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Male loneliness: A hidden struggle

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Introduction

Loneliness in the United States has grown into an epidemic because many people are losing regular, close connections with others (Office of the U.S. Surgeon General, 2023). Families often live far apart, neighborhoods feel less connected and people move more often for school or jobs. Technology, while helpful, sometimes replaces face-to-face time with friends and family, leaving people feeling more isolated. Add in stress from work, money worries and the fast pace of life, and many people end up without the strong support systems they need to feel truly connected.

Loneliness, particularly for men, is a painful and sometimes embarrassing feeling, and many men deal with it in silence (Addis, 2011). From a young age, boys are often taught to be leaders — tough and self-reliant. They may hear that showing emotions is a sign of weakness (Jansz, 2000). Phrases like “big boys don’t cry” send the message that men should suppress their feelings. As a result, many male friendships focus on shared activities or small talk (Botschner, 1996) rather than on deep conversations that build closeness. This can leave many men feeling like they have no one to turn to when they need help (McKenzie et al., 2022). Even if friends or family are around, men may still feel misunderstood or unheard. Unfortunately, this lack of emotional connection can harm both mental and physical health across a lifetime (Glaser & Kiecolt-Glaser, 2005; Park et al., 2020; Singer, 2018). Loneliness can lead to poor sleep, substance abuse, depression, anxiety, cognitive decline and increased risks for heart disease and stroke (Leigh-Hunt et al., 2017; Jaffe, 2023; Nordin et al., 2024).

Friendships and strong relationships are important for happiness and health (Umberson & Montez, 2010). However, for men, making friends can be challenging. In 2021, 15% of men reported having no close friends. Among men under 30, the number was even higher at 28% (Cox, 2021). More people are struggling with social anxiety or spending much of their time online, which can make it even harder to build real-life friendships (Luchetti et al., 2020). Some individuals have even begun turning to AI chatbots for companionship. Almost a third of young adult men (29%) who have done this say they prefer talking to chatbots to talking to real people (Willoughby et al., 2025). While AI chatbots can offer instant non-judgmental support and an opportunity for reflection, they lack many aspects of genuine human relationships. For example, human relationships often require sacrifice and negotiation, which help us feel good and connected to others (Smith et al., 2025). Interactions with chatbots lack this depth. Additionally, chatbots may shut down or change unexpectedly, provide inappropriate advice, foster emotional dependence, or present privacy concerns (Smith et al., 2025). Unlike humans, they cannot be present to provide physical affection or support for physical tasks. Because these advanced chatbots are so new, the long-term effects of using them for companionship are not yet understood.

Real-world friendships provide meaningful experiences and offer numerous benefits, including stronger social skills, improved emotional regulation and positive health outcomes (Majors, 2012). When men feel safe to share their emotions, they often realize others share similar experiences. Steps like joining a group, seeing a therapist or making healthy lifestyle changes can have a big impact (Cacioppo et al., 2015). Men can benefit from caring and kind relationships. Talking openly, showing emotion and reaching out are not signs of weakness — they are signs of strength. Therefore, if you or someone you know may be feeling the effects of loneliness, reach out to them or consider the following tips.

Tips

- **Reach out to those around you:** If you're experiencing loneliness or have noticed yourself pulling away from others more than usual, try reaching out to someone you trust. For example, you could invite a friend to join you in an activity you enjoy or ask to spend time together doing something simple. Even small actions like sending a text, making a quick phone call or meeting up briefly can help you feel more connected. Taking the first step can feel difficult, but it can help rebuild a sense of belonging and remind you that you don't have to face loneliness on your own.
- **Join a group:** Groups and clubs can be a great way to meet new people with similar interests or offer a new way to engage in hobbies with close friends. Options might include creative classes, like woodworking, culinary groups, volunteering organizations, a fatherhood program/dads-only meetups or other areas that bring people together and encourage sharing. You may be able to find information on these groups in public libraries, community centers or local Facebook groups.
- **Volunteering for connection:** If you are feeling lonely, volunteering can be a meaningful way to connect with others while contributing to something positive in your community. Volunteering often places you in group settings where people come together to accomplish a common goal. Helping others can also improve your mood and sense of purpose, which may reduce negative feelings associated with loneliness. Research has shown that volunteering is linked to better mental health and higher levels of life satisfaction, partly because it increases social interaction and feelings of belonging (Nichol et al., 2024).
- **Finding a community in fitness:** If you enjoy being active, try joining a small fitness group, such as a running club, golf league or casual hiking group. These settings give you a relaxed, low-pressure way to be social, and research shows that regular physical activity can boost your mental health and help reduce feelings of loneliness (Lubans et al., 2016). Small groups may feel especially comfortable if you are more introverted or feeling isolated, allowing you to build connections naturally through shared activities rather than forced conversation. Additionally, many workouts include music to boost your motivation, reduce your perception of effort and enhance your performance. Music can also support your mental health, as positive or hopeful lyrics, a fast tempo and a danceable rhythm may help you shift into a more positive headspace when you are struggling with loneliness (Bowling, 2023).
- **Rethink the situation:** Many feelings come from our perspective. For example, instead of thinking "I have no one around me," try seeing your situation as an opportunity for growth or reconnecting. It could be as simple as writing down the names of friends, family, co-workers or acquaintances to remind you of who you have in your community. Then, put effort into building these connections by starting a conversation with someone on your list. Consider checking up on a friend you haven't heard from in a while or reaching out to thank someone who has made an impact in your life.
- **Connect with pets:** If you are an animal lover, you may consider getting a pet. Some research suggests that pets, especially dogs, can help with loneliness and mental health. This is likely because dogs encourage people to get up and walk outside (Oliva & Johnston, 2021; Martins et al., 2023). Your pet can also be a good conversation starter, and you may even meet a new friend at a dog park. Many individuals also connect with others at service or volunteering opportunities at humane societies or animal shelters.
- **Use technology to connect:** If meeting people in person feels like too big a step right now, you can still connect with others virtually. Send a text message or video chat with a loved one. You might interact with others by playing games or by engaging on social media platforms through purposeful digital communication, rather than mindless scrolling.

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