

Matt (host): Welcome back to Nimble Youth, the podcast where we explore the emotional lives of children and teens and help parents better understand the challenges young people face today. I'm your host Matt Butterman, Today we're talking about something that many young people experience but often struggle to put into words, loneliness. In recent years, loneliness has increasingly been recognized not just as an emotional state but as a public health concern. In fact, former U. S.

Surgeon General Doctor. Vivek Murthy issued an advisory describing loneliness as a widespread issue affecting millions of Americans with risks to both mental and physical health comparable to well known health challenges such as smoking and obesity. And for teens and young adults, loneliness can be especially complex. They may be surrounded by peers connected digitally twenty four hours a day and yet still feel profoundly isolated. My guest today is Lucy Rose, founder of the Cost of Loneliness Project, an organization dedicated to raising awareness about the emotional, social and societal impacts of loneliness and helping individuals better understand how meaningful connection can improve well-being.

Lucy, welcome to Nimble Youth.

Lucy Rose: Thank you, Matt. Thanks for having me.

Matt (host): You bet. So loneliness is something that most people have experienced at some point in their lives, but many people don't really understand what it is fully. And so how would you define loneliness?

Lucy Rose: You know, it's obviously a great question. I want to be really clear that as we go forward today, I want to differentiate between loneliness and chronic loneliness because to your point, we've all felt like, you know, we wore the wrong clothes to a dance and so we stood at the pool by ourselves being a little uncomfortable. That's lonely. So, ruined that night. But what we're talking about, you and me today, as we think about this is chronic loneliness, that feeling, and it's an emotional feeling really, that we get when we don't over the long term, when we don't feel like we really belong or we're not seen.

It's kind of that gap between what we feel like we need inside to feel seen and belonging, the gap between what we need and what we believe we actually have. And that's really important to think about that again from a chronic loneliness standpoint because it's a signal that we have. It's not a negative in and of itself but a signal that we need to do a different approach to connection because we're missing something.

Matt (host): Yeah. And so I guess that begs the question, is loneliness just about being alone or is it about being, just feeling disconnected, you know, even when others are present in the room?

Lucy Rose: Matt, it's really about feeling alone and it has nothing to do with how many people are in the room. There are people who sit at Thanksgiving in our country at a table full of family

and feel really alone. Are people who sit in a room full of coworkers and feel alone, and there are people who can sit alone and not feel lonely,

Matt (host): if I you know what I know exactly what you mean, yeah.

Lucy Rose: Know, fulfilling the need each person has on an individual basis of what they need to feel comfortable and like they belong and are seen and heard.

Matt (host): Right, right. So there's a well founded, growing and well founded concern that loneliness is increasing among teens and young adults, and many observers point to a combination of factors, things like social media, and then academic pressure, you know, reduced unstructured social time, and perhaps most importantly, the lingering effects from pandemic era isolation. COVID was certainly a kind of a real life experiment in what happens when we are completely isolated from each other and devoid of in person, you know, social interaction. So what factors do you think are contributing to the trend?

Lucy Rose: I think you named many of them, right? Right. It's really interesting I think when we think about our online work, be it watching reels on TikTok or be it chatting with our friends after school or whatever that means. It's kind of a paradox, isn't it? Because in a world where things seem to the outside to be the most connected we've ever been, the paradox is that in some ways, you know, has left us without what we really need, which is human connection.

I think as we think about things like AI and we think about all the time we spend online, you know, and in fact, if teens were just three hours or more online a day actually increases their chances of getting major depression and other things as well. As we think about this paradox, that is a good thing perhaps to continue relationships that have already been developed, that touch point, touch base with our friends. It's not the best way clearly to develop relationships or a connection, where we need all five senses to really be a part of that and feel like we are seen and belong again. Yeah, and all of these things are contributing. I think COVID in its own paradoxical way too was a wake up call, wasn't it?

Because we all suddenly went, Woah, this does matter. You know, we are, we're seeing our children when they're not in school suffer because that teen time, as we're talking about today, is one of the times they need friends the most in life, as you know. They are growing, their hormones are changing, their brains are maturing, they're trying to figure out their own feelings. They need that desperately. So COVID, I think, was a wake up call in that way as well.

Matt (host): For sure. And digging a little deeper into the digital connection issue. So, people today, you know, they're more digitally connected than any generation before them. And yet many report feeling more isolated. And that's the paradox that you referenced, you know, the paradox of cyber age technology.

We are more connected than ever before and yet at the same time perhaps the most isolated we've ever been as a society writ large. So, can you explore kind of what's the difference between online connection and then connection in real life?

Lucy Rose: Again, for me at least, and studies have shown too, so it's not just my thinking about this, we need all five senses to effectively and authentically connect. And the connections we're talking about now are reciprocal connections. They are, I share some of my deepest thoughts with you, you share them with me. They're people with whom we feel comfortable and safe to share the things that are most important to us. Doing that in a way that we can give somebody a hug when they need it, and we can shake their hand if they need it, we can actually look them directly in the eye, which you probably have read and know but maybe not everybody listening will know, you cannot effectively do online.

You get close to that, but you and I are not looking at each other's eyes right

Matt (host): this minute. Exactly.

Lucy Rose: Because we may try.

Matt (host): Right.

Lucy Rose: It just doesn't work that way.

Matt (host): Right.

Lucy Rose: So that kinesthetic and the visual and the auditory, all of that stuff, those five senses, are vital to a legitimate, authentic kind of connection. And unfortunately, it just can't happen online. I think, again, it's probably a great thing to help us now that you and I have met and once we get to know one another better, following up on Zoom may be a great thing. It's not going to build the kind of connections we need, and we know that one in four teens claims to be lonely. They're willing to say they are lonely in surveys.

So there are a lot of folks out there that need more than simply this. Need a better pet. You need someone with whom you feel safe and can talk.

Matt (host): Right. You bring up a very important point and that is there's so much communication that is in fact nonverbal. Just being in someone's presence is just so important I think So many

Lucy Rose: So important. And you know, even things like a hug, I think about that often because I know not everybody is and it's absolutely fine too,

Matt (host): but

Lucy Rose: for those who are, there's nothing that replaces that feeling of safety when someone gives you that big bear hug,

Matt (host): you know? Exactly.

Lucy Rose: You and I can't do that today, can try to fist bump.

Matt (host): That's right.

Lucy Rose: We can do something, but that's not gonna really happen with that. Yeah, we'll do that and it'll bring, I'll take it off. But you know, it's not to say it won't take the place of when we actually meet and be able to hug one another, you know what I

Matt (host): Yeah, for sure.

Lucy Rose: That's critical. The other piece here is that most of these teens aren't necessarily going to say, I'm lonely. They won't use that Right. Know, we have to figure it out and help them also because there'll and there lots of reasons they don't say it.

Matt (host): Yeah, I mean, think it's just the vulnerability sort of opening them up to, I guess the embarrassment about, you know, about feeling lonely. Know, I think

Lucy Rose: Ours some binding says, you can do it by yourself. Pull yourself up by the bootstraps, you know?

Matt (host): Right, exactly.

Lucy Rose: So, come on, you can handle that yourself.

Matt (host): Right, right.

Lucy Rose: You know, so when you go up learning that, then why would you say it? Plus you don't necessarily as a teen have the language, the feeling of the even say it. Right. You feel like loser, you're not. Right.

Exactly. Learning in four will say they're lonely many more than that probably really are. And again, it's not the good news here is all it is is a sign, truly, that you do need to find more connections that make you feel more whole. Nothing negative about being lonely in any way, shape or fashion.

Matt (host): Yeah, for sure. You know, it's one of the downsides of our sort of individualistic salp sic sic existence in The US, I think in particular. We all rugged individuals here and not necessarily often part of a collective and especially these days when it seems like we're being

Lucy Rose: Especially these days. But we have to change that culture, Matt. That's my secret. Right.

Matt (host): Yeah, yeah, exactly.

Lucy Rose: Culture create a movement, one person behind, help us move from that concept of independence that you said, to the understanding of interdependence. Exactly. And how everything we do as a species is based on that, just like all other, not all, but most species of animals. It's about interdependence in mammals at least, you know?

Matt (host): Exactly. For sure. And that leads nicely into my next topic I want to talk about and that's the emotional and physical cost of loneliness. And there are definite costs to it because loneliness doesn't just feel painful, it can also affect mental health in very significant ways. And many studies have linked loneliness with an increased risk of anxiety and depression, as well as things like lower self esteem and reduced resilience, which is a topic we cover here on this podcast a lot.

And your website also says this, which I think is very important. It says that loneliness is to suicide, addiction, bullying, obesity, gastrointestinal disease, metabolic syndrome, type two diabetes, cardiovascular disease, hematological conditions and more as poor hygiene is to infection. Which is a powerful analogy and I think very appropriate. There physical somatic costs that we bear to being lonely, chronically lonely anyway. But focusing on the behavioral aspects, what are some of the emotional effects you see associated with chronic loneliness?

Lucy Rose: Yeah, I think that's so important. I do want to address some of the physical things as well so that But we as we get to, you know, as we talk emotional, the two aspects to that, I think. One is how, if you're a parent, do you recognize that your teen might be lonely? Because they're probably not going to come to you and say, I'm lonely. Right.

And when you think about the emotional pieces they may exhibit that we can pick up on as parents are things like they may seem more stressed or more anxious than they have in the past, Their grades may drop from a B to a C and they don't seem to be as interested anymore. They may kind of not be interested in going to their sports activities they were doing. You might see they're not calling or nowadays I guess texting their best friend as much anymore. You know, you begin to see behavioral changes. I hope that we can recognize this before, know, prevention's free in this world.

Right, yeah. You know, we don't have to take a drug, we don't have to do anything, we just need to be aware, you know, and look and be thoughtful. And so as we think about, the other piece to this is sleep. Often it shows up and either they are sleeping more than normal, they just don't want to get out of bed, or they're not getting enough sleep because they're, you know, lonely and it's impacting their sleep and that becomes a vicious cycle. Because when you don't get enough sleep, you also have trouble connecting.

And so I want to pause just right here for one second and make sure that we know if in fact a parent thinks that their child has gone from just being lonely, and I don't mean just as in minimizing the impact of loneliness, but if they feel like they may have gone tipped over into depression, it is really important to recognize that and get them the professional help they may need. So I want to take that little pause there and make sure everybody's aware of that because that can happen, to your point. If not detected early enough, if the team is not connecting properly, they certainly could go there. That could be one of the results.

Matt (host): Right. It's one of our common themes here as well.

Lucy Rose: Just, you

Matt (host): know, address things early on, and most importantly just address things, you know, and don't let them fester and become problems, become real huge problems.

Lucy Rose: Well, it's easy to let that fester because again, a lot of people are uncomfortable saying, I'm lonely. That just sounds like, Oh my gosh, I can't say. I'm whining.

Matt (host): Right.

Lucy Rose: No, it's not real. Right. But it's real and it's a sign and it's something that we can collectively do something about.

Matt (host): Right.

Lucy Rose: Our teachers, our physicians, the way we design our towns, our schools, we can do something to be supportive.

Matt (host): Absolutely. So adolescence is already a time when identity is forming and social belonging feels incredibly important as we've kind of alluded to already in our conversation. You know, emotions are especially intense during that period of life. But why might loneliness feel particularly intense during teenage years?

Lucy Rose: My heart feels for a teenager right now as I think about it. It's a tough time in life for most, guess, listening to the podcast will either be one or has been one. So, we all know, you know, we are working with friends, we're trying to find friends, we're trying to figure out what's cool and what's not cool. Demicks are hard these days and our expectations are high. It's hard if you are a college bound student.

It's hard to think about how do I get admitted to college. You know, there are so many aspects. How do I deal with TikTok and social media and, you know, frankly all that gets put up there are the things that are positive for most of our teens and how can I live up to, you know, all of these things everybody else seems to be doing and maybe I'm not? There's just pressures coming

from every place and they're developing as well. Hormones are beginning to come into their play here and their bodies are changing as well as their emotions are dealing with all of this.

So it's a tough time. It's no wonder that one out of four, probably many more than that actually, feel somewhat lonely through isolation or other things for themselves as they kind of try to navigate all of this.

Matt (host): Yeah, for sure. So for our parents, I'm sorry, go ahead.

Lucy Rose: This starts much earlier. Sometimes we see this starting in elementary school or even younger and continuing through adolescence. And so that can be even harder when you've been that way for a very long time. Sorry to interrupt you, Matt.

Matt (host): No, no, quite all right. I was just going to say for our parents listening, loneliness can sometimes be difficult to detect. You know, we just had a conversation the other day with another guest and we were talking about the issues of communication between teens and parents. And so for parents, it can be hard determine, you know, what's going on with their their teenager sometime because a teenager, they can they can appear busy and and socially active, and yet still feel completely disconnected. So what are some of the signs that might indicate that a young person is struggling with loneliness?

Lucy Rose: Well, you are so right. This is a very individual situation we're talking about here. Two people that look very similar, who are members of the same sports club, who seem to run-in the same group of friends and all that might be experiencing this totally differently, 180 degrees different. One feels very comfortable in there and the other not. And again, I would go back to what we're looking for.

You open the door to a whole lot of answers there because we need, I think as parents, the most important thing we can do is to listen. You know, to be sensitive, to watch, to see if things are happening, like again, grades are dropping or they're not as active with their friends as they have been before. They seem to stay home more than they used to or their sleep has been impacted. There are several things we can look for and we can build rituals into our own families' lives that, you know, help teens, I think, feel comfortable with that and create more safety with us as well through our own listening. Sometimes even just sitting side by side to someone instead of face to face can actually give them a better feeling about safety in terms of sharing.

But I think if I'm a parent, we're going to be looking for, again, the sleep change, the interaction with other students or other friends, do they have that, has that changed, Grades? Things like that.

Matt (host): Right. For sure. Yeah. So, let's talk about perhaps the biggest antidote to loneliness, which is building connection. And in most cases, this is in person embodied connection with other people.

And the good news is that these connections can be built. I think one disturbing trend or concerning trend recently is that, you know, children are they're, they're not competing in organized sports as much. They're, you know, just not getting into groups, know, participation in whatever church groups or social clubs, you know, has gone down. Know, one way I like to build connection is, you know, singing the choir. And that's a way to, you know, express yourself individually, but as part of a whole.

And I feel a lot of connection when I do that because I have to, you know, blend with the person next to me. Have to, we're all, it's just a tremendous feeling because we're all working towards a collective whole and we're all individuals. We come from different walks of life. So I think that's a very powerful thing to be involved with because not everybody is athletic and, you know, but just doing, doing something, whatever it is, whether it's artistic, whether it's athletic or social, doing it in, in a group, someplace you have to go to almost like a ritual every week, right? I think those are very important things for building connection, but what are your thoughts on how young people can move forward from isolation and towards connection?

Lucy Rose: There are a lot of things we need to think about. I love yours, by the way, because you also have to sing in harmony. So it also makes you aware of the people around you, I think, as well, doesn't it? That's kind of a cool thing. Similar to sports and similar to theater and things like that.

Here's the thing, it's critically important, clearly, that a young person find at least a few people with whom, and maybe even just one, but someone with whom they feel so safe and comfortable that they can share their innermost thoughts and fears. There are lots of ways to do that. Not every young person is going to say, I want to be an athlete or I want to sing in a choir. Those are great things. Finding a sense of purpose that you love and following that and doing it in a group with others is certainly a beautiful way to do it.

Finding something that you love, be it hiking or theater or sports, do you want sing or any of these things. I know you are bicyclists and enjoy bicycles. Right. You can go to a biking club. You know, there are lots of things.

If a person feels comfortable doing that, that is a wonderful entree into natural community. Most important thing to me is that we don't try to force something on someone that they don't want to do or aren't comfortable. And sometimes it takes courage for a young person, especially again in adolescence where this is hard anyway, darn it. If you're not naturally on a football team, then how else do I get involved? So sometimes it's one step at a time.

It's saying hi to somebody you've never said hi to in the It's even with someone who's sitting alone in the cafeteria and saying, Hi, I'm Lucy, how are you today? And just beginning to kind of get our feet wet and our toes wet. And as parents, of course, if we know what they're interested in, we can help facilitate or encourage or whatever them being able to get there on time if they don't drive yet, if they're young, adolescent or whatever. But I think and never underestimate the

small stuff like, you know, asking someone how they're doing and actually really meaning it. You know, in our society, it's all about, Hey, how are you?

Fine. Thanks. How are you? It's almost like a, a password for the day or, Hello, how are you? Good morning.

Actually asking and listening, and that's one thing too that most young people could do is look at someone else and say, How are you today? And spend the time just to listen. So there are a lot of ways, but I think finding a passion, a sense of purpose, going into that with others is a beautiful way, if that's comfortable for you.

Matt (host): For sure. So let's talk about your organization, which is the Cost of Loneliness Project and it focuses on raising awareness and fostering conversation about this issue, which is a very important issue today. How did you, what led you to found the organization and what are your goals and how do you think it's helping the situation?

Lucy Rose: Well, I was lonely and I didn't realize I was lonely, quite honestly. And I think that sneaks up on a lot of us, right? I traveled six days a week for twenty years. I was on the road as a professional consultant. And I realized that, you know, how in the heck do you build friendships like that, Matt?

Matt (host): Right.

Lucy Rose: When you're on the road, how do you join a choir? How do you even watch a TV show that's a series?

Matt (host): Exactly.

Lucy Rose: None of that. Yeah. So as I realized the impact it was having on me, I gained a lot of weight, was sleeping at night, all the kind of symptoms fell in place, and I said I was. And as I began to research how in the world somebody is outgoing and connecting and all that as I am could get that way, I started doing research and realized that, man, was I not alone, by the way, with that, to use a play on words. There were a whole lot of people alone.

This was about eight, nine years ago before COVID. There were a whole lot of people that felt lonely. And as I started looking at the real impacts, and you touched on the physical by naming a lot, but just how that happens is when we're chronically lonely, we actually produce constantly the same hormones that you do when you have fright and flight, okay? So like if you're scared to death and the impact of physical and emotional, your body really can't tell the difference between being scared to death and being lonely cause it's the same hormone. That causes inflammation, which is what actually causes all those things that you talked about.

Matt (host): Yes. From

Lucy Rose: heart disease to GI to even potentially dementia. And so all those things are at peace and as I started realizing all of that, I went, Man, I know what I want to do is my passion work for the rest of my life and that's to help educate others so they don't have to suffer in the same way, that this is a national crisis that we need to deal with. So, I started this project and I call it the cost of loneliness because of the actual dollar cost for all the things we just mentioned, but also the cost on each of us individually and what it may mean to us. Yeah. And yes, we're about education, we're about raising awareness, but frankly, we're really about doing something about it as well.

We're working on trying to increase infrastructures in this country through things like teachers and physicians and architects and city planners and trying to help us move to a culture, as we said, of interdependence in a very authentic and caring way.

Matt (host): For sure, yeah. So, as we wrap up our conversation, I keep thinking about something very simple, very powerful. Loneliness, and you've certainly addressed this in the conversation, loneliness is not a personal failure. Loneliness is human experience. And yeah, and often it's a signal not that something's wrong with the individual, but that something in their environment, relationships, or expectation needs attention and care.

And connection doesn't always come quickly, but these small moments, these small conversations that you talked about, these small acts of reaching out and connecting, these very small steps can change the story in a big way. So before we close, is there one final takeaway that you'd like to leave with our listeners?

Lucy Rose: I think you just summed it up beautifully. Those are all my takeaways, but I want to reiterate what you just said. This is not a personal failure. It is a human experience that all of us at some point in time in our lives probably feel to one degree or another. It is a signal that we can ourselves, our inner selves need more in terms of connection.

And it's really like a vital sign. This concept is every bit as important, frankly, as blood pressure and pulse, telling us we need something. And if we could think about this every bit as much as we think about going to the gym and pumping ourselves up physically, that connection that we have with others is vital for ourselves and for all the people with whom we interact. So it's, you know, it's up to you and me and it's up to all of us to collectively find those connections and help create those for everybody, I think, with whom we come in contact.

Matt (host): Yeah, I like that analogy. We have to kind of exercise our social interactions, don't we?

Lucy Rose: Yes, we do.

Matt (host): Yeah. It's free. Exactly.

Lucy Rose: You know, it's picking up the phone and calling somebody. It's sending someone a postcard that they haven't heard from. There's so many it's asking a question and listening quietly for a real answer and then engaging in a meaningful conversation.

Matt (host): Yeah. Yeah. Well, guest today was Lucy Rose, founder of The Cost of Loneliness Project, which is dedicated to raising awareness about the impact of loneliness and promoting healthier forms of connection. And you can find out more about their work at [thecostofloneliness.org](http://thecostofloneliness.org), and we'll have that link in our show notes for this episode. And if today's conversation resonated with you, please share this episode with a friend, and don't forget to rate and review Nimble Youth on Apple podcasts or Spotify.

Your support helps us continue these important conversations about youth mental health. Until next time remember connection doesn't require perfection it simply requires presence. I'm Matt Buttermann. This is Nimble Youth. We'll see you next time.