

ONLY SEVEN SECONDS

How simple gestures can combat loneliness



In 2019, Ethan Wall was a 16-year-old with a wide social circle and an active lifestyle. He was a basketball player who dreamed of taking his team to the state tournament. But everything changed when Ethan fell ill, becoming bedridden for weeks.



Photo courtesy of Campus by the Sea

During this time, he found himself sinking into a profound loneliness. Despite his busy life, not a single friend reached out to check on him. Day after day, Ethan's world shrank until it was filled with isolation, despair and thoughts of suicide. ►

His mom, frustrated by the silence, decided to act. She knew Ethan's friends were good, caring kids, and she was certain they weren't intentionally neglecting him. She wondered aloud, "How long would it take for one person to send a message that says, 'I care about you?'" She took out her phone, typed a quick message and sent it. It took her seven seconds.

That small gesture, simple as it was, became a turning point. It was a reminder to Ethan that he was seen and that he mattered. And it sparked something much larger — the beginning of a movement to reconnect people in meaningful ways. Ethan's painful yet hopeful story is a stark reminder of the profound impact that loneliness can have and the surprising power of even the smallest acts of connection.

Understanding Loneliness

In recent years, loneliness has emerged as a profound public health crisis. It is no longer a fleeting feeling but a real and growing epidemic with dire consequences. According to the U.S. Surgeon General, loneliness is a serious threat to mental health, and its effects are akin to smoking 15 cigarettes a day. Chronic loneliness has been shown to increase the risk of depression, anxiety and suicidal ideation. It reduces life expectancy by 15 years, which should serve as a sobering reminder of its significance.

The numbers are shocking: 20% of youth report feeling lonely every waking minute of the last week, and 80% of Gen Z experience loneliness regularly. However, loneliness is not an isolated phenomenon confined to younger generations. Adults, especially after the global pandemic, have also struggled with increasing isolation. From the elderly to those navigating the stresses of everyday life, loneliness knows no bounds.

The question often arises: Why is loneliness so much worse today? While modern technology, especially social media, certainly plays a role, it is not the sole culprit. Indeed, throughout history, various technological advancements such as television or air conditioning have contributed to a decline in community connection. Our social structures, from bowling leagues to churches, have also eroded over time, leaving behind fragmented communities where people feel increasingly disconnected. ►

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Practical Steps to Combat Loneliness

Intentional ideas for camp communities

No matter your role at your camp or conference center, there are practical steps you can take to combat loneliness within your team and organization. Here are a few ideas that can make a significant difference:

1. **Create a culture of “seven-second moments.”** In the hustle and bustle of camp life, it’s easy to miss opportunities for connection. Encourage your staff to take just seven seconds each day to connect with a student or colleague by asking a meaningful question like, “How are you really doing?” or letting someone know, “I see you, and I’m here for you.” These moments add up, creating a more connected and compassionate community over time.
2. **Call out the elephant in the room.** Loneliness is often stigmatized, leaving people feeling ashamed of their emotions. As a leader, acknowledge that loneliness is a widespread issue and that it’s normal to sometimes feel isolated. By speaking openly about the reality of loneliness, you can create an environment where people feel safe to share their struggles and seek support.
3. **Create space for deeper conversations.** Camp environments are often filled with laughter and fun but can also be places where struggles emerge. Provide space for staff and campers alike to have open, vulnerable conversations. Whether in a group setting or one-on-one, let people know they are not alone. As a leader, make yourself available for these conversations, offering a listening ear and a compassionate heart.

Tips for Meaningful Conversations

Questions and actions that make a difference

It doesn't take much to make a difference in someone's day, and you don't have to have the solutions to all their problems. Sometimes, simply listening, showing that you care and being there is enough. Here are several suggestions for questions and actions to help someone feel seen and heard and know they are not alone.

- Start with open-ended questions such as, "What's been the best part of your week? What's been the hardest?"
- Ask people how they are truly doing with, "How are you holding up today, really?"
- Offer a kind word or acknowledgment such as, "I see you, and I appreciate you."
- Be present in the moment. Put away your phone, make eye contact and listen deeply.



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Loneliness and Mental Health

Loneliness is not merely an emotional state; it is intrinsically linked to mental health. The isolation loneliness breeds often amplifies mental health challenges, from anxiety to depression, and can even fuel destructive thoughts or actions. This reality is particularly stark among youth, who may struggle to find their voice in a world where meaningful connections are increasingly rare.

Yet, as with all crises, there is hope. The opposite of loneliness is social health — strong, connected relationships that nourish the human soul. And while we can't single-handedly change the cultural and technological forces at play, we can make a meaningful difference in the lives of those around us by fostering a culture of connection. Even the smallest gestures, such as a kind word or a quick check-in, can be powerful tools in combatting loneliness.

How Do We Address Loneliness?

The solution to this epidemic lies not in grandiose efforts but in the smallest actions. Each of us holds the potential to be part of the solution. The key is intentionality. Take, for example, the simple act of sending a text message. Ethan Wall's story teaches us that in just seven seconds, a message can change the course of someone's life. A quick text saying, "I care about you," can create a moment of connection that shatters the isolation someone feels.

The U.S. Surgeon General has recommended an equally simple but profound gesture: Smile at a stranger. This small act breaks down the walls of isolation, reminding people that they are seen. In moments of connection, even brief ones, we begin to break the cycle of loneliness and restore the human need for belonging.

A few years ago, when I (Luke) was speaking at a school district, I was approached by a teacher who had heard me speak before. He had been practicing the "seven-second rule," sending a brief, thoughtful message daily to someone he cared about. One morning, he reached out to a student who had been struggling with severe depression. That very morning, the student had written a note expressing thoughts of suicide. Instead of following through on those thoughts, the student responded to the teacher's message, and the connection that followed became the lifeline that saved a life. This wasn't the solution to all the student's struggles, but the student felt seen in that moment. And in that moment, everything changed.

A Story of Redemption

Ethan Wall's story didn't end with loneliness and despair. Through small acts of connection, he found healing and purpose. He became a storyteller for the Only7Seconds movement, sharing his message of hope and the power of reaching out to others. He also became a teacher, where he continues to inspire students to connect with one another in meaningful ways.

Ethan learned something profound in his journey: He couldn't wait for others to reach out to him. In his experience, taking the initiative and reaching out when you're struggling is crucial. And when it comes to helping others, it only takes seven seconds to make a difference.

In a world filled with distractions and isolation, the small, intentional moments of connection remind us of our common ground. It only takes seven seconds. So why not make that effort today? ■



Luke Wall is the executive director at Only7Seconds, a U.S.-based nonprofit with a mission to end loneliness and improve social health for youth and young adults. Prior to Only7Seconds, he served at various nonprofits as a board member, volunteer and employee and worked in corporate business. He is married with three kids, and when he isn't working, he loves spending time with his family, enjoying the outdoors and playing games.



Tori Carpenter is a leader dedicated to empowering individuals, addressing the root causes of human pain and fostering healing in the world. Her background is in higher education and public health, and she has committed her career to addressing the complexities of loneliness, mental health and social-emotional well-being. Carpenter currently serves as program director at Only7Seconds, where she works to combat the youth loneliness epidemic.