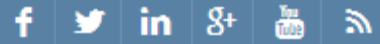


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## Better Healthcare Newsletter from Patrick Malone



Dear Jessica,

Valentine's Day is a poignant reminder that [more of us than ever before live by ourselves](#). And even if we're not alone, many of us feel lonely, often painfully so.

This hurts our health. It [even may be killing us](#).

So this month, some balms for the heart, big and small, that may help our physical health too.

### An epidemic of loneliness threatens happiness and health

#### IN THIS ISSUE

An epidemic of loneliness threatens not only our happiness but also our health

Big and small responses may reverse harms of social isolation and alienation

Valentine splurges can be hard on waist and wallet

Americans' sex lives: Full of contradictions

#### BY THE NUMBERS

27%

Estimated percentage (2013) of U.S. adults living alone, up from 5% in the 1920s



Around the globe — but especially in the United States — [developed societies have shifted from agrarian to industrial economies and from pop-and-mom farms and big families to bursting cities with many single-person households.](#)

[More than a quarter of Americans, many in urban areas, live alone](#) now. Many do so because they choose and can afford to do so. Singles cluster among the old and young.

This affects many aspects of life, including our work, housing, entertainment, transportation, and how, where, and what we eat. It [adds billions of dollars](#) to our spending to care for seniors.

As social animals, we're also struggling with the negatives of being so much by ourselves.

Many of us, with hectic and demanding careers, march through the day locked up alone in offices or work cubicles, staring at electronic screens. We grab lunch by ourselves and eat it at the desk. We gulp down a fast-food dinner in solitude, multi-tasking all the way, pounding at the laptop with unfinished work chores. Then, it's off to restless sleep, and too little of it.

The seclusion routine may be even more intense for those striving in the “gig” economy, because there may not be a workplace for them to head off to or colleagues to work with day by day.

In many jobs, even our interactions with colleagues or bosses may be clipped, formal, and with few human — as opposed to business-related — exchanges.

There is, of course, a crucial distinction between solitude and loneliness. People can do fine if they *want* to be by themselves and are comfortable or even happy with it, for short periods or even a lifetime.

But many single people experience a [detrimental social isolation and loneliness](#). So, too, can [people in unsatisfying marriages and unhappy households](#).

40%

Percentage of older U.S. adults responding in polling that they feel lonely and bad about it.

\$18 billion

Estimated U.S. spending for Valentine's gifts, dining, and entertainments

200,000

Number of older Britons reporting they had not had a conversation with a friend or family member in a month

\$6.7 billion

Added Medicare costs due to social isolation and its health harms

## QUICK LINKS

[Our firm's website](#)

[Read an excerpt from Patrick Malone's book:](#)

[The life you save](#)

[Nine Steps to Finding the Best Medical Care — and Avoiding the Worst](#)

Although conventional wisdom suggests that the old suffer social isolation and loneliness most acutely — and it is a clear woe of the aged, especially as death claims spouses and friends — [young people also struggle with solitude and bad feelings about it.](#)

Recent surveys have recorded a doubling, to 40 percent from 20 percent, among older adult respondents who say they feel lonely and bad. Those in [poor health](#), and in difficult mental health (with anxiety or depression issues), as well as those with less education, suffer loneliness' sting greatly. Social isolation is a torment for those with debilitating, chronic illness and their caregivers.

The research is building as to just how harmful loneliness and social isolation and alienation can be.

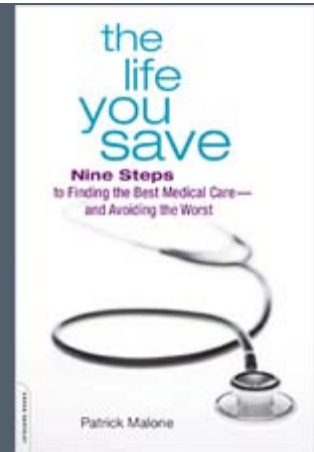
They have been shown, the New York Times reported, "[to impair health](#) by raising levels of stress hormones and inflammation, which in turn can increase the risk of heart disease, arthritis, Type 2 diabetes, dementia and even suicide attempts. Seniors who said they felt left out, isolated or lacked companionship saw declines in their daily ability to care for themselves, with bathing, grooming, and meal preparation. Their deaths [increased over a six-year study period](#) relative to people who reported none of these feelings."

The newspaper also has reported on the work of [John T. Cacioppo](#), an award-winning psychologist at the University of Chicago. In one of his studies of middle-aged and older adults in the Chicago area, he and his colleagues found that those who scored high on a widely used psychological assessment for loneliness ate much more of fatty foods than those who scored low.

He has written in his book, *Loneliness*: "Is it any wonder that we turn to ice cream or other fatty foods when we're sitting at home feeling all alone in the world. We want to soothe the pain we feel by mainlining sugar and fat content to the pleasure centers of the brain, and absent of self-control, we go right at it."

Druv Khullar, a resident physician at Massachusetts General Hospital and Harvard Medical School, reported in the New York Times' research-driven "Upshot" feature that individuals with less social connection have:

- [disrupted sleep patterns](#)
- [altered immune systems](#)
- [more inflammation](#)



## LEARN MORE



Read our Patient Safety Blog, which has news and practical advice from the frontlines of medicine for how to become a smarter, healthier patient.



## PAST ISSUES

For a healthier New Year, small steps can be big  
For the holidays, consider the best gift ever  
Coping in an age of anxiety  
Disastrous storms prove that now is the time to research nursing home quality  
Deflating the hype and exposing the risks of stem-cell treatments

- and higher levels of stress hormones.

He cited research showing that “isolation increases the risk of heart disease by 29 percent and stroke by 32 percent. Another analysis, with data from 70 studies and 3.4 million people, found that socially isolated individuals had a 30 percent higher risk of dying in the next seven years” — an effect largest in middle age.

Khullar also said studies have shown that “loneliness can accelerate cognitive decline in older adults, and isolated individuals are twice as likely to die prematurely as those with more robust social interactions. These effects start early: Socially isolated children have significantly poorer health 20 years later, even after controlling for other factors. All told, loneliness is as important a risk factor for early death as obesity and smoking.”

Social isolation increases spending for care for the elderly. The AARP has estimated it adds \$6.7 billion in additional Medicare costs. With the nation graying, with dementia cases rising, and with so many single adults — many without family or friends to support them — older Americans may be in dire shape when it comes to finding long-term assistance so they can maintain independent lives.

## Big and small responses may reverse harms of social isolation and alienation



In another day, in a breezy 1950s rom-com movie suitable for Valentine’s Day viewing, when confronted with a challenge like loneliness and its major harms to health, someone like Doris Day might flash a 500-watt smile and croon, “*Que, será, será*, whatever will be will be,” and a happy ending magically would ensue.

In the real world of 2018, that isn’t happening. But good things are happening. Consider these global, high-level responses:

You Can Eat This... But Why Would You?

Looking Ahead: Preparing for Long-Term Care

Managing Chronic Pain: It’s Complicated

Secure Health Records: A Matter of Privacy and Safety

Standing Tall Against a Fall

[More...](#)

- In Britain, Prime Minister Theresa May — citing research of a national commission that found 9 million of the United Kingdom's 66 million people often or always feel lonely — has appointed a cabinet minister to tackle what she called “a sad reality of life ... to confront this challenge for our society and for all of us to take action to address the loneliness endured by the elderly, by [caregivers], by those who have lost loved ones — people who have no one to talk to or share their thoughts and experiences with.”
- In the U.S., Vivek H. Murthy, a former U.S. Surgeon General, has set his sights on loneliness and social isolation, calling them a major public health crisis and taking to the pages of the Harvard Business Review to urge the American business community to combat this “epidemic” in the workplace for the benefit of their tens of millions of employees.
- In Denmark, the national public broadcast system, created the *En som mig* (“Someone like me”) campaign to combat a scourge of loneliness that 200,000 of the nation's 6 million people say afflicts them constantly and for which they are stigmatized. Social isolation hits their seniors hard, Danes say, with 5,000 of their people dying annually, alone and with no family or friends.
- In Japan, one of the globe's most rapidly aging societies has grappled with public guilt and shame about its people's loneliness. This is especially true with the staggering solitude that results in as many as 4,000 elderly dying each week alone, forgotten, and neglected. The clean-up after these deaths has become one kind of practical woe. But the bigger issue for the Japanese is the sadness, and deep and widespread recriminations that result from seniors' "lonely deaths" in a nation once-renowned for its respect for the aged.

At the individual level, there are ways to better cope with isolation, alienation, and loneliness, experts say.

First, recognize it in yourself, then get over the stigma and set aside any woolly headed pride or machismo about being alone and feeling bad about it. Then, look for ways to increase not just the quantity but also the quality of your social interactions.

People dear to us, it is a fact of life, move, move on, and even die. It requires energy and commitment to make and keep friends, and it may be more challenging to do so after age 30. Then again, as every grown-up knows, childhood also can be a time of great, constant change — including of schools but maybe also of homes and peers, too — and yes, upsets. This can make it a challenge, too, for

youngsters, and especially already awkward feeling teens, to build a meaningful and lasting group of friends.

In adulthood, it can be too easy to get swept up in harried routines, only to look up and discover you're dissatisfied with your situation — and alone or lonely. Cacioppo, the psychologist who has researched in this area for decades, says people [should think about following an EASE plan](#): *Extend* yourself, have an *Action* plan, *Seek* collectives (people through groups), and *Expect* good things so you don't undercut your good efforts with morose thoughts.

It's important to keep socializing, constantly. Get up from the desk and [don't just sit all day](#). [Walk up the stairs](#), around the block, and especially in your workplace to talk, face to face, with colleagues you might otherwise phone or email. Force yourself to take regular lunches, dinners, and appropriate after-hours occasions to gather with colleagues, especially if you're a free-lancer, consultant, or creative type in the gig economy. A colleague says a mentor in such endeavors warned him that it's far too easy to "go feral," working alone at home and neglecting the socialization that occurs, say, in an office (this can include showering regularly and shaving for some). You do need to ensure your health supports your relationship building, so [get regular exams and treatments so you see, hear, and can walk](#) as well as you can.

It's key, too, to [find deep and meaningful relationships](#) that may challenge you and force you to be more alive and to grow. Some of these may be spiritual. Translation: You may wish to give church or other place of worship a chance. Or your bonding may be accompanied by activity that helps connect you with others. This may include everything from playing in a regular poker game to bowling to exploring the Himalayas. You may wish to volunteer so you can feel good about yourself even as you're increasing your human interaction.

If it's appropriate, don't feel ashamed or stigmatized about seeking professional help to determine what may block you from giving and receiving love, especially with family or intimate partners. You may find you're e-device obsessed or addicted, and, though online contacts may, in this crazy age, provide you with random, occasional sexual hookups, this isn't the course you'll probably need to ensure you against your isolation and loneliness.

May you, instead, celebrate on Feb. 14, and, indeed, for the month, year, and a long time thereafter with a dear Valentine who cherishes and completes you and for whom you do the same. And may this and many other deep and fulfilling relationships keep you always healthy and well!

Valentine splurges can be hard on waist and wallet      Americans' sex lives: Full of contradictions



It doesn't take a medical scientist to determine that many of the much-touted Valentine delights aren't great for your health, much less your pocketbook. Here, the powers of online search engines can abet common sense and moderation to give you perspective on your Feb. 14 plans.

Experts estimate Americans will spend [\\$136 on average](#) on Valentine gifts and fetes, notably a fancy and caloric dinner.

Look at any of the online food or restaurant sites, and a common menu for a Valentine's feast might round up something like this: a glass of champagne (100 calories), 3 oysters Rockefeller (100 calories), a serving of Caesar salad (327 calories), 2 slices garlic toast (400 calories), a grilled T-bone steak (750 calories), medium baked potato with butter (250 calories), chocolate soufflé (342 calories), and 2 glasses of red wine (250 calories).

That adds up to 2,519 calories for just one meal. That means an "average" 45-year-old American male — a 5'9" man weighing 195 pounds — would splurge for 80 percent or so of his typical daily weight-maintaining calorie allotment in just one sitting. His 43-year-old "average" female date for this "romantic" dining, who would be 5'4" and weighing 166 pounds, would get 88 percent of her daily weight-maintaining calorie allotment.

Is this feasting healthy? Probably not on a regular basis, common sense should tell you. It may be OK on special occasion. It's worth noting, though, that the average weights, as used here and put out by Uncle Sam and various health or wellness advocacy groups, already suggest what's apparent: Americans struggle in mighty fashion with their waistlines, without over-the-top eating for Valentine's.

So, maybe light eating and activity or experience with the beloved would be a better choice?



Curious Valentines may wish to know: Lots of factors affect the sex lives of Americans, including economics, demographics, and the sweep of digitalization.

All of these have produced contradictory views and practices.

Data seem to show that [teen-agers are having less sex \(at least sexual intercourse\) and fewer babies outside of wedlock.](#)

Some experts argue that the [generation whose members are between 15 and 25 years old — the first to have and to use electronic devices so commonly and frequently — have been damaged by smartphones and e-tablets.](#) E-devices have made them cyber-connected but isolated in reality, and lonely for and backward in human relationships, including through dating and sex.

But slightly older young people seem to be more active, accepting of casual sex, and adoptive of [e-devices and apps for hookups.](#) These fast and commitment-lacking encounters, especially when they become an obsessive and singular way of relating to others, can leave young adults [alienated and lonely.](#)

Adults, overall, are [less accepting of extra-marital sex,](#) but they're reporting they've had more sexual partners over their lifetimes than before.

To get a download on the "enormous variability in the sexual repertoires" of grown-up Americans, it may be worth taking a look at the seven volumes of a recent medical journal on sex — or this summary of a seven-year-old [major survey of Americans' sexual views and practices,](#) funded by condom-makers and involving almost 6,000 respondents ages 14 to 94.

By the way, if the holiday gifting includes chocolates, it may be worth reconsidering. Contrary to widespread belief — something of a myth that has been foisted on the public by candy makers — [chocolate, especially the dark kinds, isn't a "miracle" food with various oversized health benefits](#). Neither is red wine.

And as for the [purported aphrodisiacal attributes of oysters](#) or other "special" foods for Valentine's Day, well, that, again, may be more in diners' minds and not based in science or evidence. [Do use care, too, in eating oysters raw](#).

There's one more finding that can't be ignored about Americans' single living and sexuality, and the country's demographic destiny: The nation's [female fertility rate has hit record lows](#). But, at the same time, as the New York Times reported:

"86 percent of women ages 40 to 44 — near the end of their reproductive years — are mothers, up from 80 percent in 2006, reversing decades of declines, according to [a new analysis](#) of census data by Pew Research Center. ... The increase has been especially steep among groups of women who hadn't been having as many babies: those with advanced degrees, and those who never marry. Today, 55 percent of never-married women ages 40 to 44 have at least one child, up from 31 percent two decades ago."

But the experts warn that the share of women who have children "could drop again if current trends continue." And, "if young women continue to decide not to have children, or if they struggle to do so after waiting too long, it could depress the economy and fray the safety net. There would be fewer workers to support retirees, and fewer family members to care for older people."

## Recent Health Care Blog Posts

Here are some recent posts on our patient safety blog that might interest you:

- An ugly truth about malpractice lawsuits is that some of the [most indefensible violations of patient safety are covered up by hospitals, clinics and doctors with the complicity of the lawyers](#) representing the injured patients. This happens when settlements are entered into that require the patient to keep confidential everything that happened, and sometimes to even pretend it never happened. USA Today published a big takeout, quoting Patrick Malone as an opponent of broad secrecy clauses in settlement agreements. (See our [website for more on our stand about secret settlements](#).) USA Today describes a particularly egregious example: The prestigious Cleveland Clinic covered up a rape allegation against one of its surgeons by settling the patient's claim and requiring the patient to sign a settlement document promising to remain silent about the episode. Eventually the surgeon resigned quietly and moved onto another health care institution, which of course knew nothing about the allegations until informed recently by the newspaper.



- Politicians and policy-makers can't ignore the rising number of vehicular deaths, and they must [crack down fast and hard on the increasing road toll associated with alcohol abuse](#). At the request of the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, a blue-ribbon expert group has examined not only the overall increase in road deaths — to 37,461 in 2016, a 5.6 percent rise over the year previous. The panel from the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine also focused on the 10,000 deaths per year attributed to alcohol impairment. The experts called these road fatalities, which are increasing in number, “entirely preventable,” and recommended tough ways to reduce booze-related deaths. They have recommended that a new national sobriety standard should be put in place, the Associated Press reported, reducing motorists' allowable blood-alcohol concentration “from 0.08 to 0.05. All states have 0.08 thresholds. A Utah law passed last year that lowers the state's threshold to 0.05 doesn't go into effect until Dec. 30.”
- Although medicine has made advances in treating strokes, more than 795,000 Americans suffer them annually, they kill 140,000 of us each year, and they're a leading cause of disability. But medical experts, revising their care guidelines, say that patients with the most common kind of stroke — a clot blocking blood flow to the brain — [may be better treated in an expanded window of still urgent time](#). This higher but still guarded optimism does not apply to all stroke cases and not to all ischemic strokes (the kind that come from blood vessel blockages). Doctors have known for awhile now that it is vital to bust the damaging clot — and they had thought their time to do so with drugs like tPA and surgeries was constrained to six or so hours. This led specialists to their axiom, “Time is brain,” and to crash responses.
- Jeanne Lenzer, a seasoned medical investigative reporter, points out that 32 million Americans — about one in 10 of us — have at least one medical device implanted in our bodies. These include artificial joints, cardiac stents, surgical mesh, pacemakers, defibrillators, nerve stimulators, replacement lenses in eyes, heart valves and birth control devices. [Most patients — indeed most of the public — may think federal regulators subject all this hardware to rigorous quality and safety testing. That's a wrong assumption.](#) And though medical devices may be helping change and save many lives, Lenzer also warns they are harming and even killing too many patients.
- Thousands of nursing homes nationwide have failed to control dangerous and often deadly infections, with their basic contagion controls so poor and widespread that federal regulators repeatedly have issued disciplinary citations to almost 3 out of 4 facilities. Thousands of other nursing homes have drawn the ire of families, advocates, and the AARP for summarily evicting or discharging residents in dubious or possibly improper fashion. [So, what action did the Trump Administration officials announce during the hectic](#)

holidays about their oversight of nursing homes? They agreed with complaints by facility operators and owners, the New York Times reported, with officials saying they would be “scaling back the use of fines against nursing homes that harm residents or place them in grave risk of injury [as] part of a broader relaxation of regulations under the President.”

HERE'S TO A HEALTHY 2018!

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Patrick Malone". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first letter of each name being significantly larger and more stylized.

Patrick Malone

Patrick Malone & Associates

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