

HEALTH

Teens aren't socializing in the real world. And that's making them super lonely

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Teens whose face time with friends is mostly on their phones are the loneliest of all, but even those who mix real-world socializing with social media still are increasingly isolated, a report out Wednesday shows.

Loneliness isn't just an age thing; it's generational, says the author of the study, San Diego State University psychology professor Jean Twenge. The percent of high school seniors who said they often felt lonely increased from 26 percent in 2012 to 39 percent in 2017.

The number of 12th graders who said they often felt left out also increased, from 30 percent in 2012 to 38 percent in 2017.

The data and study, published in the *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, are from nationally representative surveys of 8.2 million U.S. adolescents between 1976 and 2017.

The study comes as the topic of loneliness gains considerable interest in the health care field because of its link to mental and physical health, as well as life expectancy.

Research out last year from the insurer Cigna found teens reported being loneliest, but it wasn't clear whether that was due to age or being from a different generation.

"We find it is a generational difference, since loneliness increased among teens 2012 to 2017," says Twenge, who is also the author of *"iGen: Why Today's Super-Connected Kids*

Are Growing Up Less Rebellious, More Tolerant, Less Happy--and Completely Unprepared for Adulthood."

The increase in loneliness might be due to how teens spend their leisure time, Twenge says. When compared to teens in earlier decades, Gen Z are less likely to "get together with friends in person, go to parties, go out with friends, date, ride in cars for fun, go to shopping malls, or go to the movies," she reported.

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'A lot of time alone'

Rebecca Agnello of Grand Island, New York, was "alone in her suffering" when she died by suicide at 14 in December 2015. Her father, Rob, says there is no "one cause" that led his daughter to take her life though he believes social media played a role.

"With social media, there's an appearance of having all this closeness, but we have a lot of time alone," he says.

Agnello cites the book "A Mind at Home with Itself," by the author Byron Katie, which he said helped him get through the grieving process. It wouldn't resonate as much for teenagers, he says.

"At that age, they can't really process the mind being at home with itself," he says. For Rebecca, who had a good group of friends, "sitting with her phone and people not getting back to her," was particularly painful, he says.

Other statistics from Twenge's study:

- In the late 1970s, 52 percent of 12th graders said they got together with their friends almost every day but, by 2017, only 28 percent did.
- In 2017, teens got together with their friends 68 fewer times a year than they did in the early 1990s and high school seniors went out on dates 32 fewer times a year.
- Gen Z 10th graders went to approximately 17 fewer parties a year than Gen X 10th graders did.

The perils of social isolation

As a heartthrob for those of Gen Z and older, musician Nick Jonas might seem an unlikely spokesman on the perils of social isolation, but he is doing so for Cigna. In a recent interview, he said balancing Type 1 diabetes with the challenges of his new solo career several years ago was difficult but not as hard as it might have been.

"I was really lucky to have my brothers, my family and my touring family," said Jonas, who recently resumed performing with his brothers. "I never felt that sense of real loneliness."

"Social media is an incredibly powerful tool," says Jonas, but he notes "it can be isolating at times."

Today's high school seniors spend more than an hour less a day interacting with friends in person than Gen X teens did in the late 1980s.

Melissa Sporn, a McLean, Virginia, child psychologist who has two teenage children, cites overscheduling that limits socializing and parents' efforts to protect kids from danger outside, which leads to more inside time on computers and phones.

Millennials and Gen Z are really, really lonely

"Online activities hits us twice, once as a distraction and/or substitution for real social interaction and then again as a representation via social media of all the things we aren't doing and should be engaged in thus leaving us feeling lonely and FOMO," says Sporn, referring to "Fear of Missing Out."

Twenge says teens' increasing isolation is not caused by more time spent on work or homework – because the data show they now spend less time on paid work and about the same amount of time or less on homework and extracurricular activities as they did in the 1980s and 1990s.

Sporn disagrees: "Our students in high school are taking college classes and there is a significant uptick in the amount of homework our kids have compared to just 15 years ago," she says.

Preserving social interaction

Cigna's annual global well-being survey, Well and Beyond, out March 25, will report that U.S. millennials – members of Generation Y who are 25 to 34 – appear to favor their smartphone and gaming more than socializing with friends. And spending more time on digital devices and gaming leads people to isolate more by avoiding in-person interaction, Cigna found.

Cigna's questionnaire on loneliness includes ways to connect more with other people. Agnello says that's needed: "Effort has to be made in order to preserve some of this social interaction" as there are major drawbacks when it is "electronic assisted," he says.

"Social media can give us the impression that the lives of others are so good and can make us feel like we are missing out or our lives are not as good as that of others," says Agnello. "There are so many factors at work here and the emphasis these days seems to be more on achieving and accomplishing partly due to the demands of society rather than the time we used to have just to be children, just to relax and be who we authentically are. There is much more pressure now."

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