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Loneliness and Social Isolation—A Private Problem, A Public Issue

Sue E. Williams
Bonnie Braun

Loneliness is the subjective state of feeling alone, of dissatisfaction with the quantity and quality of social relationships. Social isolation is an objective lack of social relationships, networks, or contacts and access to information and resources (Wilson & Moulton, 2010). Most of the population in the United States experiences loneliness. Recent research produced evidence of the widespread nature of the condition and of the long-term impact on health. There is an impact on each individual and their family, but there also is a great impact on society which must bear the burden of healthcare costs and loss of productivity and civic engagement.

Loneliness

Multiple studies provide evidence of the presence and prevalence of both conditions. Although loneliness affects most of society, it is not equally distributed. A 2010 study found that 70% of teenagers were lonely and that the “alarming” effects of teenage loneliness carried over across the life span (Goosby, Bellatorre, Walsemann, & Cheadle 2013). A 2018 study of adults (Cigna, 2018) found that 48.3%, nearly half of those ages 18–22, known as the Gen Z population, had the highest loneliness

scores. Close behind were 45.3% of those in the 23–27-years-old Millennial population. The lowest loneliness scores were among the oldest adults, ages 72+. In contrast to the youngest adults, only 38.6% of this age group scored high on the loneliness survey. These data demonstrate both the presence and uneven prevalence of both conditions across the lifespan.

Research documents that across all age groups, those with fewer supportive individuals around them have the highest loneliness scores. More than half (55%) of the lonely people were more likely to have poor health (Wilson & Moulton, 2010). Teens and young adults exhibit the largest proportion of loneliness. The long-term negative health consequences of loneliness and social isolation among the young threatens the health of our nation’s population. And, although there is an impact on each individual and family, there is a great impact on society, which must bear the burden of healthcare costs and loss of productivity.

Research is increasingly linking loneliness to declining physical, mental, and emotional well-being.

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Loneliness:

- Increases blood pressure and cholesterol
- Activates physical and psychological stress responses
- Contributes to cardiovascular disease—the number one cause of death
- Suppresses the immune system—our protection from illness and disease

Loneliness can produce social isolation as people withdraw from connections. Alternatively, loneliness can occur as a result of social isolation when people become disconnected from relationships with family, friends, neighbors, co-workers, community organizations, communities of faith, or other sources of social interaction.

Social Isolation

Social isolation can affect individuals across their lifespan and in all geographic areas. Although there are many ways to define—and many characteristics of—social isolation, one definition is simply *a lacking connectedness with others* (Flowers et al., 2017).

Social isolation produces a diminished sense of community and loosens bonds that help people find a shared sense of direction on many issues such as poverty, health, food security, violence, and racial conflict that plague society. Most adults do not participate in social groups (Pew Research Center, 2009) and rates of volunteerism are decreasing (U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Statistics, 2016), putting them at-risk for social isolation and health problems.

Conversely, positive social bonds are associated with better health. A meta-study found that strong and deep social connections were associated with a 50% drop in the risk of early death (Holt-Lunstad, 2017). Thus, social isolation contributes both to poor personal health and to a lack of engagement in the public arena.

From Personal Problem to Public Issue

Loneliness and social isolation are threats to individuals, communities, and the nation. These two conditions kill people and cripple a democratic society—a society that depends on civic engagement in public matters. With this increasing lack of connectedness, civic—and civil—engagement are threatened.

The data behind these statements are both startling and concerning. The data suggest that our society must move away from viewing loneliness and social isolation as personal concerns, and hence private, toward loneliness and social isolation as public problems or issues. As a population, we are at a tipping point, or what a former surgeon general identified as, a public health epidemic—as destructive, or more so, than obesity and tobacco use (Murthy, 2017). A public problem or issue requires a public response (Rourk, 2014).

This public issue has implications for what holds our communities and nation together—social cohesion.

This public issue has implications for what holds our communities and nation together—social cohesion. A recent study of social cohesion offers a new definition appropriate to loneliness and social isolation. According to Fonseca, Lukosch, and Brazier (2018), social cohesion is:

The ongoing process of developing well-being, sense of belonging, and voluntary social participation of the members of society, while developing communities that tolerate and promote a multiplicity of values and cultures, and granting at the same time equal rights and opportunities in society. (p. 16)

Increasing social cohesion can be one outcome of shifting loneliness from a private concern into the public arena. This shift from private loneliness and isolation fits the definition of a “wicked problem”—one for which the diagnosis, definition, and cause are unclear and effective actions to deal with the problem requires narrowing the gap between what is and what ought to be (Mathews, 2014; Rittel & Webber, 1973). Wicked problems are more human than technical and are deeply embedded in our social fabric. They contain confusion and disagreement regarding sources and solutions for the problem. The shift from private concern to public issue can be understood, and solutions found, through civic involvement.

A Path Forward

If Americans are lonely and socially isolated, are they willing and able to be civically engaged? Would the act of engagement both reduce individual loneliness and isolation and contribute to a more cohesive society? How important would this engagement be? In 1991, Richard Harwood collaborated with the Kettering Foundation and found that people want to become civically involved but do not know how to start. After 9/11, he found a renewed sense of patriotism and desire for increased civic engagement. The American public wanted to kickstart a new path or way forward for individuals, communities, and the country (Harwood, 2012). However, by 2018, people were finding themselves in the “Tower of Babel” where possibilities for positive progress were stymied. Acrimony and divisiveness seem to rule the day leading people to be anxious, fearful, isolated, and lonely.

Harwood suggested a path forward and proposed that as a society we focus on basics—the value of compassion, openness, and humility. He suggested that common values and common solutions can be found through civic engagement. For people to become civically engaged they must reclaim control of their lives and focus on the common good. This point of view is reinforced by Sasse (2018) who urged a rediscovery of real place and human-to-human relationships. Even as technology nudges us to become more isolated and “rootless,” he urged us to rediscover one another and our communities. “In spite of the endless disagreements that flow from diversity, we want to be *free to* build our local communities where we shoulder one another’s burdens in compassion and generosity” (Sasse, 2018, p. 14). Bearing burdens and making connections is a way out of social isolation and its accompanying loneliness, detrimental health problems, and public health issues.

The path forward needs the engagement of family and consumer science (FCS) professionals with expertise and access to youth and adults in local communities. FCS professionals, both individually and collectively, as members of professional associations such as the American Association of Family & Consumer Science (AAFCS), must become engaged and/or lead others on this path forward.

Deliberative Civic Engagement by FCS Professionals and AAFCS

Wondering what roles you could play in addressing loneliness and social isolation? We have written about roles of engagement for FCS professionals and named five roles FCS professionals can fulfill:

1. Personal. We can begin with self-reflection about this call for engagement to address the public nature of loneliness and isolation.
2. Citizen. We can invite neighbors over for a conversation or talk with other professionals, members of our community of faith, neighbors, students, and others.
3. Educator. We can educate through classrooms, community meetings, articles, and other means of building awareness.
4. Analyst. We can seek, then provide, data for people to consider as they understand the extent to which loneliness and social isolation exist in their communities. We can frame the public and private consequences and organize deliberative processes, such as study circles or forums, for engaging people in considering the impact and options for action.
5. Advocate. We can organize within our communities and professional associations to collectively advocate for achieving in the area of loneliness and social isolation what our nation has achieved in the areas of tobacco use. (Braun & Williams, 2004).

Deliberative civic engagement denotes a process that enables individuals from many sectors of our society to come together and participate in constructive, informed, and decisive dialogue about important public issues.

Any or all of these roles could be fulfilled through multiple paths, but this article is focused on deliberative civic engagement. Deliberative civic engagement denotes a process that enables individuals from many sectors of our society to come

together and participate in constructive, informed, and decisive dialogue about important public issues (Nabatchi, Gastil, Weiksner, & Leighninger, 2012).

Informal Deliberative Practices

Deliberation is a process of careful consideration of options, trade-offs, and multiple perspectives with the intent of solving common problems or issues. Engaging in deliberation can be informal and can begin with a few questions such as:

- Is loneliness a problem among people you know?
- Do you see people becoming isolated from one another?
- Are you aware that loneliness and social isolation affect both the health of individual youth and adults and the health of our community and society?

Such questions can guide the efforts of individuals and groups seeking to be civically engaged. For example, when one of us raised these questions with her church congregation, members began discussing them within their committee structure. Church members have decided to explore actions they could take to reduce loneliness and social isolation in the local community.

Formal Deliberative Practices

The practice of deliberation can be more formal and can use tested methods for dialogue. Living Room Conversations (www.LivingRoomConversations.org) is a nonprofit organization focused on developing relationships around public issues that will increase knowledge and understanding. The purpose of these conversations is to find common ground in areas of agreement among people with different beliefs and opinions, often on controversial issues. Living Room Conversations are designed to create a space to talk about experiences and shared aspirations. Other groups with similar objectives and varying approaches include Bridge Alliance (www.bridgealliance.us) and All Sides (www.all.sides.com).

The Paul J. Aicher Foundation created the Study Circles Resource Center that morphed into Everyday Democracy (www.everyday-democracy.org) to

help individuals engage in dialogue and problem solving. In a study circle, everyone has an equal voice and participants try to understand each other's views. Study circles are typically conducted over several sessions at multiple sites. At the end, people from all of the conversations gather to work on action.

Each of these deliberative approaches could be used to increase civic engagement while reducing social isolation. FCS professionals could form study circles on the topic of loneliness and social isolation. (An example of the use of study circles by FCS professionals is included in this article.)

The National Coalition for Dialogue and Deliberation is an educational organization and a Community of Practice. Communities of practice are formed by people who engage in a process of collective learning in a shared topic area. In other words, communities of practice are groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly. AAFCS supports communities of practice among its members to bring together people with mutual interests. Existing or new communities of practice could be formed to address loneliness and social isolation.

Perhaps one of the most well-known foundations devoted to civic engagement is the Charles F. Kettering Foundation. Kettering is focused on learning what it takes to make democracy work as it should. The Foundation started the National Issues Forum project to foster public deliberation and get citizens engaged in helping to shape the destiny of their communities, states, and the country. The Foundation has conducted research to assess the impact of the forums and found them to be effective.

The Kettering Foundation partnered with the AAFCS Public Policy Committee to teach its members how to conduct forums, frame issue guides, collect data, and apply their learning experience in local communities and to the association (Williams, Braun, & Hartough, 2006). As a result, the partnership: increased the capacity of members to name, frame, moderate, record, and host forums; produced the *Sizing of America* issue guide; and engaged citizens across the country in hundreds of deliberative forums. The Foundation determined

that the partnership was effective. Perhaps it is time for AAFCS to create an issue guide on loneliness and social isolation and again conduct citizen deliberations and again host forums across the country.

Professional Practice

Beyond becoming personally engaged and/or engaging collectively through professional associations, FCS professionals can engage in their professional practice settings. Here we focus on two settings that represent a large proportion of AAFCS members: Cooperative Extension as well as secondary and higher education—practice settings wherein FCS professionals have authority and flexibility to incorporate deliberation into their programs.

Cooperative Extension

A critical role of Cooperative Extension is to build the capacity of people to shape their lives, communities, and collective futures (Peters, Alter, & Shaffer, 2018). FCS professionals working in county, state, and national Extension positions have demonstrated the power of deliberative civic engagement to help people address a wide-range of social problems including economic development, environmental quality, race and class conflict, safety and well-being of children, food security, health literacy, and poverty.

Extension professionals have successfully adapted deliberative principles to unique local circumstances and specific issues to help people share their perspectives.

Extension professionals have successfully adapted deliberative principles to unique local circumstances and specific issues to help people share their perspectives. They guide conversations about participants' values regarding an issue; sort through the costs and benefits of alternative courses of action; and come to common ground that leads to positive change.

One example of addressing a public issue is the Turning the Tide on Poverty Initiative (Tide) launched in 2010 by Cooperative Extension in collaboration with the Southern Rural Development

Center (Beaulieu & Welborn, 2012). Tide was launched in eight sites in five Southeast states. The initiative involved 5 weeks of deliberative dialogue using the Study Circles model followed by community-wide action forums. During these forums, study circle participants shared action ideas and used a consensus process to identify top action ideas. Action teams were formed around priority ideas.

Beaulieu and Welborn (2012) found an amazing number of success stories that are specifically relevant to the target communities as well as the southern region. Beyond specific success stories to tackle local poverty, they reported specific impacts of Tide as a civic engagement project:

- A diverse population seems willing to join in civic dialogue related to community issues. Involvement in Tide helped strengthen the nature and level of dialogue among those with limited history of speaking with one another.
- The presence of a local champion seems vital to the initiation and sustainability of both dialogue and community action.
- Investments in civic engagement often translate to increases in citizen participation, innovative partnerships, and new collaborations on challenging “wicked” local issues.

FCS Extension professionals provided key leadership to design and implement the Tide initiative. They offer critical local support for citizen-led efforts to address poverty and improve the human condition. Though focused on the southern region, Tide has great potential for implementation across our country. We challenge FCS professionals to learn more and lead this effort.

Another example of engagement by Extension is found in the Kettering Foundation-funded project “Engaging Unheard Voices” (Braun et al., 2006). The project arose out of a research study of rural, low-income mothers. The Foundation’s charge was to answer the question, “Under what conditions can, and will, limited resource citizens participate in the deliberative public policy process?” The project interviewed mothers to identify an issue they wanted to address and barriers to engagement. Mothers selected the issue of lack of low-cost, safe

recreation for the health of their families. The issue was named, framed, and presented during a moderated community forum using three tradeoffs for deliberation. At the request of the mothers, the project team invited a town mayor. As a result of the deliberation, the mayor invited the participants to join him in exploring the use of a donated armory to meet their desired healthy recreation needs.

Before the forum, the mothers felt powerless and marginalized. Some were angry because a building was vacant that could be used for their families. After the forum, they were excited that a person of power honored their ideas and encouraged them to work together with him. One year later, they were offering to serve as peer leaders to show others how to get involved. The research report concluded that Extension was well positioned to address conditions that could encourage engagement among limited resource citizens. Again, FCS professionals could be the ones to identify local issues and guide deliberative processes that remove or decrease barriers to encourage diverse participation.

Social isolation is an issue that is prevalent in many communities served by Extension. Some conditions, such as distances between homes and communities and lack of transportation, inhibit engagement, particularly in rural areas. However, using the contacts, creativity, and deliberative skill set of Extension professionals, loneliness and social isolation can be brought into the public agenda where solutions, driven by committed, caring, and engaged citizens, can emerge.

Given Extension's contact with teens through 4-H, FCS Extension professionals could collaborate to engage 4-H members in seeking ways to alleviate or prevent loneliness and social isolation among youth. What a contribution Extension would be making to reduce the long-term detrimental impact of loneliness and social isolation on the health of teens and teens as adult citizens.

Another example ripe for Extension attention is loneliness and social isolation associated with stress among farmers, farm workers, and farm families. One of the authors is currently engaged in a research and Extension project that has identified health issues, including the negative impact of

stress, on the health of people engaged in farming. Current actions include sharing data and raising questions about what can be done. As a result of forums held in the fall of 2018, two action teams in two states are organized to expand conversations and research in early 2019. A likely next step is framing the issue for community deliberation that could include discussions of loneliness and social isolation (Braun & Anderson, 2019).

Secondary and Higher Education

Deliberative pedagogy is an educational process that provides opportunities for students to consider multiple perspectives on “wicked social issues,” weigh costs and benefits of proposed corrective actions, and struggle with tensions between and among alternative policies directed to civic action. Marin and Minor (2017) reported on studies of 11 higher education projects designed to integrate deliberative pedagogy into the curriculum. A consistent finding is that reading and volunteer service coupled with follow-up deliberative discussions related to a challenging social issue, leads to a greater sense of political efficacy and power. Furthermore, students who were exposed to deliberative democracy learned that they could make positive contributions and improvements in society—thus becoming civically engaged in the short- and long-term.

Cress (2012) cited multiple studies concluding that thoughtful and purposefully designed civic engagement curriculum that incorporates deliberative concepts yields greater learning and increased graduation rates in K-12 schools and higher education including community colleges. Students who participate gain interpersonal skills and the ability to communicate and collaborate with diverse groups. Deliberative practices in the classroom and community help secondary students become connected to one another and often-diverse populations in the community, thus reducing individual loneliness and social isolation.

The secondary educators described in a 10-year study (Molnar-Main, 2017) are committed to engaging students with public issues and guiding them as they discuss challenging topics with civility and a critical lens. They know that engagement reduces conflict, increases the

ability to talk across differences, understand divergent viewpoints, and manage complex problems. The researchers have seen students realize they are not alone when they struggle with difficult personal and societal issues.

We wonder about the extent to which FCS educators incorporate deliberative pedagogy in their courses in secondary and higher education. Educators could make a substantial contribution to reducing the long-term detrimental impact of loneliness and social isolation on the health of teens, Gen Zers, and Millennials they teach.

Threat As Opportunity

We began this article with these bold statements:

Loneliness and social isolation are threats to individuals, communities, and the nation. These two conditions kill people and cripple a democratic society.

Loneliness and social isolation threaten the health and well-being of individuals. Both phenomena occur across the life span, but teens and young adults are experiencing both threats in great numbers. The negative impact affects not only one's current health and well-being, but also carries over into long-term health problems. Loneliness and social isolation threaten the health and well-being of our communities and our democratic society. The negative effect includes behaviors that divide, shut-down conversations, and inhibit understanding; that could lead to other negative consequences.

Indeed, this threat can become an opportunity. The trend toward loneliness and social isolation does not have to continue. The impact on both individual health and social cohesion can be reduced, eliminated, and prevented going forward. To do so, we must have the will to find the way.

Deliberative civic engagement practices, by the very nature of people exploring situations and solutions together, can serve as means of reducing social isolation for those who choose to engage. At the same time, deliberative processes can provide a way to understand the extent of the public problems of loneliness and social isolation, the consequences, and to identify desired solutions that fit local situations.

Although we can intentionally employ deliberative civic engagement processes in our individual practice settings, it is by working with others both within and outside of our professional associations and workplaces that we will have collective impact. Kania and Kramer (2011) found that isolated interventions of individuals and organizations are necessary but not sufficient to have collective impact. Stachowiak and Gase (2018) found that by working together, solutions can come from within neighborhoods and communities to maximize our “collaborative IQ.” These collaborative efforts contrast with recent recommendations that isolation be addressed through a medical lens (Bipartisan Policy Center Report, 2018).

Professionals in medicine and public health are writing about the private and public impact of loneliness and social isolation. Even so, according to Frist and Tramuto (2018), social isolation, as a health condition that raises the risk of early death, is not well known among medical professionals or most of the public. A medical perspective is important, but so too are perspectives from FCS and other professions. All are needed to truly reduce or eliminate the loneliness epidemic.

From our review of the literature, voices of FCS professionals are missing. The purposes of this article were to inform FCS professionals about the personal and public nature of the problem and to persuade these professionals to address pressing private problems and public issues that arise from loneliness and social isolation through deliberative civic engagement. FCS professionals and AAFCS are well positioned to engage in deliberative civic engagement focused on loneliness and social isolation and to produce impact assessments. We bring unique disciplinary perspectives and access to youth and adults where they live, work, play, and pray. We have set a precedent as an association in conducting deliberative forums. We can become part of the solution as called for by Frist and Tramuto (2018):

As more people become aware of the problem of social isolation—and maybe identify it in themselves—our movement will gain momentum. Together, we can weave a stronger social fabric from today's disparate pieces and ensure a more connected and healthier tomorrow.

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Dedication

This article is dedicated to two deceased presidents of AAFCS—Drs. Beverly Crabtree and Peggy Meszaros. Both were administrators who urged us, as early-career FCS professionals, to engage in public policy. They understood, from a systems perspective, that changes in the public arena had an impact on individuals, families, and communities. They believed that FCS professionals must apply their knowledge and skills to matters requiring civic engagement. Our engagement is rooted in their encouragement and support.