Using Mentoring to Combat Loneliness and Isolation Among America’s Young People

INTRODUCTION

One of the more troubling shifts in America and other Western societies over the last several years has been the sharp increase in the number of individuals expressing feelings of loneliness, isolation, and disconnection from their communities and the individuals that surround them. A 2023 report from the Surgeon General, *Our Epidemic of Loneliness and Isolation*, paints a stark picture of where the nation stands in terms of social connection and belonging: only 39% of Americans indicate that they felt “very connected to others”, while additional studies suggest that over half of Americans experience loneliness. The toll of this social disconnection on individuals is concerning, with studies suggesting that isolation and loneliness increases risk for premature death equivalent to smoking 15 cigarettes a day. The toll to the nation as a whole is also considerable, with the impact of isolation known to lower academic achievement and work performance across society, while costing the nation’s employers upwards of $154M annually in employee absenteeism and declining productivity.

Unfortunately, some of the highest rates of loneliness and isolation are found in youth and young adults. Young adults are more than twice as likely to experience loneliness than adults over the age of 65, with their reported loneliness rate increasing every year between 1976 and 2019. There are many reasons young people experience loneliness and isolation, but major contributors include low connectedness and relationship quality with peers and the negative impacts of social media (ironically, given the potential connectivity benefits of social media, one study found that simply limiting social media use by teens by 30 minutes a day resulted in significant reductions in feelings of loneliness and depression.) In one study, only 43% of students indicated that they felt like they were part of their school’s community.

Research has also illuminated the feelings of loneliness and isolation among the nation’s young people in Generation Z. MENTOR’s recent *Who Mentored You?* study found that 67% of the nation's 18-21- year-olds reported that there were times during their childhood when they wanted the help of an adult mentor, but did not find one, while a quarter of these youth wanted a mentor’s help specifically with mental health needs (more than double the rates of their slightly older Millennial peers.) Only 60% of Generation Z reported feeling a strong sense of belonging while growing up, and a staggering approximately 2.3M youth reported not only having no mentor, but no meaningful adult of any kind in their lives throughout their entire childhood and adolescence. Simply put, the young people of this nation have been struggling to find connectedness and community in their schools, in their neighborhoods, with their peers, and with the adults who surround them. This is a crisis that, in the Surgeon General's terms, “represents an urgent public health concern.”
DEFINING CONCEPTS OF LONELINESS & ISOLATION

While terms like loneliness, isolation, and social disconnection are often used somewhat interchangeably, it is important that those who seek to address these issues have a solid theoretical understanding of how loneliness and isolation start and how they might be best alleviated.

- **Social isolation** refers to the objective state of having few social relationships, limited social interaction, and low participation in social groups and other communal activities. Isolation is often the result of external factors, such as living in a sparsely populated area, or personal factors, such as having a disability or being bullied and ostracized by peers.

- **Loneliness** is the subjective feeling resulting from isolation or low social participation. These negative perceptions about one’s relationships with others can lead to other negative feelings, such as depression, low self-esteem, or feelings of hopelessness. Unfortunately, it is entirely possible for young people to feel tremendously lonely, even if they are not technically isolated or lacking in opportunities for connection.

- **Social connectedness** refers to the size, composition, and engagement with individuals and groups in one’s social networks, as well as the positive and negative qualities of those relationships. Young people often have limited social networks or opportunities to build more connectedness—they are also likely to know many individuals but not feel that they can turn to them for meaningful help and support. Even young people with friends and engaged caregivers can experience low social connectedness.

- **Belonging** refers to an individual’s sense they are welcome, engaged with, and “at home” in a given community or social group. Young people may experience a lack of belonging at school, with their peers, or in the broader community. Personal characteristics, such as race, ethnicity, nationality, immigration status, gender and sexual identity, or disability status can often influence perceptions of belonging. Youth may feel a sense of belonging in some contexts (e.g., at home or with peers) but not others (their school or in the community).

To deliver effective interventions, such as mentoring services, it is important to understand the distinctions between these terms and precisely how they can offer meaningful support. For example, bringing an online mentoring program to rural youth might alleviate their feelings of isolation, but they may still feel loneliness if they have limited or poor daily interactions with their peers, and they may feel even less belonging by realizing that their mentors are living in other, perhaps more inclusive, communities.

USING MENTORING TO COMBAT YOUTH LONELINESS & ISOLATION

There are strong reasons to consider youth mentoring services to be a meaningful tool in combatting youth loneliness and isolation in America. In fact, the Surgeon General’s report lists mentoring as a recommended strategy for supporting youth who are experiencing social disconnection and associated challenges. Mentoring programs, by definition, are focused on connecting youth to additional adult or peer supports – building not only individual relationships, but deep engagement with program staff and other participants. There may be no more direct way to help reduce isolation and loneliness for a youth than, literally, providing them with a mentor and relationship that is tailored to their needs and circumstances. Additionally, when mentoring programs use volunteers as mentors, especially near-peer youths or potentially isolated older adults, they also have the potential to combat isolation in both participants.
RESEARCH ON MENTORING & LONELINESS

While the research on the impact of mentoring on youth loneliness is limited, the evidence we do have suggests that mentors can have a positive effect. While many studies focus on the benefits of “natural” mentors (e.g., teachers, neighbors), mentoring programs have demonstrated that they can fill gaps in youths’ relationships in meaningful ways. For example, youth who participate in formal mentoring are more likely than non-participants to report having a very important adult in their life. Additional studies have found that relationships with adult mentors can improve both broader, community-level social connectedness and relationships with peers. Mentoring relationships also represent a promising approach to growing a young person’s social networks (i.e., social “capital”) in meaningful ways, extending the benefits of mentoring beyond just this one new person in a child’s life.

When youth experience negative peer relationships, they can internalize that rejection and suffer from reduced self-esteem and perceptions of their social competence. Studies suggest that mentoring relationships, even those with adults, can reduce “rejection sensitivity” and promote positive relationships among youth with poor pre-existing relationships. Group mentoring models, in which youth are mentored alongside other youth with whom they develop meaningful collaborations and group identity, have also demonstrated an ability to broaden youths’ networks of support and improve their connectedness and feelings of belonging.

It is worth noting that research suggests that reducing loneliness, feelings of isolation and rejection, and improving connectedness and belonging with others are outcomes that mentoring programs are well-positioned to support. The mentoring field already has a strong network of service providers who understand how to bring new adults or peer relationships into the lives of youth who are struggling to find meaningful connections. Research suggests that the hallmarks of meaningful mentoring relationships—a feeling of trust and mutuality, frequent and regular interactions, shared power and decision-making, collaboration and companionship—are the very factors that define all helpful relationships. As such, mentoring can provide youth with relationship skills and confidence that can be translated to other relationships they experience. One recent paper exploring the potential of mentoring interventions concluded that “formal youth mentoring offers practice expertise, research knowledge, and organizational infrastructure as a foundation for addressing social isolation among young people.”

A FOCUS ON LONELINESS & BELONGING AT 2023 SUMMER INSTITUTE ON YOUTH MENTORING

In response to the current crisis of loneliness and lack of belonging among American youth, mentoring scholars have revisited these outcomes with renewed interest. Perhaps no recent event has captured the surging interest in using mentoring to combat disconnection more directly than the 2023 Summer Institute on Youth Mentoring. The event brought together over 30 leading practitioners with a group of 10 scholars and guest speakers from around the world for a week of presentations and discussion.

Presentation and discussion highlights from this event included:

- Presentation of a theoretical paper by Dr. Tom Keller and colleagues that noted the considerable opportunities for using mentoring to reduce loneliness and increase belonging, as well as potential barriers, such as the challenges of offering a relationship-centered intervention to youth who may struggle to form healthy relationships for a variety of reasons.

- Representatives from MENTOR and Mentor Canada shared findings from studies illustrating that millions of children in both nations are lacking sufficient adult and peer support.
• Research findings from Dr. Lindsey Weiler on an innovative mentoring program that is improving the interpersonal relationships and life satisfaction of neurodivergent youth, many of whom shared their moving stories of acceptance and well-being via video recordings.

• Lessons learned from a major study evaluating the LET’S CONNECT program, which used mentoring to increase social-connectedness and reduce suicidality among urban youth, shared by Dr. Polly Gipson.

• Findings from several programs in Spain focused on providing mentoring support to unaccompanied youth immigrants in the Catalonia region that have increased the self-esteem, resilience, and hope for these extremely isolated and disconnected youth, shared by Dr. Òscar Prieto-Flores.

• Seminal research from Dr. Michael Karcher on how peer mentoring relationships can build connectedness to other youth, school, community, and one’s own future.

• Compelling findings from Westley Fallavollita’s study examining associations between having an adult mentor in a school-based program and youth reports of peer acceptance: positive relationships with the mentor predicted growth in peer relationships, while negative mentoring experiences did not lead to gains with peers.

• Presentations from Dr. Christian Rummell and Dr. Juliet Oshiro on their experiences building and improving mentoring interventions for isolated LGBTQ-IA+ and Native American/rural youth, respectively.

Overarching themes emerging from this event include:

• The need to listen to youth and community voice when developing interventions to combat loneliness and isolation, as services that do not “meet youth where they are at” are likely to fail.

• The need to focus the work of mentors on the sources of feelings of loneliness and rejection. In some cases, mentors may not be able to address factors like peer rejection or discrimination and marginalization from the broader community. Programs are encouraged to combine mentoring with other supports that can address root causes or unique circumstances.

• The need to reorient the mentoring field in service of this critical dearth of relationships and connection that youth are experiencing globally. Attendees noted that the youth mentoring field has increasingly associated itself with desired impacts in areas such as academic achievement, socioeconomic mobility, or justice system involvement, often at the expense of forgetting what mentoring programs may be best positioned to do: bring new, positive relationships and connections to the life of a youth who simply needs more people in their corner.
As noted above, the mentoring field is positioned to be a major contributor to combat the epidemic of loneliness and isolation threatening the health and well-being of the nation. The following actions can help maximize the contributions that the mentoring field can make to this effort:

1. **Expanding the scale and scope of mentoring programs** - While mentoring has grown considerably over the last few decades, recent research suggests that 40% of today’s youth will grow up without ever having a mentor and that almost three-quarters go through a period where they keenly feel the absence of mentors or even any “meaningful” adult. Growing the youth mentoring field – which requires private and public investment – will provide expanded opportunity to establish those connections with caring adults and peers.

2. **Improving the quality of mentoring services** - The research highlighted here has noted several challenges in offering mentoring to youth who are feeling isolated and disconnected—everything from personal characteristics and traumas that have contributed to their inability to make connections to others, to isolation caused by geography or disability or social marginalization, to the inability of programs to properly prepare and support mentors as they help a youth rebuild their webs of support. This is complicated work, where the risk of doing harm is elevated for youth who already have feelings of rejection. Providing programs with professional development, training support, and improvement strategies can increase the effectiveness of these efforts.

3. **Creating opportunities for more “natural” mentoring relationships** - Most youth receive mentoring from adults and peers they are already connected with outside of formal mentoring programs. This suggests that one way to grow mentoring in service of reducing loneliness is to make it easier for youth and adults to connect and form meaningful bonds in the places they already engage one another, such as at school, clubs and sports teams, houses of worship, or other community settings. Mentoring programs can play a meaningful role in sharing relationship strategies with a wide variety of community adults who can step into that void, either through a dedicated program or in simple, everyday acts of support.

4. **Asking young people if they need mentoring** - Unfortunately, much of the mentoring work in this country is reactive, and is a tool that is only used when a youth is already experiencing disconnection or isolation and lashing out or falling behind in troubling ways. But all youth need mentors and opportunities for connections to others to thrive. Ideally, institutions such as schools or camps would ask young people how they are experiencing relationships, if they are feeling ostracized or rejected, and if they want the help of a mentor.
REFERENCES


Keller, Perry, & Spencer, 2019.

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