

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLER

Vivek H. Murthy, MD

19TH SURGEON GENERAL
OF THE UNITED STATES

Together



The Healing Power of
Human Connection in a
Sometimes Lonely World

"Fascinating, moving, and essential reading."

—ATUL GAWANDE, author of *Being Mortal*

About the Book

Dr. Vivek Murthy's *Together* highlights loneliness as a public health crisis, linking it to issues like addiction, depression, and societal division. Despite our deep human need to connect, modern life—through technology, mobility, and individualism—often isolates us. Murthy explores the science and stories behind this disconnection and offers hope through inspiring examples of communities rebuilding connection. His message is clear: we are wired to connect, and healing begins with awareness and action.

About the Author

[Dr. Vivek Murthy](#) served as the 19th and 21st Surgeon General of the United States, leaving a significant mark on public health. During his terms, he spearheaded crucial initiatives, including “Facing Addiction in America,” a landmark report that reframed addiction as a chronic illness, and “TurnTheTideRX,” a historic call to action addressing the opioid epidemic. He also released the first federal report on youth e-cigarette use and launched “Step It Up!” to promote physical activity. Beyond these efforts, Dr. Murthy focused on the pervasive issues of chronic stress and isolation, seeking to build emotional resilience.

As Vice Admiral of the U.S. Public Health Service Commissioned Corps, he led responses to national health emergencies. His extensive career includes co-founding organizations such as VISIONS, which focuses on HIV/AIDS education, and Doctors for America, which advocates for accessible healthcare. He is also the author of the New York Times bestseller, *Together: The Healing Power of Human Connection in a Sometimes Lonely World*. Dr. Murthy, with degrees from Harvard and Yale and medical training at Brigham and Women's Hospital, has dedicated his life to improving the health and well-being of the nation.



Discussion Questions

1. Dr. Vivek Murthy learned from a young age that being a doctor was not primarily about fixing people but witnessing people. Who has been an important witness to your story?
2. Some of Dr. Murthy's patients have shared that they don't have anyone who they can authentically talk to or feel seen by in their life. As one of Dr. Murthy's friends put it, "To be loved is not enough. You have to both be loved and to be known." Do you feel known? What keeps you from opening up?
3. When Dr. Murthy became the 19th Surgeon General of the United States, he began his service with a listening tour. He was struck by how willingly people opened up when asked. He was also struck by how behind stories of addiction, abuse, or violence, there were stories of real loneliness. When has someone shared a story of loneliness with you? What prompted their story? How did you become a partner in their story?
4. Loneliness is both common and consequential. It's an epidemic that, according to surveys, affects around 20% of adults in the United States and impacts our health outcomes, work engagement, and school performance. Does this number surprise you? Does this number compel you?
5. There are a number of reasons why loneliness—which has always been a struggle—is so ubiquitous now. We're more mobile, for starters. We also have more technology that can dilute or substitute for higher-quality interactions. To what do you attribute the loneliness epidemic? How has mobility, technology, or something else impacted your ability to make durable connections?
6. What cultural stigmas have you noticed around the topic of loneliness? How do you think your race, gender, or age has affected your ability to talk truthfully about it?
7. Dr. Murthy's physical therapist once said to him, "Strength is the padding that you need in life. It makes you less susceptible to injury." What's one relationship in your life right now that gives you strength? How has it been a cushion against pain? How can you be a cushion for someone else?
8. And yet the great irony is that the thing that affords us the greatest ability to connect—our fragility—is the thing we're most afraid to share. What's something small that helps you overcome this fear when you're struggling to connect?
9. To address the loneliness epidemic, Dr. Murthy says we will have to ask deeper questions about life, its purpose, and our obligation to one another. What question do you think is part of the solution?
10. "At the heart of our ability to connect deeply with others is our ability to connect deeply with ourselves," Dr. Murthy reflects. How will you commit to let love in today?

Adapted from [Discussion Questions for Vivek Murthy: The Loneliness Epidemic](#) - Kate Bowler.

Chapter Summaries

Chapter 1: The Hidden Epidemic

Loneliness is a widespread but often overlooked issue, especially in healthcare. The author, a physician, shares how his training failed to prepare him for the emotional needs of patients—until he met James, whose health declined after isolating himself. The chapter defines loneliness as a subjective lack of meaningful connection and outlines its three dimensions: emotional, social, and collective. It also presents research showing that loneliness has health risks comparable to smoking or obesity, emphasizing the vital role of human connection in healing and well-being.

Chapter 2: Wired for Connection

Humans are biologically designed for connection. Social bonds are not just emotional comforts—they're essential for survival, rooted in our nervous systems and brain chemistry. The chapter explains how modern life—marked by technology, busyness, and individualism—disrupts these natural systems, increasing stress and loneliness. Rebuilding connections is presented as a key to resilience, happiness, and health.

Chapter 3: Culture and Connection

This chapter explores how cultural values shape experiences of loneliness. Collectivist cultures (e.g., Ethiopian, Indian, Hutterite) emphasize mutual support, while individualistic societies often foster isolation. It traces the historical shift from “oneliness” (a neutral state) to “loneliness” (a negative one), and examines how gender norms influence how loneliness is expressed and experienced.

Chapter 4: Why Loneliness is Rising

Modern trends—like rapid technological change, increased mobility, aging populations, and political polarization—are intensifying loneliness. While technology can connect us, it often leads to shallow interactions and social comparison. Migration and aging disrupt traditional support systems, and political division erodes trust and dialogue. The chapter calls for renewed efforts to rebuild social bonds.

Chapter 5: The Disguises of Loneliness

Loneliness often hides behind other behaviors—anger, addiction, violence, or overwork. Stories of individuals like Anthony Doran and Bryan Robinson show how disconnection can lead to self-destructive patterns. Healing begins with connection, especially through service to others. Programs like Alcoholics Anonymous and youth mentoring demonstrate how purpose and belonging can break the cycle of loneliness. The chapter also highlights how childhood trauma increases loneliness risk, but even one caring adult can make a lasting difference.

Chapter Summaries Cont.

Chapter 6: Belonging Begins Within

An authentic connection starts with self-awareness and self-compassion. Through Serena's story—navigating loneliness in college and creating “Space Gatherings”—the chapter illustrates how practices like reflection, solitude, and loving-kindness meditation help individuals reconnect with themselves. True belonging, it argues, begins when we feel at home within ourselves.

Chapter 7: The Power of Friendship

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Chapter 8: Raising Connected Kids

This chapter explores how cultural values shape experiences of loneliness. Collectivist cultures (e.g., Ethiopian, Indian, Hutterite) emphasize mutual support, while individualistic societies often foster isolation. It traces the historical shift from “oneliness” (a neutral state) to “loneliness” (a negative one), and examines how gender norms influence how loneliness is expressed and experienced.

Resources

Videos & Podcasts

- Podcast: [*Vivek Murthy: The Loneliness Epidemic – Everything Happens with Kate Bowler*](#)
- Podcast: [*Do You Sometimes Feel Lonely? – The Oprah Podcast*](#)
 - Video Version: [*Oprah and Former U.S. Surgeon General Break Down Why Humans Feel So Lonely*](#)
- Podcast: [*The Cure for Loneliness – A Bit of Optimism with Simon Sinek*](#)
 - [Video Version](#)
- Podcast: [*House Calls with Dr. Vivek Murthy*](#)
- Video: [*We Are Made to Connect*](#) – Arizona State University
- Video: [*Vivek Murthy. Together*](#) – Politics and Prose
 - Includes ASL Interpretation
- Video: [*Songs for Hope*](#) – The Kennedy Center

Articles

- [NPR](#): *In ‘Together,’ Former Surgeon General Writes About the Importance of Human Connection*
- [Yale School of Medicine](#): *YSM Graduate and Former Surgeon General Vivek Murthy on Unwanted Solitude as a Health Risk*
- [Greater Good](#): *How Loneliness Hurts Us and What to Do About It*
- [USA Today](#): *Review – Loneliness: A Hidden and Serious Health Scourge*
- [The Wall Street Journal](#): *‘Together’ Review: All the Lonely People*

Playlists

- [*Dr. Vivek Murthy – Unlocking Us Podcast*](#) – Curated by Brené Brown
 - Includes six favorite songs shared by Dr. Murthy

Class Connections

Lonely or Making Friends

The Loneliness Question (pp. 10-12)

Dr. Murthy explores the deep emotional impact of loneliness, emphasizing how it can affect our sense of self and well-being. He highlights that loneliness isn't just about being alone—it's about feeling unseen and disconnected, even in the presence of others.

“Evolution has placed a bet that the best thing for our brain to do in any spare moment is to get ready to see the world socially... We are built to be social creatures.” (p. 34)

Lonesome Cowboys & Women and Loneliness (pp. 80-96)

This section examines how simply being near others—even while engaging in solitary activities—can foster a sense of connection and support. Murthy also addresses the unique challenges women face, including the fear of judgment or shame, which often leads to masking true emotions. He underscores the importance of open communication and authentic connection in overcoming these barriers.

On Edge (pp. 134-145)

Murthy discusses the tendency to believe that meaningful relationships can only form between people who think, speak, or act alike. He challenges this notion, advocating for empathy, active listening, and the willingness to set aside stereotypes. By doing so, we can build bridges across differences and form genuine, lasting connections.

College Success & Seeking Support

Relating Inside Out (pp. 185-199)

This chapter explores the often challenging transition into college life, particularly during the first year. Many students experience feelings of disconnection, uncertainty, and loneliness. Dr. Murthy shares the story of Serena, a student who not only found her sense of self during college but also took the initiative to foster connections within her campus community after realizing others felt the same isolation she once did.

Serena's journey highlights the power of vulnerability, empathy, and shared experience in building meaningful relationships.

Consider hosting a Space Gathering—an open, informal space where students can come together to share stories, connect, or simply be in community with others. No structured agenda, just a welcoming environment for conversation and connection.

Class Connections Cont.

Travel & Bilingual Experiences

On the Move (pp. 120-134)

This section explores the emotional toll of relocating—whether for work, education, or other life changes. Dr. Murthy highlights how moving away from family and entering an unfamiliar environment without established relationships can lead to profound loneliness. These feelings are often intensified by additional challenges such as language barriers, job loss, financial strain, and a diminished sense of identity. Together, these factors can push loneliness to a severe and even dangerous level.

Murthy emphasizes the importance of recognizing these struggles and creating spaces where people can rebuild connection and belonging, especially in transitional moments.

Child Development & Socialization

Cultures of Connection (pp. 80-96)

This section explores how societal and cultural norms shape the way boys and girls develop socially, influencing their relationships into adulthood.

- “Little boys and girls tend to talk about their friendships similarly—with excitement, enthusiasm, and passion. In childhood, boys will develop deep, meaningful friendships with emotional honesty and intimacy. But as they approach puberty, they learn that social closeness is not okay.” (p. 88)

Girls, on the other hand, often face constant comparison, which can lead to feelings of shame and social failure.

- “There’s a fear of missing out, yet you can never keep up,” notes Rosalind Wiseman. (p. 93)

These pressures increase the risk of loneliness and emotional isolation, especially during adolescence.

Invisible Wounds (pp. 173-182)

Dr. Murthy discusses how adverse childhood experiences can negatively affect social development and emotional well-being. However, he also highlights the power of supportive interventions—such as mentoring programs like Big Brothers Big Sisters (BBBS)—to help children build resilience, foster connection, and heal from early relational wounds.

Class Connections Cont.

Crime & Justice

The Masquerade of Pain (pp. 155-173)

This section shares the powerful stories of formerly incarcerated individuals who grew up in environments marked by violence, poverty, and gang culture. As children, many of them longed for connection, love, and belonging—needs that were often met through gang involvement. Dr. Murthy highlights how these early experiences of seeking acceptance in harmful ways can lead to cycles of crime and isolation.

The chapter also introduces organizations dedicated to helping individuals rebuild their lives—supporting them in living crime-free, gang-free, and drug-free—by fostering community, purpose, and healing.

These stories underscore the importance of compassion, rehabilitation, and connection in the journey toward justice and personal transformation.

Health Care & Professionals

A Matter of Life or Death (pp. 12-23)

This section emphasizes the importance of seeing patients as whole people, not just as a set of symptoms or diagnoses. Dr. Murthy advocates for a shift in perspective within health care, “...stop asking what’s the matter with the patient and start asking what matters to them.” (p. 21)

The chapter highlights how meaningful social connections are vital to health and longevity. It also points out a common limitation in medical practice—where providers may overlook the deeper emotional and relational needs of patients. By fostering more personal, empathetic relationships, health professionals can better understand the root causes of illness and support holistic healing.

Military

Unmasking Loneliness (pp. 152-155)

Dr. Murthy shares the story of Anthony Doran, a former Army service member who struggled with profound loneliness after leaving the military. The loss of connection with his comrades and a sense of purpose led him to turn to drugs as a way to cope.

Doran’s experience illustrates how the transition from military service to civilian life can leave individuals feeling isolated and adrift, highlighting the urgent need for support systems that help veterans rebuild meaningful connections and rediscover purpose.

Class Connections Cont.

Identity and Self Discovery

Wired for Connection (pp. 32-35)

Dr. Murthy explores how human beings are inherently social, wired to seek connection and belonging. These relationships don't just enrich our lives—they help shape our very sense of identity.

- “Even if we don't realize it—even if we think of ourselves as profoundly introverted or task-oriented—we spend most of our time thinking about other people. To a large extent, Lieberman says, that's because our relationships with other people define us.” (p. 34)

Relating Inside Out (pp. 185-199)

This chapter delves into how mental health challenges like depression, anxiety, and stress can cause individuals to lose touch with their sense of self. Through the story of a student, Dr. Murthy illustrates how adversity can cloud one's passions, relationships, and purpose—but also how healing and reconnection are possible.

- “She no longer felt excited about sustainability and beekeeping. She no longer had any desire to meet new people. She'd lost sight of everyone she loved, why she mattered, and what gave meaning to her life. It was as if she no longer belonged to herself—or anyone.” (p. 189)

Leadership

Lonesome Cowboys (pp. 80-90)

This passage highlights the transformative power of noticing a need and taking initiative. One woman's efforts to address social isolation among men sparked a global movement.

- “...but the movement she'd helped launch took off on its own. Over the next twenty years, nearly one thousand men's sheds sprouted across Australia... Ireland, the Netherlands, Denmark, New Zealand, Canada, the United States, and the United Kingdom. ‘Shoulder to shoulder,’ tens of thousands of men around the world to date have benefited.” (pp. 84–85)

Her leadership didn't just solve a local problem—it inspired a worldwide network of connection and support.

Relating Inside Out (pp. 185-199)

This chapter explores personal leadership and the courage to create community. Despite feeling isolated in college, Serena chooses to reach out—inviting strangers to coffee and founding Space Gatherings. Her initiative fosters meaningful connections among students, showing how small acts of leadership can ripple outward to impact many.

Class Connections Cont.

Social Media

Online All the Time (pp. 101-120)

Dr. Murthy explores the complex role of social media and technology in shaping our experiences of connection and loneliness. He notes that our phones have become extensions of ourselves, often present in every moment of our lives—sometimes at the cost of genuine human interaction.

- “When we’re on the digital tether, she says, we’re not fully present in either our virtual or our physical life. Also, we’re not fooling anyone. Others can tell when we’re not paying attention, and it makes them less likely to share as much or as deeply. No wonder the constant presence of our phones and other communication technology has been shown to reduce the emotional quality of our conversations.” (p. 109)

Murthy emphasizes how social media can intensify loneliness by replacing in-person connections with superficial interactions and by fostering environments of comparison and cyberbullying.

However, he also acknowledges the positive potential of technology. When used intentionally, tools like Skype and Zoom can strengthen relationships across distances, support learning, and create space for more meaningful engagement.

Connecting Kids in the Digital Age (pp. 255-262)

This section underscores the importance of monitoring and moderating children’s use of social media and technology. It advocates for thoughtful guidance to help young people navigate digital spaces in ways that support connection rather than isolation.

Student and Faculty/Staff Awards

First Book Faculty/Staff Award

Faculty and staff who design learning experiences inspired by K-State First Book are invited to submit their work for recognition. Outstanding submissions may include paper assignments, events, discussions, or programs. Awardees are selected based on their creative integration of the book's themes, the level of student engagement, and their enthusiasm for enriching the educational experience at K-State.

Student Award

The K-State First Book Awards honor students and student groups who bring the book to life across campus. These awards recognize individuals who go above and beyond to engage others, deepen learning, spark meaningful conversations, and creatively connect with the book's themes both in and out of the classroom.

Each year, the program presents several awards, including:

- Bill Miller and Debbie Leckron Miller K-State First Book Scholarships – two awards of \$1,000 each
- Student Group Award – one award of \$250

For details and submission guidelines, visit: [K-State First Book Awards](#).

Kirmser Award

The Kirmser Undergraduate Research Awards recognize students who have used library resources to complete a research project for a K-State course during the current academic year.

Each year, we award winners in four categories:

- Freshman (\$1,500 award)
- Non-freshman undergraduate student (\$1,500 award)
- Group project (\$3,000 award minimum for the group)
- Continuing research (\$1,500 award)

The 2025 award process is closed. Look for the 2026 deadline in April 2026.

More information can be found on the [Kirmser Award webpage](#).

Faculty, Alumni, and Community Engagement

You don't have to be an incoming student at K-State to take part in our common reading program. Here are some meaningful ways to engage with *Together* by Dr. Vivek Murthy alongside friends, family, and your community:

Ways to Participate

Read the Book

Borrow a copy from your local public library or purchase one from your favorite bookstore.

Start a Conversation

Talk with an incoming student or loved one about the book. Use these questions to spark meaningful dialogue:

- How has the increasing use of digital technology impacted your sense of connection with others?
- What is one small, everyday act you could take to strengthen a bond with someone you care about?
- How do you distinguish between “being alone” and “feeling lonely,” and what are your experiences with both?
- Beyond close friends and family, what kinds of connections give you a sense of purpose or support?

Host a Book Discussion

Start a conversation group or incorporate *Together* into your existing book club.

Get Involved

Explore additional resources on the [First Book website](#), including events, recommended books, films, and helpful links to deepen your understanding of connection and community.