

# Why are young adults the loneliest generation in America?

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By Rachel Simmons

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This week, [a study by the health company Cigna](#) found that young adults 18 to 22 are the loneliest generation of Americans, more disconnected and isolated than even our nation's elderly.

As an educator working on a college campus, I am not surprised. More than 40 percent of 18-to-24-year-olds are college students, and the young people who knock on my office door are markedly different from the ones I went to school with in the 1990s.

When I first arrived on campus, I made small talk with students by telling them about the day-tripping and goofy late-night pranks of my college life. After frenetic high school days in Rockville, where I raced from school to sports practice to homework, college offered a welcome downshift: more than enough time to sleep, go to class, babysit and get my work done, while still hanging out with friends. I assumed the same would be true of my students.

*[Perfectionism among teens is rampant (and we're not helping)]*

Not so. My students charge into their undergraduate lives with the same intense schedule they had in high school, filling their every waking minute with work.

The phenomenon can be seen all over the country. [UCLA's 2015 Freshman Survey](#), which includes responses from 150,000 full-time students at more than 200 colleges and universities, found that the number of first-year students who spent 16 or more hours a week hanging out with friends fell by nearly half over 10 years, to just 18 percent. The same survey found that 41 percent of students said they felt "overwhelmed by all I had to do," and logged the highest levels of unhappiness ever recorded among women, who are the majority of college students.

How is it possible that at a time when access to friendship is at its peak — when adolescents are less encumbered than ever by the demands of family and work — more than half of young adults say they feel left out, isolated and without anyone to talk to? After all, the study found that people who have frequent, meaningful in-person interactions report better health and less loneliness than those who have scant face time with others.

The answer is not the smartphone — at least, not as much as we think. Cigna's study found no correlation between social media use and loneliness. It is no doubt true that social media amplifies feelings of social insecurity and being left out. But to impugn smartphones exclusively not only oversimplifies a complex problem; it also turns our attention away from other cultural forces undermining young adult wellness.

Indeed, the problem is hardly that college students spend all their time alone and on screens. It is that they spend too much of their time with peers working: running meetings, producing plays, organizing conferences or studying. They prioritize activities that achieve goals, not meaningful connection. The study found that 69 percent in this age group felt that the people around them were “not really with them,” and 68 percent felt as if no one knew them well. I suspect this is because young adults are far less content to *be* than to *do*.

Students I have interviewed across the country fear that if they are not constantly busy studying or attending meetings, something must be wrong with them, their schedule or their work ethic. These new norms of stress culture translate to fewer opportunities to let their conversations and minds wander. If anything, many young adults turn to the screen because they feel it's the only authorized recreation in a culture of constant work. You don't have to leave your library carrel to scroll through Instagram or take a BuzzFeed quiz.

But why not go to the gym or call a friend? Students tell me that “everyone is working harder than I am” and “I can't stop,” erroneous beliefs fueled by a sense of personal inadequacy, which fuels their isolation.

“I can't have downtime,” one college sophomore told me. “I feel like I'm doing something wrong if I'm not doing anything.” It is mealtimes, students say, that are the last bastions of casual conversation (and that, too, often turns to the subject of work). “When I'm eating I feel justified to be not working,” a college junior told me. “Any other situation where I'm having a lot of fun, I'm not totally present. I feel distracted and sometimes I'm not fully engaged because I feel guilty that I'm not working.”

To be overwhelmed and constantly busy are the new baselines. Anything less, for many young adults, feels lazy. Still, my students long for more authentic connections with peers. The most common feedback they give me in their program evaluations? They want more time just to “get to know” their classmates.

Constant busyness takes a toll not only on the quality of relationships, but also on the skills young adults use to forge them. To walk into a dorm living room where you know only one other person, make small talk with people at a party, connect spontaneously with a stranger in an orientation group — this comes naturally to only very few. Skills are like muscles: They need to be flexed repeatedly. Friend-making skills atrophy from underuse.

The not-so-invisible hand of parents on college students’ schedules is evident, despite hand wringing among parents who claim their children put “too much pressure on themselves.” In 2014, Harvard’s Making Caring Common project found a wide gap between what parents told researchers they valued in their children, and what their middle- and high school student children said their parents actually cared about. Some 96 percent of parents told researchers moral character was “essential” in their children, but more than 80 percent of teens said their parents most valued achievement or personal happiness.

So what can parents of college students do?

1. Encourage your child to take self-care seriously. Stress culture has demoted self-care from a right to a privilege for too many students, making it something they think they deserve only once they’ve done enough work. But the Cigna study found that people who get enough sleep (but not too much) and have a healthy balance of daily activities are less likely to say they are lonely. Periods of rest and recharge will also help your child work smarter and longer.
2. Remind your young adult that everyone gets lonely sometimes. Some of the most popular people on college campuses, including student government and dorm presidents, confide to me that they feel lonely. It happens to everyone. The point is not to never feel lonely, but to know what you need when it happens. Anyway, sometimes we need to feel lonely. It can be a signal that tells us something is not right, and that can help us change our lives for the better.
3. Tell her that loneliness isn’t her fault. Remind her of the systems in play that contribute to a nationwide epidemic of quiet isolation: the pressure to work constantly, the sense among students that no amount of work completed is ever truly enough, and, yes, the rise of smartphone use that shunts us away from face-to-face interaction.

There is a difference, too, between being lonely and alone. People who are always busy may not know the difference. They may not know what to do, or who they are, when they are idle. Overscheduling their lives may, for these students, be a defense against solitude and stillness, or the fear of it.

Above all, urge her to tell someone about how she is feeling. When we surface and share the thing we feel afraid of, we take away much of its power. We also find that others are feeling the same way. College is hardly the best four years of every student's life, but to pretend that it should be will keep students quiet and feeling ashamed.

More reading:

[6 ways parents can stay connected with their teen sons](#)

[7 skills your child needs before heading to college](#)

[8 ways to teach kids to see the best in others](#)