

Together

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Loneliness, Health and What Happens
When We Find Connection



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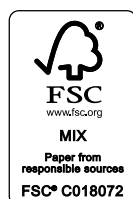
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To my wife, Alice, the best friend I could have ever hoped to have

*To our children, Teyjas and Shanthi, who remind me each day of
how good it feels to love*

*To my mother, father, and Rashmi, who gave me everything and
to whom I owe everything*

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Preface

On December 15, 2014, I began my tenure as the Nineteenth Surgeon General of the United States. I expected that my focus as the “nation’s doctor” would encompass issues like obesity, tobacco-related disease, mental health, and vaccine-preventable illness. That’s what I’d told the US Senate at my confirmation hearings some ten months earlier, and there was plenty of data to support these as important focus areas. But the surgeon general’s position, which oversees more than six thousand uniformed Commissioned Corps officers working throughout the federal government to protect, promote, and advance the health of the nation, comes with high expectations. For more than a century, the physicians holding this office have addressed national health crises ranging from yellow fever and influenza outbreaks to the aftermath of hurricanes and tornados to the terrorist attacks on 9/11. Over the past few decades, the nation’s doctor also has become America’s most trusted voice on public health issues such as smoking and HIV/AIDS. It mattered to me that the issues I selected as focus areas also mattered most to the people I served.

I hadn’t grown up in the public eye or as a creature of politics. I was a child of medicine. Much of my youth was spent in my

father and mother's medical office, where my father practiced medicine and my mother managed everything else. My sister and I spent many afternoons after school helping out with paperwork, filing charts, cleaning the office, and greeting patients as they came and went. It was there that I found my inspiration to go into medicine. I saw the way people arrived looking anxious and left more peaceful and reassured, with my parents as partners in their healing. Medicine for my parents was all about relationship, and they built those connections by listening. Insurance companies would protest their spending more than the approved fifteen minutes with their patients, but my parents understood that to truly listen, you have to meet people where they are, emotionally and physically, however long that takes.

That was the kind of medicine I strived to practice. That was the kind of leader I wanted to be. And so, as I began my tenure, I decided to listen before setting my agenda and laying out my plans. That meant taking time. And it meant showing up where Americans lived. "Let's go talk to people and see what they need," I told my new team.

We spent the next few months on a listening tour of America. We were welcomed into communities from Alabama to North Carolina, from California to Indiana. We sat down in small group meetings and large town halls, spending time with parents, teachers, pastors, small business owners, philanthropists, and community leaders.

Everywhere we went, we asked a simple question: *How can we help?* The answers in some cases confirmed what I suspected were major pain points: the opioid epidemic and rising rates of obesity, diabetes, and heart disease, to name a few. Other responses took me by surprise. Teachers in Washington State, for example, told me that children were vaping *during* class. Kids weren't allowed to chew gum or smoke in class, yet there were no rules prohibiting the use of e-cigarettes in school. It turned out, the schools were waiting for guidance from the local government, which in turn was waiting for the federal government.

These conversations played a central role in guiding the agenda I pursued during my time in office and beyond. They moved me to produce the first surgeon general's report on the addiction crisis and to launch a national campaign to address the opioid epidemic. And it was those teachers, along with parents, scientists, and policymakers, who inspired me to issue in 2016 the first federal report on e-cigarette use by youth.

But one recurring topic was different. It wasn't a frontline complaint. It wasn't even identified directly as a health ailment. Loneliness ran like a dark thread through many of the more obvious issues that people brought to my attention, like addiction, violence, anxiety, and depression. The teachers and school administrators and many parents I encountered, for example, voiced a growing concern that our children were becoming isolated—even, or perhaps especially, those who spent much of their time in front of their digital devices and on social media. Loneliness also was magnifying the pain for families whose loved ones were struggling with addiction to opioids.

One of the first times I recognized this connection was a chilly morning in Oklahoma City when I met a couple named Sam and Sheila, who had tragically lost their son Jason to an opioid overdose. We met at their local treatment facility more than a year after Jason's death. The pain that both carried was visible in their exhausted faces. Once they started talking about their son, it didn't take long for their eyes to well up. Their wounds were still raw. Losing Jason had been unimaginably painful. But what made it even worse was that, at their hour of greatest need, they found themselves without the people they'd counted on for years.

"When bad things happened to our family before," Sheila said, "our neighbors would show up to help or express their support. But when our son died, no one came by. They thought we might be embarrassed that he died of a disease they believed was shameful. We felt so alone."

Sam and Sheila were far from alone in their loneliness. In Phoenix, Anchorage, Baltimore, and many other cities, I listened

to men and women who told me that the hardest part of addiction to alcohol and drugs was the profound loneliness they experienced when they felt like their family and friends had given up on them. This loneliness, in turn, made it harder for them to stay on the path of treatment and recovery. It's not easy handling a substance use disorder, they would tell me. "Everyone needs some support."

The people of Flint, Michigan, felt much the same way, though for different reasons. I went to Flint at the height of their water crisis and visited the home of a couple whose daughters had toxic levels of lead in their bodies from the city's contaminated water. It was bad enough that they felt they'd failed to protect their daughters, but as the weeks went by with no agreement on how to fix the city's water supply, they also felt forgotten by their government and their country. This was loneliness as abandonment; the feeling of being left behind, cast out, ignored by society.

In some cases, loneliness was driving health problems. In others, it was a consequence of the illness and hardships that people were experiencing. It wasn't always easy to tease out cause and effect, but clearly there was something about our disconnection from one another that was making people's lives worse than they had to be.

As much as I learned about how prevalent loneliness is, I also learned a great deal about the healing power of human connection. In Oklahoma, for example, I met a group of Native American teenagers who felt lost in their identity and forgotten by the outside world, so they developed the "I Am Indian" program to strengthen a sense of culture and belonging among their peers and reduce their risk of alcohol and drug addiction. I saw the power of connection in a support network formed by parents in New York whose children struggled with addiction. Having a community of fellow parents who truly understood what they were going through made it easier to cope when a child relapsed or when they blamed themselves for what was happening. In Birmingham, Alabama, where obesity and

chronic disease were on the rise, I met a community of people who gathered to run, walk, and swim together. Even those who felt too ashamed and discouraged to exercise alone came out because their friends were participating. In Flint, too, human connection became part of the solution when community members organized to go door-to-door to educate neighbors about how to properly install filters and avoid the lead in their city's drinking water.

In these instances and so many others, I could see the vital role that social connections can play when individuals, families, and communities face difficult problems. While loneliness engenders despair and ever more isolation, togetherness raises optimism and creativity. When people feel they belong to one another, their lives are stronger, richer, and more joyful.

And yet, the values that dominate modern culture instead elevate the narrative of the rugged individualist and the pursuit of self-determination. They tell us that we alone shape our destiny. Could these values be contributing to the undertow of loneliness I was witnessing? In Baltimore, a couple expressed joy at having young children, but they also confided that so much of their time was devoted to child care that they felt cut off from their friends. In Los Angeles, a successful hospital executive reluctantly told me he had just spent his birthday alone at home because his intense work schedule had caused him to lose touch with his friends. People didn't easily volunteer these stories. Many were embarrassed to admit how alone they felt. This shame was particularly acute in professional cultures, like law and medicine, that promote self-reliance as a virtue.

Deeply committed doctors, nurses, and medical students I met in Boston, Nashville, and Miami said they felt emotionally isolated in their work, but they didn't tell anyone for fear of repercussions from colleagues and patients. Some even worried the medical licensing boards might question their fitness to practice medicine if they even remotely admitted having mental health concerns. Nevertheless, they knew that their loneliness was con-

tributing to their burnout and emotional exhaustion. They just weren't sure what to do about it.

Others didn't even realize that loneliness was what they were feeling. But once one person in the room broke the ice by naming loneliness, I'd see hands go up with more stories to share. Men, women, children. Highly trained professionals. Tradespeople. Minimum-wage earners. No group, no matter how educated, wealthy, or accomplished, seemed to be exempt.

Many people described what they were feeling as a lack of belonging. They'd tried to do things about it. Many had joined social organizations and moved to new neighborhoods. They worked in open-office settings and went to happy hours. But the sense of being "at home" remained elusive. They missed the foundation of home that is genuine connection with other people.

To be at home is to be known. It is to be loved for who you are. It is to share a sense of common ground, common interests, pursuits, and values with others who truly care about you. In community after community, I met lonely people who felt homeless even though they had a roof over their heads.

Sitting in my hotel room late at night at the end of a packed day of town halls and community meetings, I would reflect on these stories with a mix of curiosity and concern. I was no stranger to loneliness myself. During my early years in grade school, when my parents dropped me off in front of my school each morning, I'd have this sinking feeling in the pit of my stomach. It was like first-day jitters, except that it repeated every day of the school year. I wasn't scared about exams or homework. I was worried about feeling alone. And I was too ashamed to tell my parents that I was lonely. Making that admission would have amounted to much more than saying I didn't have friends. It would feel like admitting I wasn't likable or worthy of being loved. The shame that accompanied loneliness intensified that familiar pain for

years until I eventually found a group of friends in high school with whom I felt I truly belonged.

In spite of my personal bouts of loneliness, however, I'd never considered this issue as a potential public health priority. It certainly wasn't on the agenda I'd shared with the US Senate during my confirmation hearings less than a year earlier. But suddenly it loomed very large indeed.

The question was how to address it. Many of the people I was meeting assumed I had billions of dollars in discretionary spending and a staff of tens of thousands. I often had to tell them this was off by a few orders of magnitude. Despite this, my new position gave me a bully pulpit from which to raise public awareness about loneliness, to convene conversations with key stakeholders, and to make the case for shifts in everything from research and policy to infrastructure and individual lifestyles.

The more I studied the seesaw relationship between loneliness and togetherness, the more convinced I became of the great power of human connection. So many of the problems we face as a society—from addiction and violence to disengagement among workers and students to political polarization—are worsened by loneliness and disconnection. Building a more connected world holds the key to solving these and many more of the personal and societal problems confronting us today.

Social connection matters to an office worker who wishes to be seen and appreciated, or a CEO who wants to connect with employees. It matters to parents of young children who need more support from friends but wonder how to ask. Or to citizens who see a way to make their community better but wonder who'd care if they spoke up. And yes, social connectedness matters to a doctor who wants to help patients get better but doesn't know how to heal their loneliness—or the doctor's own.

To my surprise, the topic of emotional well-being, in general, and loneliness in particular, received the strongest response from the public of any issues I worked on as surgeon general. There were few issues that elicited as much enthusiastic interest from

both very conservative and very liberal members of Congress, from young and old people, or from urban and rural residents alike. After my presentations to city mayors, medical societies, and business leaders from around the world, it was what everyone seemed to want to talk about. I think this is because so many people have known loneliness themselves or have seen it in the people around them. It's a universal condition that affects all of us directly or through the people we love.

The irony is that the antidote to loneliness, human connection, is also a universal condition. In fact, we are hardwired for connection—as we demonstrate every time we come together around a common purpose or crisis. Such was the collective action of the Parkland high school students in South Florida after the 2018 mass shooting at their school claimed seventeen lives. We also see this instinct in the outpouring of aid and assistance by volunteers that follows major hurricanes, tornados, and earthquakes around the globe.

One of the most dramatic demonstrations of community in the wake of tragedy occurred on September 11, 2001. When the twin towers of the World Trade Center fell that terrible morning in New York City, thousands of people in lower Manhattan fled south in search of escape from the growing inferno behind them. When they reached the Hudson River and realized they had no way to cross, panic mounted. Recognizing they had no way to rescue so many people in time, the US Coast Guard made an unprecedented decision. It issued a radio call asking civilian boats to help.

The response was swift. Scores of boats pierced the dense cloud of dust and debris and ferried their frightened, soot-covered passengers to safety. In nine hours, the 9/11 Boat Lift rescued nearly half a million people, becoming the largest boat rescue in the world's history—even larger than the Dunkirk evacuation of WWII.

Vincent Ardolino, the captain of the *Amberjack*, said his wife thought he was crazy for wanting to take his boat toward

Manhattan that morning after the call. But he knew that he had to go. “Never go through life saying you should have,” he said later, reflecting on the decision.¹

Our community instincts remain alive and well. When we share a common purpose, when we feel a common urgency, when we hear a call for help that we are able to answer, most of us will step up and come together.

My own desire to heed this call continued beyond my tenure as surgeon general. So did the persistent questions around loneliness that arose from the people and experts I’d met. What exactly has led to the fraying of relationships in communities and such high levels of loneliness? What other aspects of health and society are affected? How can we overcome the stigma of loneliness and accept that all of us are vulnerable? How can we create stronger, more enduring and compassionate connections in our own lives and communities, and a more unifying sense of common ground in our larger society? How do we shift the balance of our lives from being driven by fear to being fueled by love?

These are just a few of the questions that launched my journey to write this book. Many more unfolded as I absorbed the research that’s shaping our understanding of the critical roles that both loneliness and connection play in every one of our lives. Beyond the facts and data are the people you will meet throughout the pages of this book—scientists, philosophers, doctors, cultural innovators, community activists, and people from all walks of life—whose stories continually remind us that, truly, we’re better together.

The first section of the book is focused on the underpinnings of loneliness and social connection—the reasons why loneliness evolved in our highly social species and the ways in which different aspects of culture may help or hinder our efforts to bond with others and establish a sense of communal belonging. The second section addresses the process of connection that each of us individually must navigate in our own lives, beginning with our relationship with ourselves and moving outward through family and friends to ultimately build a more

connected world for coming generations. My hope is that the stories you are about to read will deepen your awareness of your own place in our social universe and also inspire and encourage you to reach out to those around you with a renewed sense of the vital role we all play in one another's lives. As you'll see, when we strengthen our connection with one another, we are healthier, more resilient, more productive, more vibrantly creative, and more fulfilled.

In the writing of this book, I've come to realize that social connection stands out as a largely unrecognized and underappreciated force for addressing many of the critical problems we're dealing with, both as individuals and as a society. Overcoming loneliness and building a more connected future is an urgent mission that we can and must tackle together.