes a day.<sup>6</sup> This, coupled with the known higher health care costs for individuals who have both chronic physical and mental health conditions, highlights the need to address the upstream causes of mental well-being issues, including warning signs like loneliness.

### Cigna survey on loneliness

In summer 2019, we surveyed 10,441 adults to understand the effect loneliness has in the United States. This "Cigna U.S. Loneliness Index"<sup>7</sup> showed that:

- › Three in five Americans reported sometimes or always feeling alone.
- › Half of Americans rarely or never feels as though there are people who understand them.
- › Adults age 18–22 are the loneliest generation and claim to be in worse health than people older than them.
- › Men are lonelier than women.
- › Americans living in urban areas are lonelier than those living in rural areas.

### How you can help identify affected patients and what can be done to help

While loneliness is not a diagnosable medical condition, as a health care provider you play the central role in identifying when a patient may be suffering from loneliness – and how best to help them. And yet knowing which patients may suffer from loneliness and how to recognize it in a clinical setting may be challenging.

### Tips to help you identify if a patient may be lonely

When asking your patient questions, listen to what they do and don't do, and if they vocalize any feelings of isolation.

- › Because we spend so much time at work, it's an important place that can help indicate if your patient may feel lonely. Do they feel as if they have friends at work? Do they engage with others or participate in "water cooler" conversations?
- › People who identify as less lonely tend to have more balance in their life.<sup>7</sup> Do they feel balanced in their sleep, amount of physical activity or desired level of family time? Encourage your patient to practice mindfulness, which is a technique and a process that allows people to achieve balance and stay present in their life.

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## Tips to give patients who may be experiencing feelings of loneliness

Once you identify that a patient may be suffering from loneliness, there are things you can recommend to help them immediately and over time.

- Recommend they call a friend or family member to say hi, schedule lunch or drop by for a visit.
- Suggest that the next time they walk through the office or go to the gym or coffee shop, they should make a point to stop and talk to others. They should also try scheduling meetings in person instead of by phone.
- Encourage them to sign up for a group exercise class, to break a sweat and meet new people.
- Remind them to get the right amount of sleep each night. They should also avoid technology before bedtime, and set an alarm to avoid oversleeping.

Cigna also offers many behavioral and mental health resources to covered individuals. For these patients, let them know that they can always call Cigna at the number on their ID card to talk to mental health professionals or customer service representatives who can educate the individual about any additional resources that may be offered under their benefit plan.

Remember that for many patients, they may be suffering from loneliness, but may not have the awareness or the right vocabulary to vocalize their feelings. This is where you can help identify those feelings and offer support.

## Help your patients improve their mental health and combat loneliness. Visit [Cigna.com/Connections](https://www.cigna.com/Connections).



### Loneliness resources for your patients

Individuals can assess their own loneliness score by accessing the questionnaire used to create the Cigna U.S. Loneliness Index as well as get additional tips and supportive resources at [Cigna.com/CombatingLoneliness](https://www.cigna.com/CombatingLoneliness).



1. Loneliness in the Workplace Can Be a High Cost For Employers, American Psychiatric Association (APA) Center for Workplace Mental Health, 2018; <http://workplacementalhealth.org/News-Events/Blog/January-2018/Loneliness-in-the-Workplace-Can-Be-a-High-Cost>.
2. Loneliness and social isolation as risk factors for mortality: a meta-analytic review, Perspectives on Psychological Science, 2015; <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/25910392>.
3. Unraveling the Role of Loneliness in Depression: The Relationship Between Daily Life Experience and Behavior, Interpersonal and Biological Processes, 2017; <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/00332747.2016.1256143>.
4. Loneliness and social isolation as risk factors for coronary heart disease and stroke: systematic review and meta-analysis of longitudinal observational studies, BMJ Journals Heart, 2016; <http://heart.bmj.com/content/102/13/1009.info>.
5. Myeloid differentiation architecture of leukocyte transcriptome dynamics in perceived social isolation, Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America, 2015; <http://www.pnas.org/content/early/2015/11/18/1514249112>.
6. Testimony before the US Senate Aging Committee, Julianne Holt-Lunstad, Ph.D., 2017; [https://www.aging.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/SCA\\_Holt\\_04\\_27\\_17.pdf](https://www.aging.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/SCA_Holt_04_27_17.pdf).
7. Cigna's U.S. Loneliness Index, 2019, <https://www.cigna.com/newsroom/news-releases/2020/cigna-takes-action-to-combat-the-rise-of-loneliness-and-improve-mental-wellness-in-america>.

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