



Global development

WHO declares loneliness a 'global public health concern'

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The **World Health Organization** (WHO) has declared loneliness to be a pressing global health threat, with the US surgeon general saying that its mortality effects are equivalent to smoking 15 cigarettes a day.

WHO has launched an **international commission** on the problem - led by the US surgeon general, Dr Vivek Murthy, and the African Union youth envoy, Chido Mpemba - of 11 advocates and government ministers, including Ralph Regenvanu, the minister of climate change adaptation in Vanuatu, and Ayuko Kato, the minister in charge of measures for loneliness and isolation in Japan.

It comes after the Covid-19 pandemic halted economic and social activity, increasing levels of loneliness, but also amid a new awareness of the importance of the issue. The WHO commission on social connection will run for three years.

"[Loneliness] transcends borders and is becoming a global public health concern affecting every facet of health, wellbeing and development," said Mpemba. "Social isolation knows no age or boundaries."

The health risks are as bad as smoking up to 15 cigarettes a day, and even greater than those associated with obesity and physical inactivity, **according to Murthy**.

While loneliness is often seen as a problem for developed countries, Murthy said the rates of one in four older people experiencing social isolation are similar in all regions of the world.

In older adults, loneliness is **associated with a 50% increased risk of developing dementia and a 30% increased risk of incident coronary artery disease** or stroke.

But it also blights the lives of young people. Between 5% and 15% of adolescents are lonely, according to figures that are likely to be underestimates. In Africa, 12.7% adolescents experience loneliness compared to 5.3% in Europe.

Young people experiencing loneliness at school are more likely to drop out of university. It can also lead to poorer economic outcomes; feeling disconnected and unsupported in a job can lead to poorer job satisfaction and performance.

Mpemba said that across Africa, where most of the population is made up of young people, challenges around peace, security and the climate crisis, as well as high levels of unemployment, are contributing to social isolation. “We believe it’s important to redefine the narrative surrounding loneliness particularly for vulnerable populations excluded by the digital divide,” she said.

Murthy added: “These issues don’t affect one country ... [Loneliness] is an underappreciated public health threat.”
