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A person watches the sunrise on April 12, 2023, at 31st Street Beach in Chicago. (Antonio Perez/Chicago Tribune)

Amy Eisenstein: It's time we address isolation and loneliness as the systemic issues they are

By Amy Eisenstein

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My grandparents used to know their banker on a personal level; my grandma brought him a casserole every time his wife had a baby. My grandpa was on a first-name basis with the man who sold newspapers on the corner — they even chatted over a cup of coffee occasionally. Friendships and social connections were made at the grocery store, choirs, sewing circles and barber shops.

Today, however, many of the places we “gather” are virtual, and we’ve lost something essential — the in-person social interactions that help make us human and happy, that make our lives more meaningful.

How did this happen? First, we started bowling alone, as sociologist Robert D. Putnam noted several decades ago. We stopped joining and participating in houses of worship, sports leagues,

social clubs and civic organizations. More broadly, our governments stopped investing in libraries, community centers, parks, even public health. These public institutions were places to gather, share and “see” how our lives were connected to and dependent on one another. The rise of the internet and social media isolated us in front of our own computer screens. Most recently, the COVID-19 pandemic split us even further apart.

We are currently feeling the impact of these trends, and it is killing us, quite literally. A [2020 report from the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering and Medicine](#) found that social isolation significantly increases our risk of premature death, a risk that may rival those associated with smoking, obesity and physical inactivity.

The solution starts with reframing the problem as a collective, rather than an individual, challenge. It’s just what we did 20 years ago with physical activity. Back then, we blamed individuals for their obesity. Now, we recognize that systemic issues, such as a lack of opportunities to be physically active and the overabundance of unhealthy food options, are major contributors. We have begun to change our infrastructure, shift norms and work at a policy level to increase opportunities for exercise and healthy eating, alter expectations around physical activity and even tax sugary drinks.

Reframing social isolation and loneliness similarly starts with creating a new narrative about the problem that focuses, not on what we as individuals must do, but on the public innovations, programs and policies that promote connections that benefit everyone.

We see glimpses of this new approach across the country. Earlier this year, Surgeon General Dr. Vivek Murthy released a new federal advisory calling attention to the [public health crisis of loneliness](#), isolation and lack of connection. National organizations such as [CoGenerate](#) and [Generations United](#), just to name two, are changing societal norms by bridging generational divides to create a world that values, engages and connects all generations.

Here in Chicago, a number of organizations have pivoted to intentionally bring people together. [Little Brothers Friends of the Elderly](#) runs social clubs in which older adults and volunteers come together to cultivate new skills and maintain hobbies. These clubs help them link to their interests and passions, as well as to each other.

[CJE SeniorLife](#) has expanded its community engagement offerings to include lifelong learning classes and workshops, as well as friendly calls and visits in its volunteer opportunities, to provide more opportunities for connection in the community.

The [Village-to-Village network](#), locally and nationally, offers a variety of fun and engaging social activities both in person and on Zoom in which one can be part of a welcoming community and make friends.

These organizations are doing critically important work, but they should not be the standouts they are. We need to create new opportunities for connections in communities from Rogers Park to Morgan Park and from Austin to the Loop.

The ground around this issue is beginning to swell. Now is the time to build on this momentum and address isolation and loneliness as the systemic issues that they are. Programs and policies can go beyond the individual to focus on communities and society as a whole. And we can invest in the work of organizations and institutions in Chicago and more broadly to further identify new and innovative ways our communities and our environment can make coming together and staying connected easier and much more common.

It's an idea as warm, fulfilling — and necessary — as my grandmother's tuna noodle casseroles.

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