

BOOK REVIEW

A Review of "Together: The Healing Power of Human Connection in a Sometimes Lonely World"

Vivek H. Murthy, Washington, DC: HarperCollins Publishers

Review By: Kimberly Dickman

Dr. Vivek Murthy has been the US Surgeon General twice. As the Nation's Doctor, his mission is to lay a foundation for a healthier country. As the 19th Surgeon General, under President Obama, he led the national response to the Ebola and Zika viruses, the opioid crisis, and tobacco-related diseases. In 2016, he issued the first Surgeons General's Report on Alcohol, Drugs and Health where he called for an increase of access to prevention and treatment and shifted the view of addiction from being a character flaw to one of a chronic illness. As the current, 21st US Surgeon General he is focused on youth mental health crisis, well-being and burnout in the health worker community, and the growing proliferation of health misinformation. Prior to government service, his research focused on vaccine development and the participation of women and minorities in clinical trials. He has cared for thousands of patients as an internal medicine doctor and trained undergraduates, medical students, and medical residents.

What would the nation's top physician choose as a topic for his first book? Loneliness. Dr. Murthy knows that good medical providers start by listening so he started his first tenure as Surgeon General traveling and listening to people across North America. On his listening tour, he heard from parents, teachers, pastors, small business owners, philanthropists, and community leaders, and regardless of the major pain points, Americans were experiencing opioid addiction and obesity to anxiety and depression and others, a reoccurring dark thread existed. Loneliness.

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Murthy's book, *Together: The Healing Power of Human Connection in a Sometimes Lonely World*, was published in 2020 during the height of physical distancing due to COVID-19. Though physical distancing due to the coronavirus increased many people's sense of loneliness, this book is based on trends that started decades before the pandemic and has since continued to get worse.

Loneliness exists due to our innate desire to connect. The book is divided by this with a focus on why loneliness exists now and then some suggestions for how to build connection. The author presents data from national surveys, academic research outcomes, and social neuroscience in a way that does not read like an academic journal but more like a story. Dr Murthy infuses the text with his own story of loneliness as a child and again as an adult to model the fact that many, regardless of background, education, position, or status, suffer from loneliness. Leaders can struggle with loneliness. It is important for leaders to acknowledge this for themselves as it can impact their performance, relationships, and their ability to lead most effectively.

The trend of increase in loneliness can be traced back to the later third of the twentieth century. Norms and opportunities to engage with others, religious participation, community organizations, and social events have declined. With the advancements of technology and social media, these trends have only worsened. From 2003 to 2020, time spent alone increased, while time spent in in-person social engagements decreased. We can order food, shop, bank, work, talk with family across the globe, and watch the latest movie all without changing out of our pajamas or stepping foot outside our homes. Though this can simplify our lives, "human connection is being edged out" (p. 98). The book lays out the data that loneliness impacts our immune system increasing risk for disease, prevention of healing, and increased probability of early death. It distracts us, impacts our cognitive ability, and increases the risks of

dementia. Psychological well-being is also affected by loneliness. Murthy describes the process of how individual sense of loneliness plays a direct role in the social morass we are currently experiencing across our nation and between people. The author does a great job differentiating loneliness from being alone and experiencing solitude with the last two being important for human health and flourishing while loneliness harms us.

Leaders may think that loneliness is a personal or psychological issue, but the research shows that loneliness impacts our productivity and effectiveness at work. It can spur on incivility and conflict in the workplace. Leaders must be aware of the potential impact that loneliness can have in the workplace. They can also be assured that there are things that leaders can do to increase the sense of belonging and connection.

The last third of the book describes these antidotes to loneliness. With the use of stories, Dr. Murthy writes that connection starts from the inside out. Knowing ourselves and practicing self-compassion is what the doctor orders. Having moments of pause to include quiet contemplation, meditation, or planned white space in our schedules allows for practices of gratitude and development of positive emotions. This prepares us for relationships with others. The author then writes about the different levels of connections we may have with others from the smallest number of intimate/romantic connections to friends and coworkers, to larger numbers of those we may not know deeply but see regularly, and even the importance of our connection to strangers. The science supports that each level of relationships serves a different but important purpose and the time we put into connecting at each level is time well spent for us individually, for the relationship, and for our nation's well-being. With most adults spending most hours of their day at work, the focus on relationship building for leaders in the workplace is important to personal well-being and mission accomplishment.

Loneliness is impacting how children perform in school, how workers perform in the workplace, our physical and psychological health, and our sense of division and polarization in our society. The antidote is simple yet not always easy, especially if we are lonely. Loneliness often begets loneliness. Dr. Murthy added an author's note section at the beginning of the book where he summarizes how we may heal our social world with these four strategies: 1) Spend time each day with those you love; 2) Focus on each other by eliminating distractions and genuinely listening; 3) Embrace solitude and develop a strong connection with yourself and 4) Help others and accept help from others. Leaders can help in this healing by

modeling these steps, being present with others in the workplace, and destigmatizing help-seeking behaviors.

I highly recommend this book to those who lead others in the workplace, school, or home or who are human and in need of connection. It is an easy read that is full of science and story and is written with great compassion and hope. Further, the Surgeon General released an advisory report, *Our Epidemic of Loneliness and Isolation*, in May of 2023 that I also recommend. It includes information on the effects from COVID-19 and includes recommendations for leaders in policy-making positions.