

Governor Proclaims Social Connection Awareness Week as Coalition Efforts Aim to Increase Social Connection Statewide

(MADISON, WI) At one time or another, we've all been lonely. For most of us, it's temporary. While people of all ages and backgrounds experience isolation and loneliness, older adults and people with disabilities are uniquely susceptible and being isolated and lonely is a common reality. Governor Evers recently declared November 10-16, 2024, as Social Connection Awareness Week in Wisconsin to bring attention to this topic and support people throughout Wisconsin.

Given the great potential we have to increase social connection and make a positive impact in our communities, individuals and organizations throughout the state continue to convene the Wisconsin Coalition for Social Connection (WCSC) to address the challenges and find community-based solutions. WCSC is holding FREE lunch & learn webinars throughout the Awareness Week and leading an outreach campaign to share strategies to further community connections. A 2023 U.S. Surgeon General's [advisory](#) alarms about the mental, physical and societal impacts of loneliness, isolation and lack of connection. According to the report, about half of adults in the U.S. indicated that they experienced loneliness which can increase the risk for early death as much as smoking up to 15 cigarettes a day.

Loneliness and social isolation are often used interchangeably, yet they are distinctly different according to Jill Renken, Executive Director at the Wisconsin Institute for Healthy Aging and a WCSC member. "Social isolation is an objective measure of the number of contacts that a person has," says Renken. "People who are socially isolated have little if any contact with other people. Loneliness, on the other hand, is a subjective feeling about the gap between a person's desired levels of social contact and their actual social contact." Both are associated with serious health impacts including a 29% increased risk of heart disease, a 32% increased risk of stroke, and a 50% increased risk of dementia as well as a significant increased risk for depression and anxiety.

While there are challenges in finding and supporting lonely and isolated older adults and people with disabilities, there is also strong interest in finding solutions at the individual and community levels. WCSC aims to raise awareness, engage in policy initiatives, and share screening and support strategies to increase social connection. As a start, the group encourages people to reach out to those who are isolated and may be lonely, not just during the holidays but year-round. "Let's get back to the basics," says Renken. "Taking time to call, video chat, visit or plan an outing may seem small, but are the building blocks of connection, and together with community supports, can make a big difference in the life of someone who is isolated and feeling lonely. Reaching out and staying connected lets that person know you care."

To learn more or join the movement, visit ConnectWI.org.

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