The WHO constitution: "Health is a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity."
Social connection, social isolation, and loneliness
Social connection: why is it a global public health priority?

- Scale of problem
- Severity of consequences
- Promising solutions
First, some definitions

- **Social connection**: Relates to feeling close and connected to others. An individual’s position on three dimensions:
  - Structural (number of relations)
  - Functional (support)
  - Qualitative (positive to negative)

- **Social isolation**: A form of social disconnection. The objective state of having an insufficient number of social roles, relations, and interactions.

- **Loneliness**: A form of social disconnection. A subjective and negative experience arising from a discrepancy between needed/desired and actual social connections (quantity and quality).
Recent Gallup-Meta survey: “In general, how lonely do you feel?”

24% of the global population felt "very lonely" or "fairly lonely".

Gallup/Meta (2023)
Severity of consequences – risk of mortality

Increased risk of early death

14-32%

Similar to:
- Smoking
- Excessive drinking
- Physical inactivity
- Obesity
- Air pollution

Holt Lunstad et al. (2015); Wang et al. (2023)
Severity of consequences for individuals

Health outcomes
- Physical Health
- Mental Health

Other outcomes
- Educational
- Economic

WHO Commission on Social Connection
Severity of consequences for communities and society

- Community safety
- Community prosperity
- Community governance

Social Connection

Social Capital

- Social & economic development
- Innovation

WHO Commission on Social Connection
Total cost of loneliness per year (healthcare and loss of productivity):
• € 14 billion
• 1.17% of GDP

Cost per year of stress-related absenteeism due to loneliness:
• US$ 154 billion
### Determinants – some examples of risk factors

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Individual</th>
<th>Interpersonal</th>
<th>Social groups</th>
<th>Community &amp; societal</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Physical and mental health</td>
<td>Difficult relationships</td>
<td>Ethnic minorities</td>
<td>Public transport</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personality</td>
<td>Life transitions</td>
<td>Immigrants</td>
<td>Built environment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age (younger and very old)</td>
<td>Marital status</td>
<td>Disability</td>
<td>Digital technology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social economic status</td>
<td>Living alone</td>
<td>LGBTQI+</td>
<td>Poverty</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Dahlberg et al. (2022); Lim et al. (2020); Solmi et al., (2020); WHO (2021)
Promising solutions

Available solutions:

- Laws and policies that address:
  - Discrimination and marginalization
  - Social cohesion and norms

- Improving infrastructure
- Volunteering

- Social prescribing
- Cognitive behavioral therapy
- Psychoeducation

WHO (2021)
Promising solutions

Hundreds of interventions evaluated

421 evaluations of in-person interventions by type

Welch et al. (2023)
WHO's efforts to increase social connection

Commission

WHO Secretariat

Technical Advisory Group
1. Vivek Murthy (co-Chair), Surgeon General, United States
2. Chido Mpemba (co-Chair), Youth Envoy, African Union
3. Ayuko Kato, Minister for Loneliness, Japan
4. Khalid Ait Taleb, Minister of Health and Social Protection, Morocco
5. Jakob Forssmed, Minister for Social Affairs and Public Health, Sweden
6. Cleopa Mailu, Permanent Representative to the UN, Kenya
7. Ralph Regenvanu, Minister for Climate Change Adaptation, Energy, Environment and Disaster Management, Vanuatu
8. Ximena Aguilera Sanhueza, Minister of Health, Chile
9. Haben Girma, Deaf Blind Advocate and Activist, United States
10. Hina Jilani, Elder and Human Rights Lawyer, Pakistan
11. Karen Desalvo, Chief Health Officer, Google, United States
A world where everyone has quality social connections that benefit their health and wellbeing
Aims – 3-year tenure

- Increase visibility and priority
- Reposition issue
- Scale-up solutions
Main outcomes

Commission Report (2025)
- Political will
- Public awareness
- Resources
  - Interventions
  - Measurement
- Country and community action

WHO Commission on Social Connection
Thank you

WHO Commission on Social Connection