# World Health Assembly declares loneliness a global health priority for the first time



In a significant shift for global health discourse, the World Health Assembly (WHA) has embraced the topic of loneliness through a groundbreaking resolution aimed at fostering social connection. Traditionally, the assembly has focused heavily on disease pathogens and treatment protocols, but this recent initiative broadens the conversation to encompass social determinants of health, a move heralded by many as crucial for addressing pressing health issues that afflict populations worldwide.

The resolution titled "Fostering social connection for global health" marks the first time loneliness has been acknowledged as a standalone health priority. Co-sponsored by Spain and Chile, the measure highlights the alarming rise in loneliness and social isolation, which are linked to an increased risk of serious health conditions such as cardiovascular disease, depression, and dementia. It urges member states to weave strategies that nurture meaningful social ties into national health policies and to enhance public awareness on the ramifications of social disconnection.

Ailan Li, Assistant Director-General for Universal Health Coverage at the WHO, remarked, "Today marks the first time social connection has been formally considered at the WHA," indicating a landmark moment in reshaping the understanding of mental and social wellbeing as integral to health systems. This recognition has been catalysed by lessons learned during the COVID-19 pandemic, which laid bare the consequences of disconnection, prompting countries globally to prioritise initiatives aimed at combatting loneliness.

Saima Wazed, WHO’s Regional Director for Southeast Asia, noted that the inherited trends fostering social isolation are longstanding and complex. These include an increase in remote work, changing family structures, and even cultural shifts such as the decline in religious practice. This multifaceted landscape signifies that loneliness is not merely a personal challenge but a growing public health crisis that demands immediate action.

The WHA’s initiative brings to light the array of vulnerable populations affected by social disconnection, emphasizing the need for inclusive approaches. Delegates from nations such as Burkina Faso, Palestine, and Vanuatu illustrated how conflict, displacement, and climate challenges exacerbate isolation and mental health issues among their communities. The Palestinian delegate specifically spotlighted the need for mental support amidst ongoing conflict, revealing the profound effects of upheaval on social networks.

While the issue of social disconnection resonates globally, it is not confined to low-income or war-torn countries. Initiatives to combat loneliness have emerged in diverse contexts, as evidenced by the UK's loneliness strategy launched in 2018 and Japan's national plan aimed at fostering community interaction. Australia has embarked on a national wellbeing framework, and Mexico is integrating social health services into primary care to enhance social resilience among its citizens.

Youth delegates, representing countries such as Slovenia, have voiced concerns regarding the implications of technology on social connectivity. "We cannot expect children and youth to tackle addictive technologies on their own," one delegate stated, highlighting the urgent need for policy changes that safeguard real-world social bonds amidst increasing screen time and digital communication.

The WHA's new Commission on Social Connection, scheduled to commence its work in 2024, will explore these issues further, aiming to build a global evidence base and offer practical frameworks that governments can employ. This commission has a three-year mandate and will be co-chaired by prominent figures including U.S. Surgeon General Dr. Vivek Murthy, indicating the high-level engagement on this topic.

However, a considerable challenge looms ahead. While the WHA resolution serves as a pivotal starting point, its success hinges on political will, adequate funding, and robust collaborative frameworks across sectors. The assembly’s elevation of this discourse must translate into actionable steps at local levels, with efforts likely competing against more traditional health concerns for resources.

Moreover, there remains a significant social stigma associated with loneliness and mental health issues, which hampers open discussion and the implementation of effective interventions. Public awareness campaigns aimed at normalising conversations around social wellbeing are essential, as are innovative approaches such as "social prescriptions," whereby healthcare providers direct patients to community engagement activities.

As nations prepare to take the lessons learned from the WHA session into public policy, the emphasis on embedding social connection into various health agendas—be it through universal health coverage plans or climate resilience strategies—will be pivotal. The forthcoming formal WHO report will serve as an interim benchmark for assessing progress in tackling this "silent emergency," advancing the conversations that are increasingly recognised as being critical to both individual and collective health.

In facing this shared struggle, whether in times of peace or conflict, the collective recognition of social disconnection as a formidable health risk offers a pathway toward healing and resilience. As Ailan Li succinctly put it, "Social connection is everyone’s business," underscoring the multifaceted nature of this challenge that demands collective action across all levels of society.

## Reference Map:

* Paragraph 1 – [[1]](https://healthpolicy-watch.news/who-member-states-recognize-social-connection-as-a-global-health-priority/), [[4]](https://www.who.int/activities/reducing-social-isolation-and-loneliness-among-older-people)
* Paragraph 2 – [[1]](https://healthpolicy-watch.news/who-member-states-recognize-social-connection-as-a-global-health-priority/), [[2]](https://www.who.int/news/item/29-05-2024-world-health-assembly-endorses-resolution-on-social-participation), [[5]](https://www.who.int/teams/social-determinants-of-health/demographic-change-and-healthy-ageing/social-isolation-and-loneliness)
* Paragraph 3 – [[3]](https://www.who.int/news/item/15-11-2023-who-launches-commission-to-foster-social-connection), [[6]](https://bmcpublichealth.biomedcentral.com/articles/10.1186/s12889-024-18370-8)

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## Bibliography

1. <https://healthpolicy-watch.news/who-member-states-recognize-social-connection-as-a-global-health-priority/> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
2. <https://www.who.int/news/item/29-05-2024-world-health-assembly-endorses-resolution-on-social-participation> - In May 2024, the World Health Assembly endorsed a resolution to implement, strengthen, and sustain regular and meaningful social participation in health decision-making processes. This resolution emphasizes the importance of social participation in fostering mutual respect and trust, making health systems more responsive, equitable, and resilient. It builds upon previous intergovernmental agreements that assert the significance of social participation in health governance and universal health coverage.
3. <https://www.who.int/news/item/15-11-2023-who-launches-commission-to-foster-social-connection> - In November 2023, the World Health Organization announced the establishment of a new Commission on Social Connection to address loneliness as a pressing health threat. Co-chaired by U.S. Surgeon General Dr. Vivek Murthy and African Union Youth Envoy Chido Mpemba, the commission aims to analyze the role of social connection in improving health and outline solutions to build social connections at scale. The commission will run for three years and will consider how connection enhances the well-being of communities and societies.
4. <https://www.who.int/activities/reducing-social-isolation-and-loneliness-among-older-people> - The World Health Organization addresses social isolation and loneliness as significant social determinants of health across all ages, including older people. Recognizing that high-quality social connections are essential to mental and physical health, WHO works with partners to develop guidance on implementing and scaling up effective interventions to reduce social isolation and loneliness, improve research, and create a global coalition to increase the political priority of these issues among older people.
5. <https://www.who.int/teams/social-determinants-of-health/demographic-change-and-healthy-ageing/social-isolation-and-loneliness> - WHO recognizes social isolation and loneliness as important social determinants of health affecting people of all ages. With an estimated one in four older people experiencing social isolation and between 5 and 15 percent of adolescents experiencing loneliness, WHO addresses these issues through the UN Decade of Healthy Ageing (2021–2030), focusing on changing perceptions towards age and ageing, ensuring communities foster the abilities of older people, delivering person-centred integrated care, and providing access to long-term care for those in need.
6. <https://bmcpublichealth.biomedcentral.com/articles/10.1186/s12889-024-18370-8> - A scoping review of national policies in 52 countries highlights the increasing prioritization of loneliness and social isolation as major public health and societal issues. The study suggests that policymakers can strengthen their strategies by incorporating rigorous, evidence-based intervention evaluations and fostering international collaborations for knowledge sharing. It emphasizes the need for funding to develop and implement interventions that impact individuals, communities, and society.
7. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jo_Cox_Commission_on_Loneliness> - The Jo Cox Commission on Loneliness was established by British Member of Parliament Jo Cox to investigate ways to reduce loneliness in the United Kingdom. Launched in January 2017 and operating for just over a year, the commission produced a report outlining strategies to combat loneliness in the UK. Despite its brief duration, the commission led to the UK government making a lasting commitment to addressing loneliness.