

# The Epidemic of Loneliness

According to the November 30, 2018 “Seattle Times,” medical providers need to approach loneliness, with the same passion, they have when addressing: smoking cessation, diabetes, depression and heart failure. There are patients that come to the clinic more than needed, due to loneliness, while others are so immobile or isolated, they cannot leave their homes. Social isolation and loneliness were deemed social rather than clinical problems, in the past — issues to be dealt with in the home and community, but now, it is time for a change.

Loneliness threatens the futures of more people in our country than virtually any other illness. A study from Brigham Young University revealed that social isolation and loneliness are associated with a nearly 30 percent increase in mortality, meaning being chronically lonely or socially isolated may be worse for one’s health than smoking or obesity. This is not a rare phenomenon; a Cigna research survey from this year highlights that nearly half of Americans sometimes or always feel alone or left out.

Yet and still, loneliness remains a reject of medical research and intervention. This is partially because of the natural challenges associated with addressing community, social issues. This complexity may be why the medical community has stayed away from addressing social isolation as a health concern; however, it is the of duty of medical providers to address social challenges that impact patients’ health. The blueprint for medicine, must include all areas of well-being and social connection is a foundational part of wellness.

In Seattle, Underdog Sports Leagues has organized sports games and leagues for individuals interested in athletic activity. Also, The African American Elders Program provides programming for Black elders in the

area, while Generations Aging with Pride has unique events for older LGBTQ individuals. The Seattle Parks Department has numerous programs, such as the Sound Steps Walking Program, to build community through physical activity and those interested in exploring the beauty of Washington state may enjoy Washington Trails Association work parties.

Such programs serve to unite members of our communities and should be recommended in clinical encounters when appropriate. However, there remains many individuals without support and here lies an opportunity for community health organizations, to be leaders in investing and innovating, on behalf our vulnerable and at-risk populations. Our communities' wellbeing depends on it!