Are Social Isolation and Loneliness Deadlier Than Obesity?

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In the United States, more than one third of adults are overweight, which is why obesity is considered a major public health concern. But now, new findings presented at the 125th Annual Convention of the American Psychological Association suggest that loneliness and social isolation may be even deadlier than obesity. The two potentially perilous mental health concerns could increase the risk of premature death by half, reports Medical News Today.

For the assessment, researchers at Brigham Young University (BYU) in Provo, Utah, conducted two meta-analyses of 218 studies to determine the connection between loneliness, social isolation and risk of early death. (The first meta-analysis examined more than 300,000 adults in 148 studies; the second reviewed 70 studies that involved more than 3.4 million adults.)

In the first meta-analysis, results showed that there was a 50 percent lower risk of premature death among adults who connected with others compared with those who were socially isolated. The second meta-analysis revealed that loneliness, social isolation and living alone were related to an increased risk of early death. Additionally, researchers found that the link was equal to or greater than the risk of premature death associated with obesity and other major health conditions.

“There is robust evidence that social isolation and loneliness significantly increase risk for premature mortality, and the magnitude of the risk exceeds that of many leading health indicators,” said Julianne Holt-Lunstad, PhD, a professor of psychology at BYU and the study’s coauthor.

According to Holt-Lunstad, as the aging population increases, many countries face an epidemic of loneliness, and researchers must figure out how to combat this problem. She suggested dedicating additional resources to address the problem, including focusing more on social skills training for children and encouraging doctors to screen for social connectedness during medical visits.

Holt-Lunstad also points out that older adults should prepare for the social implications of retirement, as work is a place where individuals build a variety of interpersonal relationships.

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