

Social Isolation and Loneliness in Persons with Obesity

DAVID B. SARWER, PHD¹ & BRYAN P. MCCORMICK, PHD²

¹ Center for Obesity Research and Education, College of Public Health, Temple University

² Department of Health and Rehabilitation Sciences, College of Public Health, Temple University

Correspondence: sarah.fischbach@temple.edu (Sarah R. Fischbach, MPH)

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Presently, over 40% of Americans carry approximately 30 to 40 extra pounds of body weight, leaving them meeting the criteria for obesity¹. Another 30% of Americans are overweight and at risk to meeting the criteria for obesity if they gain weight. Obesity impacts individuals from underserved groups, in both urban and rural settings, at higher rates than seen in persons who live in neighborhoods and communities with greater resources to promote health and weight control². Underserved neighborhoods are far less likely to have grocery stores to purchase fresh fruits, vegetables, meats and dairy products; they are less likely to have safe and clean green spaces to promote physical activity³⁻⁴. By contrast, more well served neighborhoods typically include grocery stores, usable public areas, and health care resources to promote the health and well being of those who live there.

While many people think of extra body weight as an aesthetic issue, obesity is associated with over 200 medical conditions and diseases which impact essentially every system of the body in some manner⁵⁻⁹. Obesity not only impacts morbidity it also impacts mortality. While the decrease in life expectancy seen in Americans since 2020 is typically attributed to the COVID-19 pandemic, life expectancy has

not returned to pre-pandemic levels, something that many experts are attributing to obesity¹⁰⁻¹².

Carrying extra body weight is not only a physical burden, but also a psychosocial one¹³. Many individuals with obesity report low self-esteem and quality of life. In a culture that celebrates thinness and muscularity as influential markers of physical attractiveness, these relationships are not that surprising. We also know that obesity can come with social consequences as well. Persons with obesity are more likely to be single and typically report smaller social networks¹⁴⁻¹⁵. Interestingly, obesity also appears to have a “contagion” effect, that persons with obesity are more likely to have persons in their social network who have obesity¹⁶⁻¹⁷.

While the impact of bodyweight on social relationships may seem trivial at first glance, new evidence suggests it’s far from it. In a study over almost 400,000 individuals in the UK Biobank, adults with obesity who reported more social isolation and loneliness were at an increased risk of all-cause mortality¹⁸. More simply put—the combination of obesity, social isolation, and loneliness can contribute to an early death.

Social isolation and loneliness may seem like two words for the same thing, but they are different. Social isolation refers to a lack of social connections¹⁹. People who are socially

isolated have few social contacts. In contrast, loneliness is the feeling that one's social connections are inadequate to one's needs²⁰. However, it is more than an emotionally negative experience. As this study suggests, it also can impact health and contribute to early death.

How can a person with obesity address social isolation and loneliness? One way to address social isolation is to increase the amount of time you are out in the world and around people. Spending more time with family and friends is a start. Social pleasures among humans, such as eye gaze, touch, and attachments have been asserted to be a source of basic sensory pleasure²¹ and social relationships are one of the most important factors in human happiness²². However, even being in public places and having brief, casual interactions with others, such as exchanging a few nice words with the person at the cash register, can help²³. These small, seemingly insignificant social interactions keep us practiced in treating each other with mutual trust, creating shared purpose and bond us socially.

Loneliness can be more difficult to address, as we can feel lonely even when we are

around others. To combat loneliness, we like to focus on strategies that enhance “mattering.” Mattering results from social information that one is valued and needed by others and that one adds value to their world²⁴⁻²⁵. People who feel like they do not matter can experience a sense of social exclusion contributing to feelings of numbness, a focus on the immediate present, inaction, reduced self-agency, and overall sense of worthlessness²⁶.

Although it is important to be valued, adding value is just as important. Engaging in opportunities to ‘give back’ can provide a sense of meaning and purpose as well as opportunities to make meaningful connections. When people feel like they matter, they are more likely to contribute to the well-being of themselves and others.

Conditions that lead to people with obesity to experience greater social isolation and loneliness are socially created. A culture of mattering fosters conditions in which people feel valued and can add value, and prevent conditions in which people feel devalued, incapable and powerless. It can also mitigate the experience of social isolation and loneliness, an important aspect of quality of life and the human experience for just about everyone.

About the Authors

David B. Sarwer, Ph.D., is Senior Associate Dean for Research and Strategic Partnerships and Director of the Center for Obesity Research and Education at the College of Public Health at Temple University. He is member of The Obesity Society, the American Society for Metabolic and Bariatric Surgery, the International Federation for the Surgery of Obesity and Metabolic Disorders. <https://cph.temple.edu/about/faculty-staff/david-b-sarwer-tug35552>

Bryan P. McCormick, Ph.D., is Professor in the Department of Health and Rehabilitation Sciences in the College of Public Health at Temple University. He is a past president of the American Therapeutic Recreation Association and is a fellow in the Academy of Leisure Sciences and the National Academy of Recreational Therapists. <https://cph.temple.edu/about/faculty-staff/bryan-p-mccormick-tuh41357>

Disclosures

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ORCID IDs

David B. Sarwer <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1033-5528>

Bryan P. McCormick <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1017-8868>

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