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"A growing number of people have hundreds of friends online, but few in-person contacts," according to the 2017 Annual Report of the Chief Medical Officer of Health of Ontario. It's part of an alarming trend towards loneliness.

LIVING LONELY: WHO NEEDS A FRIEND?

"I AM AMAZED AT THE WAVES AND WAVES OF PEOPLE, ALL WITH THE LOOK OF BEING LOST."

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This is the first in a two-part series looking at why we are lonelier than ever, and what we can do about it.

Are you lonely?
Does this question make you uncomfortable?

If you are, and if it does, then you are not alone. Studies show we are more lonesome than ever - especially youths, seniors and males - and most of us are reluctant to talk about it. At any given moment, 35 to 40 per cent of people are feeling lonely, says Dr.

Ami Rokach, a clinical psychologist and contract faculty member at York University. And yet, while we readily share our physical and even mental health issues, few are willing to talk about our need for friends - possibly because it's connected with a feeling of

personal failure, says Rokach, author of "Loneliness, Love and All That's Between." "When I walk down university hallways I am amazed at the waves and waves of people, all with the look of being lost." You can feel lonely in a crowd, or in an intimate relationship. Unlike solitude - which feels welcome and recharging - loneliness is not welcome; it zaps your energy and life

satisfaction, Rokach says. Studies show it is increasing, and it is harming our health. The average American has only one close confidante, surveys show, and close friends are less common than they used to be, according to researchers at Duke University and University of Arizona. The study published by the American Sociological Association found the number of people who say there is no one with whom they discuss important matters nearly tripled between 1985 and 2004. That has Ontario's

Chief Medical Officer of Health concerned. "The time to act is now," the officer said in its 2017 annual report. "Loneliness and social isolation are serious public health problems that cost us all. They affect our productivity, health, well-being - even how long we live." Human beings are hard-wired to connect and a lack of connections can increase your risk of dying early by 50 per cent, the report says. Loneliness has about the same negative impact on health as smoking 15 cigarettes a day, is twice as

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deadly as obesity and increases the risk of dementia by 64 times.

And it's getting worse thanks to smaller, more spread-out families, increasing divorce rates and single family households, more work and time pressures, financial constraints (it's cheaper to stay home and watch TV than take part in activities), longer commute times, and technology that competes for our attention, the report says.

"People are over busy and uber-stressed," says Thornhill psychologist and author Sara Dimerman, who says she has spoken to many lonely people in her counselling practice.

"They bring their work home or their work is at home, and the line between down time and work is very blurred ... With technology at our fingertips, we are constantly accessible to others, and expected to respond to emails and texts, for example, within seconds."

Longer work days and commutes mean less time to connect with others, Dimerman says, and when we do have time, we are tired and turn to technology for recreation, like video games, Netflix, scrolling through social media.

"People spend less time speaking to one another, even over the phone, and prefer to send text or Facebook messages." Ironically, although this creates a quicker connection, it does not create a feeling of true caring, she adds.

Some, like Richmond Hill resident Marj Andre,

**THE QUESTION:
WHO NEEDS
FRIENDS IN
THIS AGE OF
LONELINESS?**

**THE CONCLUSION:
WE ALL DO,
RESEARCHERS SAY, BUT
ESPECIALLY YOUTH,
MALES AND THE ELDERLY**

believe social media can make it easier to maintain friendships.

"I send a quick text to a friend going through chemo, I am reminded about many people's birthdays, I can send long notes when riding the subway."

Bupesh Shah, a Seneca College professor and Richmond Hill resident, is also a social media fan, saying he has made some good friends purely through Twitter and Facebook.

"It's easier to maintain friendships or renew friendships due to social media. I've reconnected with friends from high school and even kindergarten."

But to many others, social media can feel hollow. That's because research shows when people are physically in the presence of another person, they experience a marked increase in good feelings, says Rokach. He is concerned that younger generations, that prefer to connect through a screen, will lose face-to-face social skills.

"If all you need is to



Sara Dimerman



Ami Rokach

"Loneliness and social isolation are serious public health problems that cost us all."

—Ontario's Chief Medical Officer of Health

push your thumb or click a mouse, you lose cognitive muscles that allow you to get close to people."

In fact, Rokach says, studies show youth are the loneliest generation - those in "emerging adulthood" between 18 and 26, who are usually making major life decisions trying to find romantic connections and comparing themselves to peers who seem to be doing better.

The second loneliest age is the very old, those over 84 whose partners and friends may be gone due to death or illness or are housebound because of their own failing health.

Mid-50s are another lonely time, the typical

"mid-life crisis" period where kids have moved out, elderly parents are dying and health ailments make it clear life is finite.

When it comes to friendship, men face their own challenges, Rokach says.

"It may be evolutionary: when a man goes in the jungle he must be prepared to fight or flight when confronted with danger, where women are socialized to tend and befriend."

Andre has noticed a tendency for the male in a relationship to depend on the female to arrange social interactions.

Shasta Nelson, founder of GirlFriendCircles.com,

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a women's friendship website, and author of "Friendship: How to Deepen Friendships for Lifelong Health and Happiness," is convinced loneliness contributes to men's shorter lifespan.

She refers to a study showing boys talk the same way as girls with their friends until age 11, but after that, there's a move away from anything "girlish," more joking, arm-punching, and a lack of comfort with being close - and also an increase in

suicide and loneliness.

"Our society gives men permission to have intimacy only in romantic relationships. We are doing a huge disservice to men when we don't encourage vulnerability and sharing and talking. They end up relying on their wives and remarrying much faster after divorce or death of their spouse. They can't find closeness anywhere else."

How do we make friends in this age of loneliness? Read Part 2 to find out.

STORY BEHIND THE STORY

In this age of social media, it feels like we are more connected than ever. But research shows the opposite is true. We are lonelier, and we are hurting because of it. In this two-part series we look at why this is so - and what we can do about it.

**GOT PLANS FOR
THE WEEKEND?**



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