

We Have a New National Crisis—Loneliness

Three weeks ago, a troubled young man named Nikolas Cruz used an AR-15 rifle to kill 17 people at his south Florida high school. We were all shocked by the news, but we weren't surprised to hear how acquaintances described the 19-year-old killer. He was called a "loner."

That is the same term journalists pinned to Stephen Paddock, the quiet gambler who fired 1,100 bullets from his Las Vegas hotel room into a crowd of 22,000 music fans on Oct.1, 2017, killing 58 people and wounding more than 800. And Dylann Roof, the 21-year-old white man who killed nine people in the 2015 Charleston church massacre, was described by his stepmother as "a loner and quiet."

Loneliness, it seems, can be deadly.

Americans today are lonelier than ever, thanks to family breakdown, media overload, long commutes and job pressures. Our population has increased, highways are more clogged and we are "connected" more than ever through social media, but much of our communication is virtual. Face to face conversations are becoming as rare as hand-written letters.

We have more coffee shops and restaurants than ever, but more of us eat alone or sit with people who are glued to their smart phones. We have more customer service than ever, but it's all automated. We have more retail outlets than ever, but we don't talk to a salesperson—we shop online. Soon, a drone (not a real human who might actually smile) will deliver our packages to our front doors.

Psychologists today have been studying loneliness—and they've proven that it can also trigger Alzheimer's disease, obesity, diabetes, high blood pressure, neurodegenerative diseases and

even cancer. Science actually reveals that humans need close relationships, meaningful touch and loving emotional support in order to thrive physically.

Dr. Vivek Murthy, who served as the U.S. surgeon general until 2016, said he believes loneliness is the most prevalent health issue in this country. Another prominent physician, Dr. Richard S. Schwartz, declared in his book *The Lonely American: Drifting Apart in the 21st Century*, that people who stay isolated have multiplied health problems and that loneliness is as great a health risk as smoking.

I've noticed that loneliness is a problem among many Christians, too. Many Christ-followers have turned their faith into a solo act. It's a "me and Jesus" kind of thing. We listen to our favorite preachers online, yet going to church is optional. Church dropouts ask, "Who needs people anyway?"

Are you starved for meaningful relationships? Have you become a Christian loner? Here are a few steps you may need to take:

1. **Get involved in church again.** If you've been AWOL from church for a while, wake up and realize that God created you to be connected to others. The church functions as a body, and people need you just as much as you need them. Hebrews 10:25 says: "Let us not forsake the assembling of ourselves together, as is the manner of some, but let us exhort one another, especially as you see the Day approaching." If you skip church, you are also skipping the chance to get encouraged!
2. **Join a small group.** It's impossible to build deep friendships at church just by attending a Sunday service—especially if it's a big congregation where people can hide. Most churches have home fellowships, Bible studies or support groups where you can connect on a personal level. Afraid of meeting new people? Swallow your fears and go anyway, even if you feel awkward. It's

possible that the people you meet will become your spiritual family.

3. **Let go of your past hurts.** I meet many Christians who have totally slammed the door of their hearts because they got burned in a past relationship. They don't realize that resentment leads to more heartache—and even sickness. Cutting yourself off from people is unhealthy, regardless of how you justify it. Ephesians 4:31a says: “Let all bitterness, wrath, anger, outbursts, and blasphemies, with all malice, be taken away from you.” If you are full of negativity about people, your toxic attitudes will poison you.
4. **Let God's love grow in you.** God never called anyone to be a loner. He created us with the capacity to love—because we were made in His image. When we invite Christ into our lives, His love grows inside us—not only in a vertical way, toward Him, but in a horizontal way toward others. One of the best ways to measure someone's spiritual maturity is to look at how much they love other people.

God calls us to radical love. 1 Peter 1:22 (NASB) says: “Since you have in obedience to the truth purified your souls for a sincere love of the brethren, fervently love one another from the heart.” The word “fervently” in the Greek can also mean “stretched.” The Holy Spirit wants to stretch your love so it becomes God-sized.

Make a quality decision that you will not live in isolation. Refuse the temptation to pull away from people. Open your heart and be willing to make a friend, even before anyone reaches out to you. Let's drive out loneliness in the body of Christ.