

Combating Loneliness in the Digital Age

Featuring Dr. Jean Twenge

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TRANSCRIPT

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: I'm here with Dr. Jean Twenge. She's professor of psychology at San Diego State University, author of seven books, over 120 publications, and an expert on generational changes and differences. Thank you for being here with us today at Cornerstone University.

Jean Twenge: Thanks so much.

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: I wanted to talk with you about loneliness and the epidemic of loneliness, and there's such a stigma around it. On the one hand, people who don't want to talk about it, and others who say it's too negative to talk about. So share with us why you think there's such a stigma around the topic of loneliness and the effects of loneliness.

Jean Twenge: Well, I think it's tough because people who feel lonely sometimes then feel ashamed that, you know, "Maybe I'm lonely 'cause I did something wrong," or, you know, "I should have these relationships around me." But so many people these days are lonely. And it's just the way our culture has shifted makes it tough. It makes it tough for people to truly connect to each other. Like, we think of our digital age as being one of connection...

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: Yeah, right.

Jean Twenge: ...but that's not really the emotional true connection. It doesn't... Yeah, I mean, every once in a while, sure. You know, it can be great to use technology to reach out, and you can do that, but if you don't also have those in-person times with people, those close relationships, it's kind of empty.

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: If you just have those connections online, it often just isn't enough to keep you from being lonely. I read something recently. It was entitled The Antisocial Century.

Jean Twenge: Yeah.

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: And how there are individuals who are actually choosing to be alone. They, for a host of reasons — now the trend is to walk into a restaurant, it's empty, but lots of takeout ordered, and people just come pick it up and go home.

Jean Twenge: That's right.

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: And so share with us what's happening there as well. People who are choosing to be alone.

Jean Twenge: Yeah. I'm not saying they're lonely, but they're choosing to just say, "No human interaction for me."

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: Right.

Jean Twenge: And you know, we do have to acknowledge there's a difference between those two things, 'cause, yeah, sometimes it's great to be alone and have alone time and have quiet time. And there's some people who don't want as much social interaction around them. I think the difficulty is, yeah, we have that, and that people can make that choice, fine, but that there's a lot more people who would like to have those closer connections, and they're not there and are lonely.

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: You'll help us with a definition of loneliness. I mean, when I read the Surgeon General's report of a couple of years ago, it was hard to really pin down a definition. There's isolation, ennui, alienation, social connectedness, disconnectedness, loneliness. So help our audience to get a sense of this word lonely or loneliness. What are we really talking about here?

Jean Twenge: Yeah. So I mean, I think the most important distinction to make is we were just discussing that you can be alone but not lonely. So there's a bunch of issues here that we have in terms of the trends in society, and both of them are important, that people are less connected to each other. They're spending a lot less time with each other...

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: Yeah.

Jean Twenge: ...face-to-face, so they don't have that true social connection like they used to. But if everybody was like, "Hey, that's cool. I'm fine," then we wouldn't have a problem, but we do because we have that, and we have more people saying that they're lonely, particularly young people. We have the strongest evidence that this is a study that I've been working on looking at trends in loneliness among teens. So it asks questions like, you know, "Do you often feel left out? Do you often feel lonely? Do you feel like you have people you can rely on? Are there usually friends who are there for you?" So those are some things on a loneliness scale. And as a research psychologist, often we define things by how we measure it.

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: Right. And we measure it by how we define it.

Jean Twenge: Right. So that kind — but I think that captures loneliness pretty well, that it's not just being alone, it's that feeling, that kind of achy feeling of like, "Wait, where did everybody go? And I don't feel like I belong here."

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: Yeah, I think one of the most heartbreaking parts of that report was the initial letter that our Surgeon General wrote, where he said that he'd been traveling throughout America, and he met people who would tell him how lonely they were. And one in particular said, "I'm convinced that if I died, no one would even..."

Jean Twenge: Yeah.

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: "...know I ceased to..."

Jean Twenge: Tragic.

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: And it broke my heart. I don't know the person, but I thought, "This is terrible. This shouldn't be happening in our country," but it is happening everywhere it seems. And so one of the things I want to ask you about is the kinds of things we need to do. Are, you know, driving on the highway you see bumper stickers. And one that was particularly trouble for me was, "The more people I meet, the more I like my dog."

Jean Twenge: Well, I've seen that.

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: You've seen that, right? You can put cat, whatever pet you want into there, right? But it's almost this, you know, to address this, you have to get involved. Right? You have to be willing to walk into somebody else's life.

Jean Twenge: Yeah.

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: And there seems to be a hesitancy to do that over the last three or four years. So give us a sense of what to do there. What should we be thinking about?

Jean Twenge: Right. Well, you know, we should have a little courage, be willing to take that small little social risk, you know, in a number of ways. So one is there's some really cool social psychology research that says that people usually really don't like the idea of striking up a conversation with someone they don't know on a train, on a plane, in a line at a grocery store. But when they do it, and when they are encouraged to do it, say, through an experiment, and then they see the outcomes, they're happier.

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: Hmm.

Jean Twenge: They're less lonely. Even those little connections really seem to help people out. So I think that's, you know, one thing to keep in mind is you may think that that's going to be awkward or cringe, as the kids call it.

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: Right.

Jean Twenge: But it's probably not, and it, and most people are good, and most people are friendly, and it's probably going to go well, and, you know, help you feel better. So I think that's one thing for people to consider. And then the other is the one that's really hard these days, which is social media has social in it, but it's not really truly social connection.

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: Hmm.

Jean Twenge: It's made out to be. By putting that phone down and seeing people in person, having fellowship, that's what we need.

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: Yeah, see, I'm thinking about social media reels, right? You know, the entire phenomena of a reel culture and all those things, and the effect it's having on people, young or old. And I'm wondering if that's part of the stigma. Everyone looks funny, great, you know, all put together, or you feel this angst piece, right? How much of this is also not just, I want to say, structural? You know, there's a lot of work being done on architecture and...

Jean Twenge: Right.

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: ...cities being built, and town squares. And so how much of that, you know, the way we've set up modern life...

Jean Twenge: Mm-hmm.

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: ...if I can put it that way. I read the report that TV and the automobile were two of the inventions that really made us isolate us.

Jean Twenge: Yeah. And now you have the phone.

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: Right. So how much of it is the structures of life...

Jean Twenge: Yeah.

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: ...and how much of it can really be changed?

Jean Twenge: Right. Yeah, so I mean, I think the automobile, it's true. Now look, I'm a suburban girl and I like my car.

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: Yeah.

Jean Twenge: I grew up in the middle of the country, and so, you know, you're not going to tell — you're going to have a hard time, you know, convincing me we should all, you know, live in a city and, you know, absolutely all of us have to be in a walkable place, and so on, where it's loud...

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: Yeah.

Jean Twenge: ...for example. The people part is fine. It's just, it's also, you know, there's some downsides, right? But you know, we've had suburbs forever. Not quite, but at least since the 1950s.

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: Sure.

Jean Twenge: And definitely in the '80s and '90s. And teen loneliness didn't really start spiking until about 2012 with the phone. So I think that that's a really key piece for teens and young adults. And for prime-age adults, TV does seem to have played somewhat of a role. So Robert Putnam wrote this book called Bowling Alone.

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: Sure, yep. Yeah. And great book. Sure. Has lots of charts, so it's, you know...

Jean Twenge: I love charts myself. I've got 200 of them, 200 of them in my latest book, Generations, so I have to like it. So that book came out in 2000, and I think, how long is that? It's 600, 800 pages long, something like that. At the end of all of those pages, that is the conclusion he comes to, that the Elks Club and Kiwanis Clubs and the bowling clubs and so on, that it was TV that seemed to have broken them.

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: Yeah, I remember several years ago, before I came to Michigan, 2020, we signed up for a bowling league. You know, my kids were really reticent too. And I said, "Why don't you want to bowl?" "These people are not like us." Right? And I remember Robert Putnam's book right away, Bowling Alone. I remember saying to them, "This is good for us. This is actually a good thing for us."

Jean Twenge: It's okay. It's good for us. It is. Right? It's absolutely good to meet people...

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: And it's part of the...

Jean Twenge: ...who are not like you...

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: Right, it's part of the courage piece you mentioned.

Jean Twenge: Yeah.

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: But also the, I want to say, the humility piece.

Jean Twenge: Yeah. Right?

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: Yeah. And I'm just wondering, not just structurally now, but in our society with politics, the intensity of political life and the intensity of civic life now, where I'm right, you're wrong, or I think I'm right, but I really don't need to listen to you, perhaps. You know, what do we do with that part in cultivating what I call civic humility? And how can that help us bridge, have the courage, as you mentioned, to overcome the lonely part?

Jean Twenge: Yeah. Yeah, I think we just have to keep in mind, look, you know, we can talk to people who we may not agree with politically. I mean, first of all, we don't always have to talk about politics. It is true, it's very pervasive these days. It seems like it's hard to avoid. But there's lots and lots and lots of other things to talk about. Isn't the old advice always, like, don't talk about politics or religion? You can

have a perfectly nice conversation with someone, and, you know, usually you can keep the politics out of it. Even if it goes to that, that is what we have to come back to, is that civil discourse of talking to someone we might disagree with, and being able to have that conversation, trying to understand their point of view.

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: You may not agree with it, and you may not agree with it at the end of that conversation, and that's okay. I want to ask you a question about your research and what I think about, you know, loneliness. You know, is it — it would be unfair, I think, for us to think that we can get rid of it perfectly, right? Yeah. Right? And so that raises a question in my mind about loneliness as part of the human condition, what it means to be a human being. There's a facet of it, you're lonely...

Jean Twenge: Yeah.

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: ...versus the contextual stuff...

Jean Twenge: Mm-hmm.

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: ...the cultural stuff. So in your research, just share with us about that part of it. You know, it seems like there's a facet that we're always going to be lonely to some degree, or alone at times, or feel that...

Jean Twenge: Mm-hmm.

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: ...and it's just a part of being human. Versus the contextual stuff that really exacerbates it. Yeah. And what, how do we balance those two things? On the one hand, can't ever get rid of it.

Jean Twenge: Well, loneliness is like an alarm system. It's like, it's like an alarm clock. It tells you when you need to go and seek social connection. So the hard part is these days it's sometimes harder to do that. It's easy to do it online, relatively, but it's harder to do it in real life, and I think that's the challenge that we're facing. So yeah, we're not going to eliminate loneliness. It is part of the human condition. But you have to say, "Well, why?" You know, why is it part of the human condition? Why is that kind of our brain's alarm clock telling us to go seek people out? Because back in, say, hunter-gatherer times, well, if you were alone, then you were probably dead. I mean, that's just how it worked, you know? We had to work together to survive.

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: Right. And that's still hardwired into us.

Jean Twenge: Yeah.

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: So then, and that's always going to be there. The contextual part will be certain conditions that exacerbate it, right? We talked about the city. I want to talk with you about first, and not politics but policy. What are the kinds of things do you think that, right, policy perspective — towns, cities can do to foster more of that civic life? What do you think can be done?

Jean Twenge: Right. So this is a tough question. So I'm going to come back to the things that I've been kind of thinking in terms of policy, which given my research, and also partially as the mother of three teenage children, are front of mind. One of which is a no phones during the school day policy at schools. So some of the best data that we've got on loneliness around the world, the questions are actually about feeling lonely at school. And that has skyrocketed in every, almost every country where we have data. And I think that that's got to be one of the reasons, that maybe you want to talk to your friends at lunch, but they're looking at their phones. So I give a lot of talks at schools, and spoke to a group of high school students at a school in Texas, and a young man came up to me and said, "Well, I really want to talk to my friends at lunch. That's my time during the day to really talk to them face to face, but they want to play

games. What can I do?" And my heart broke a little bit, because what could I really tell him to do? It's... You know, he could yell at his friends, but that's probably not going to do any good. But if his school said, "Okay, no phones from the beginning of the school day to the end," that problem would go away.

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: Hmm. Tell me, uh, talk to us about churches. You know, the Surgeon General in the report called the faith communities. But here, you know, at a Christian university like Cornerstone, we think about churches, local churches, and those are gathering places for people to come and worship together, pray together, sing together, cry together, serve together. We've seen a decline in the last few decades of church attendance, you know, religious affiliation. What can churches do differently to shift some of this? Even in my old local church, it's interesting for me, in the mornings the pastor will say, "Welcome everyone, and to those of you watching online," there's a camera, "welcome to you too." And I think, "Why are we doing this?" I understand the need to reach. But it's not as if we're in the pandemic days anymore.

Jean Twenge: That's right.

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: But what do you think churches could do differently to foster more of the togetherness and the social connectedness?

Jean Twenge: Yeah. You do have to wonder if... I mean, it sort of, it reminds me a little bit of the college class that I teach, that I, uh, it's actually, it actually is hybrid. Half of it is online, but then one day a week we are in person together. And so I get the question every semester, "Are you going to post the slides online?" "Are you going to post video of the in-person lecture online?" And the answer to that is no and no. Because my thought is...

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: You're a tough professor.

Jean Twenge: I'm really not. But if I do that, then they're not going to come in person. And we're there in person once a week for an hour and 15 minutes, and that's our time, and we can do interactive stuff. And that is my guess, and I know from some colleagues that's somewhat accurate from what they tell me. If you post everything online, then they won't come. And so I do wonder about that with churches, if having it online... And I totally understand why they want to do it, because if you're sick or if you're elderly and you can't make it physically, then you have that there as a resource. But I wonder if it's also, "Oh, then I don't have to go to the trouble to get dressed in my nice clothes and get in the car and go," when the fellowship is going to be just one of the best parts of it, is seeing people in person and being there with them.

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: Yeah. You know, several years back, Time magazine had a cover of "volunteerism will save America," something along those lines. They spoke about the young generation then, maybe it was a decade ago, as being the generation that has volunteered the most in America. You know what they left out of that story?

Jean Twenge: What about?

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: That it's required to graduate from high school. It's not volunteerism, it's being voluntold.

Jean Twenge: Voluntold. It's involuntary volunteerism.

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: Right. So it was a fake social effect?

Jean Twenge: As far as I can tell, yeah. Yeah. So, 'cause I work with a lot of data sets on high school students, and I remember that cover story, and I remember people talking about it at the time, and I

went and looked at every measure of community and civic involvement, and everything had gone down except for volunteering, and it's because it's required.

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: So how would you — I want to ask about the family though, or the family on all this, right? Because that's one of the areas that we're, you know, the fall conversation, wisdom conversation series will be about the family. And what can the family do to cultivate and nurture social connectedness and to nurture volunteering and to nurture, we'll call it love of the other, love for your neighbor, which is, I think, what we're talking about here to some degree. And the role of the family is really important, and yet the family is also undergoing significant challenges...

Jean Twenge: Yes.

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: ...perhaps being stretched beyond what it should be, and with challenges there. So how do we work there in that very important space?

Jean Twenge: Yeah. Yeah, I mean, I think that that's the challenge. So marriage and the family unit are under a lot of pressure because they often have to play a lot of roles that used to be lifted more by, say, the community or the church or people around. It's like the "it takes a village to raise a child" idea. And it's expected to do so much, and it's very tough for families to do all of those things and have, you know, fulfill all of those needs. So I think that's one big challenge. So any, you know, anything that the community or church or society can do, you know, to help out with, uh, just, you know, childcare or even mothers getting a break or fathers getting a break from time to time, yeah, will be helpful. The other big challenge though is that the fertility rate keeps going down.

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: Right.

Jean Twenge: And we're well below replacement. I just saw an economist give a great talk about the fertility rate and how, if we think it's going to change, we're probably deluding ourselves, and economic incentives don't seem to work. And that it's based probably on what she calls shifting priorities.

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: Hmm.

Jean Twenge: And I talked right after her, and it was perfect because that's exactly what the data that I've been able to collect has shown, too. Is it... When you look at the polls, it's about why people don't want to have children, and they'll say, "Well, I just don't want to," or, "I want to travel instead," or, "I want to do what I want to do." And we see among 18-year-olds is a huge decline in the number who want to have children. Okay. And it's really striking because the number wanting to have kids was very high and very steady all the way from boomers to Gen Xers to millennials. And with millennials, that fertility rate has fallen, but at 18 they wanted to have kids. Gen Z, the generation after them, the young adults now, even at 18 they don't think they want to have kids. So I don't think that fertility rate is coming back up unless something drastically changes.

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: You know, in the data, what gives you hope?

Jean Twenge: Gen Z is more empathic. Empathy has gone up among young adults the last 10 to 15 years. They're more likely to say they want a job that will be helpful to other people. So we see that in the national surveys, and anecdotally, I see that among my students too. They're really nice, and they want to help. So it would be up to leaders, organizations, communities to really leverage that...

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: Exactly.

Jean Twenge: ...the empathy.

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: That's right. That's always hard to do though. I mean, we talk about being voluntold...

Jean Twenge: Yeah.

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: ...right? Right. In policy, there's always that challenge, so if... And it seems to me that the younger generation resent that, the voluntold part. How would you encourage, based on data, what you've seen, you know, families, churches, communities to leverage that or to foster that so it actually addresses that loneliness piece and helps to shift some of that? What do you think can be done?

Jean Twenge: Yeah. I mean, I think the idea of the high school students volunteering was to have them have that experience, and then maybe they'll like it and continue to do that, and I think some do, but it's often not timed very well. It's often a requirement during their senior year of high school. Well, that's right before they may, you know, go off to college or move away. So maybe shifting that a little bit earlier might be good. You know, get them involved when they're a little bit younger, if that's possible. And just, yeah, generally try to recognize, you know, the stereotype of young people now being really, really selfish actually isn't true. And they really do want to give back and make a difference.

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: Dr. Twenge, thank you for being with us at Cornerstone and for being with us on the podcast. It's great to have you here.

Jean Twenge: Thank you.

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