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# CONNECTICUT POST

## WHEN SOCIAL MEDIA ISN'T SOCIAL

### Is loneliness hazardous to your health?

By Amanda Cuda

Ronnie Ann Ryan recalls a time when people who wanted to meet others and start new relationships had to actually leave their house to do that. Now, all they have to do is hop on a social media site or an online dating service, said Ryan, a Milford-based dating coach for women over 50. That's certainly convenient, she said, but it limits the amount of face-to-face interaction that singles get — not just with potential partners, but with other people in general.

“The bad part of Internet dating is that you don't get the social interaction,” Ryan said. “We were meant to live in a community, but now we're more and more isolated. People just don't get out the way they used to.”

A growing body of research not only echoes Ryan's fears about the creep of social isolation, but also shows that being, and feeling alone, can be hazardous to one's health.

A study from Brigham Young University published earlier this month in the journal *Perspectives on Psychology Science*, analyzed a variety of studies conducted between 1980 and 2014 that looked at whether perceived loneliness, limited social interaction or living alone affected a person's risk of dying. What they found was that all three factors led to a jump in mortality rates.

Feeling lonely increased the risk of premature death by 29 percent, while social isolation boosted it by 26 percent and living alone increases premature death risk by 32 percent. The study goes a long way to proving that good health is about more than taking care of the body, said Timothy B. Smith, co-author of the paper and professor of counseling psychology at Brigham Young.

“People today care about their health and they want long lives and they want to know what they can do to live longer,” he said. “Social relationships are a key part of that.”

### **Better Together**

The findings didn't surprise Ryan, who said she has always believed that companionship, whether in a romantic relationship or not, is a basic human need. People always talk about how married men live longer than bachelors,” she said. “On a basic level, we're all still animals. We can't deny our biological roots.” Yet, she has noticed that many people are denying those roots and aren't getting out enough and meeting people. “It's sad,” she said.

It's also unhealthy, for a number of reasons, according to Smith and other experts. Smith said the link between companionship and physical wellbeing has been known for a while. "There are a number of pathways between health and relationships," he said.

For instance, an active social life can help keep stress levels down and can even keep people from getting sick. "Our immune system even functions better when we're around people in a social setting," Smith said.

Having close personal relationships also encourages people to take better care of themselves. For instance, someone is more likely to have regular doctor or dentist visits if a spouse or other loved one is constantly on his or her case about it. "You can't send something like that over a tweet," Smith said.

The Brigham Young study's findings make sense to Dr. Patricia Rizzi, director of psychiatry at Bridgeport Hospital. Being alone — or even feeling lonely, despite living with others — can be stressful, she said, and stress can have all kinds of harmful effects on the body. It can tax the heart, increase the risk of diabetes, cause digestive problems and wreak any matter of health havoc. "It's kind of a toxic effect," Rizzi said.

Loneliness can also trigger or exacerbate certain mental health issues, which, in turn, can have devastating effects on the body. "We find that a lot people who are lonely are very depressed," Rizzi said.

## **Culture of Solitude**

Despite some obvious physical benefits, in-person interaction seems to be less of a priority to people than it was in the past. A 2012 report from the U.S. Census Bureau showed that 27 percent of Americans were living alone that year, up from 17 percent in 1970.

Over that same period of time, the percent of households made up of married couples with children was split in half, from 40 percent in 1970 to 20 percent in 2012. The census report attributed this to a variety of factors, including the fact that more people were getting married for the first time later in life.

Smith said the U.S. isn't alone in its growing population of singletons, as many European countries are also seeing a rise in the number of people living alone. But, he said, it's not just living alone that's damaging. It's also the whole concept of loneliness and decreased interaction with other people.

On the latter score, he and other experts lay a lot of blame at the feet of social media. Smith said some people might not even realize how lonely they are, as they're likely interacting with others online through social media sites such as Facebook and Twitter.

But, Rizzi said, chatting online isn't a substitute for getting out of the house and having real conversations with live human beings. "People should be encouraged to have face-to-face relationships," she said. "How often do we do text? How often do we email? I think we spend

too much time on social media — kids especially. For God’s sake, they’ll be sitting at a table across from each other, staring into their cellphones and not talking to each other.”

Not all see social media as a relationship killer, however. For older people, Facebook and the like are actually a way to stay in touch with loved ones, said Lisa Marsh Ryerson, president of the AARP Foundation, which works to improve the lives of low-income, vulnerable people 55 and older.

One of the key areas the foundation is looking at is social isolation, she said, and, despite the possible negative implications of social media for younger people, it can be a great tool for the aging. “When you look at the older population, it’s important to bridge the digital divide to increase social networking,” Ryerson said, “We’ve found that getting them to use technology to get in touch with loved ones who live far afield can increase their social connectedness.”

Overall, Smith said, one of the keys to turning around the culture of loneliness is letting people know that it exists, and that it can harm their health.

He likened it to the huge cultural shift that’s happened around smoking in the past century. In the 1920s and 1930s, Smith said, no one knew how harmful that habit was. Once information came out over the intervening decades, an increasing number of people changed their lifestyles.

If the same shift takes place around isolation and loneliness, it won’t just save lives, Smith said. It could make people’s lives richer and more interesting. “Social interaction isn’t just important for longevity— it’s also a quality of life issue,” he said.

### The Lonely list

Here are some key facts from a Brigham Young University study on the impact of loneliness. In reviewing a variety of studies conducted between 1980 and 2014, researchers found that:

- + Feeling lonely increased the risk of premature death by 29 percent.
- + Social isolation increased the risk of premature death by 26 percent.
- + Living alone increased the risk of premature death by 32 percent.