

# ALPHAGRACE

PRATICIEN EN THÉRAPIE NATURELLE

1



## Using African Naturopathic Medicine to address the loneliness epidemic among young people



### Abstract

Social media has connected us like never before—but young people have never felt more alone. In this powerful and deeply personal discussions i will explores the rising epidemic of loneliness among youth, weaving together clinical insight, emotional wisdom, and lived experience.

From the roots of disconnection—bullying, trauma, social isolation, and screen addiction—to the emotional and physiological toll of loneliness, I will lay out a path toward healing. I will share actionable tools for families, educators, and communities to support youth in cultivating real

connection, emotional intelligence, and authentic self-worth. This is a must-read for anyone who works with or loves the next generation, this study offers a compassionate, african naturopathic roadmap to help teens feel seen, supported, and socially alive.

*As our youth are facing a loneliness epidemic like never before. They have “social” media, but many are lacking healthy social lives. Many have likes and virtual “friends” but not real, live friends. They can text and tweet, but not speak and listen, and connect. And they are feeling it. Humans were made for real-life interaction, and we crave it when we don’t get it, or don’t even know how to go about looking for connection...*

2

## **INTERVIEW QUESTIONS AND MY ANSWERS:**

***As a renowned authority in the treatment of mental illnesses such as depression, anxiety, bipolar disorder, and eating disorders. Having overcome many mental health challenges a gifted speaker and best-selling author who loves to share his philosophy of natural wellness in interviews with platforms, and many health summits.***

### **Can you share with our readers a bit about why you are an authority on the topic of ‘The Loneliness Epidemic Among Young People’?**

When I was in elementary school, I was bullied, and my self-confidence sank as one of the kids started an “I hate Alpha Grace” club. I was lonely at school, felt isolated, and my solution was to sign my adopted parents up for every parent volunteer opportunity there was so that I had someone to lean on.

When I was a teenager, my family moved often, and I continued to struggle to fit in ; an african child in an European world. My mental health suffered and was at its worst in my late teens to early 20s. Most days, I wore a mask that said I was okay on the outside, but I was actually dying on the inside. I projected to the world what I wanted them to see, and as a result, I ended up feeling disconnected from those around me. I became a classic overachiever to compensate for the lack I felt within.

After a suicide attempt left me in a coma with kidney failure, I realized that I needed to find another way to navigate my mental health. I was the furthest from liking, let alone loving myself, that I could possibly be.

For the past few decades, this is the journey I have been on, and my passion is guiding others to mental health wellness using a physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual approach. Our children need us, and as a contributor to this study, I hope to be part of the solution.

**As it has been said : Loneliness is becoming an increasing health threat not just in the developed nations, but across the world. Can you articulate some reasons why being lonely and isolated can harm one's health?**

Mental health conditions have been on the rise for many decades, and despite the evidence of this, not much has been done to find solutions to the problems. At the root of many of these conditions is loneliness. Loneliness and social isolation affect us profoundly, and they affect kids the most.

Loneliness is an overlooked social determinant of health. I have often declared that “loneliness is as bad for us as smoking 15 cigarettes per day” and that social connection came with a 50% reduced risk of early death. So, it is apparent that loneliness exacts a grave toll on one's health. It exceeds the risk of alcohol consumption, air pollution, physical inactivity, and obesity.

All over the developed world, researchers wanted to answer a seemingly simple question: ***What makes a good life?*** The answers revealed that relationships protect people from life's discontents and prevent mental and physical decline. It surprised the researchers to discover that the quality of one's relationships was a better predictor of long and happy lives than social class, IQ, or even genes. The study proves that embracing community and healthy relationships helps us live longer and healthier lives.

I have said quite a number of times that : “When we gathered everything we knew about research subjects at age 50, it wasn't cholesterol levels that predicted how they were going to grow old; it was how satisfied they were in their relationships. The people who were the most satisfied at age 50 were the healthiest at age 80”.

Three (or more) reasons why being lonely and isolated can harm one's health are that a lack of social connection can:

- increase an individual's risk for anxiety and depression.
- cause emotional dysregulation
- negatively impact our memory and ability to learn
- leads to lower self-esteem and empathy,
- increases risky behaviours,
- decreases positive behaviour
- impact sleep quality
- reduces immune system function and
- increases inflammation

By neglecting our biological need to connect, we put our physical and mental health at risk.

## Based on your experience or research, are children impacted differently than adults by the loneliness epidemic? How?

While mental health concerns, such as lower self-esteem, anxiety, depression, and insomnia, can occur in both children and adults, the physical implications differ. For adults, the impact can be vast in terms of affecting their health on a physical level with conditions such as high blood pressure, heart disease, obesity, a weakened immune system, cognitive decline, Alzheimer's disease, and even death.

The seeds of these physical implications can be planted in childhood, but they can take years to develop into a physical problem. Another implication of loneliness in adolescents is that they may drop out of school and have increased delinquency.

A question that is important to consider is how the seeds of loneliness get planted in the first place. If we consider loneliness a weed, we can't simply pull the top off to remove it. We need to dig underground and get to the root of the problem. If you have any experience gardening, you will know that there is more than one root to a dandelion.

As children, we are dependent on our caregivers to help us navigate our emotional world. As such, we also have to understand that the role adults play in the emotional development of children can significantly influence their mental health. In my studies and collaboration with researchers, I explore how the seeds of loneliness get planted. And also in my teachings, I have stated ; ***that children have three primary, but competing needs: attachment, attunement, and authenticity.***

The first need we have as children is attunement. We need an adult to be emotionally attuned to us, not parents who are disengaged when they are playing with their kids. Not parents on their devices while their child is at the swimming pool. Then we have the needs of attachment and authenticity; the first need is for attachment, and that is about contact, connection, love, and without that, the child doesn't survive.

Our attachment needs are enormous. However, we have another need, which is authenticity – this is the capacity to know what we feel, to be in touch with our bodies, and to be able to express who we are in our relationships. Attunement is important because, evolutionarily, a person who is not in touch with their gut feelings isn't going to survive in the wild.

So, authenticity is another huge survival need. But what happens to a child where the attachment need is not compatible with the need for authenticity? In other words, if I am authentic, my parents will reject me. If I feel what I feel, express what I think, and insist on my own truth, my parents can't handle it, or my parents will abuse me. *And parents convey those messages unconsciously all the time – not because they mean to, but because they are suppressed, traumatized, hurt, or stressed.*

The message many convey to their kids is that they aren't acceptable the way they are with their emotions. And what does the child do with that? They end up choosing attachment over

authenticity as their life depends on someone caring for them. So there is no question what becomes suppressed is our authenticity, our emotions. It is the subtle, and not-so-subtle, messaging that filters into our subconscious minds and can plant the seeds for emotional dysregulation and loneliness in children.

You may have had the experience of a strong gut feeling and ignored it, and then gotten into trouble. That tells us what happened was that, at some point, we found out it was too costly for our attachment relationships to be in touch with our gut feelings. Suppose our environment does not or cannot support our gut feelings and emotions. In that case, the child, in order to belong and fit in, will automatically, unwittingly, and unconsciously repress or suppress their emotions and their connection to themselves for the sake of staying connected to the nurturing environment without which they can't survive.

We then pay the cost later on in the form of addictions, loneliness, mental illnesses, or any range of physical ailments – and it all begins with this tragic conflict that children should never be confronted with, but are all the time, between authenticity on the one hand and attachment on the other. This lack of connection, which can have its origins in trauma, further perpetuates the loneliness problem in our culture.

### **On a broader societal level, in which way is loneliness among our youth harming our communities and society?**

I would like to offer you a reframe on this question. I was listening to a lecture, and the lecturer was sharing a study she had read about regarding a group of chimpanzees in Africa. Anthropologists noticed these chimpanzees had among the population in the village, some members demonstrated what could be called depressed behavior. These chimpanzees did not eat, play, or sleep with the rest of the community.

The anthropologists were curious about this phenomenon. They wondered what the effect on the tribe would be if they took the depressed chimps away for 6 months. So they did this, and in 6 months, they came back to see what the effect was on the village. When they came back to the village 6 months later, what do you think the anthropologists found when they came back? More chaos?

More depression? Other depressed chimps? A cohesive community? What they found when they came back was that the entire village was dead. They realized then that the depressed chimps were the early warning system. They were depressed because there were snakes coming, or elephants coming, or a warning that a storm was coming. The other chimpanzees, when they saw the depressed chimpanzees, knew that something must be wrong.

We should be, on that level, listening to the depressed and lonely amongst us. We should be more depressed by the corruption in the world. We should be more depressed by climate change. We should be more depressed by global poverty and hunger. The issue is not the

presence of loneliness being a problem. The issue is recognizing loneliness for what it is. Instead of looking at loneliness as a problem, per se, perhaps we need to look at it as a warning sign that something is terribly off with our society.

We need to ask ourselves how we can navigate our way back to connection and community. Our children are speaking loudly to us, and the megaphone they are using is loneliness. Loneliness is a signal that we haven't taught our children the emotional skills necessary to navigate the inner landscape of their lives. Likely because we, as adults, have not been taught these skills.

It is now time to do the work, get the help, and make the changes necessary to move towards cohesive family systems and communities that are in connection with each other. We need to listen to our children, take note, rise, respond, and connect. Tune in, not out. They are the canaries in the coalmine, or the chimpanzees telling the rest of us something is gravely wrong with the direction we are going in. The opportunity now is to course correct.

**The irony of having a loneliness epidemic is glaring. We are living in a time where more people are connected to each other than ever before in history. Our technology has the power to connect billions of people in one network, in a way that was never possible. Yet despite this, so many people are lonely. Why is this?**

**Can you share 3 of the main reasons why our young people are facing a loneliness epidemic today? Please give a story or an example for each.**

**1.** My first reason connects back to what I mentioned above regarding attachment, attunement, and authenticity. If we don't have proper attachments in place to begin with, then we are more likely to get lost in the sea of emotions, thoughts, and relationships as we navigate the various seasons of our lives. I think trauma (whether it is big "T" or little "t") plays a large role in our ability to connect with and understand ourselves and others.

If we don't feel safe, if our nervous system is on overdrive and thrust into a sympathetic state, we will operate in the world from a place of either fight, flight, freeze, fear, or fawn. This can cause us to be reactive and defensive to those we come into contact with because we feel we are under threat. At the end of the day, there are only two states: Love (parasympathetic) or Fear (sympathetic). We need to teach our children self-compassion so that their nervous systems can shift to a parasympathetic state (love). Why is self-compassion so important? I can answer that by saying : Because its driving force is love, not fear. *Love allows us to feel confident and secure (in part by pumping up our oxytocin), while fear makes us feel insecure and jittery (sending our amygdala into overdrive and flooding our system with cortisol).* When we trust ourselves to be understanding and compassionate when we fail, we don't cause ourselves unnecessary stress and anxiety. We can relax knowing that we'll be accepted regardless of how well or how poorly we do. Unlike self-criticism, which asks if you're good enough, self-compassion asks *What's good for you?"*

As such, a reason why the loneliness epidemic is such a crisis is that, as parents, we haven't been taught the skills of emotional intelligence ourselves, and you can't teach your children something you yourself haven't been taught. Our kids need to be taught the skills of emotional intelligence, such as compassion, kindness, empathy, resilience, grit, purpose, etc., so that the voice of self-doubt is not the main operating system in our brains pushing us to places that leave us feeling lonely and isolated.

We need to understand who has the microphone in our minds – the inner critic or the inner cheerleader? If it is the former, we need to bring the conversation out into the open to help shift the suffering that is happening in silence inside the heads of children. Without the ability to talk to someone regularly who can help us navigate the emotional storms that might be swirling around within, we can be swallowed up by the turbulence of our nervous system and potentially fall into the pit of depression.

**2.** The forced isolation of the pandemic is a contributing factor. This has been a collective global trauma for everyone, and school age children were deeply affected. Early in the Covid pandemic, when young people were asked in March 2020 what their top concerns were about coping over the next few months, their top concern was isolation and loneliness.

- As the first lockdown was progressing in April/May 2020, 35% of young people said they felt lonely often or most of the time despite spending three hours on social media.
- In late November 2020, according to a survey of UK adults which took place nine months into COVID-19 restrictions, almost 50% of 18- to 24-year-olds reported being lonely during lockdown.
- In a YouGov poll conducted around the same time, 69% of adolescents aged 13-19 said they felt alone “often” or “sometimes,” and 59% feel they have no one to talk to “often” or “sometimes”.

These findings suggest that pandemic restrictions are having a heavy toll on children and young people. One of the primary reasons that children and young people may be feeling lonely is the inability to socialise and mix with friends in and outside of educational settings at this time.

- 76% of young people have said not being able to see friends had a negative impact.
- 26% of respondents said their relationships with friends have gotten worse.

Friends are of particular importance to the development of a young person's identity during these early life stages and they provide vital forms of support. Removing opportunities from children and young people to socialise with their peers appears to be contributing to feelings of loneliness and may have long term effects on their mental health.

While the pandemic has not helped our children's mental health, it is important to point out that this problem existed prior to COVID19 and has only been exacerbated with it. As such, restrictions in response to the pandemic can't be blamed fully for comparatively high feelings of

loneliness in children and young people. Even before the pandemic, young people had been reporting they are more lonely than older generations.

### 3. Lack of emphasis on the physical foundations of health: nutrition, sleep and exercise.

As a Naturopathic Doctor, I would be remiss if I didn't mention the impact the physical foundations of health have on our mental health. Your tissues, organs, bones, blood, brain and every cell that makes up those parts of you are created from what you put in your body. You have probably heard the expressions, "you are what you eat," "the car won't run if you don't put the right fuel in the tank," or "garbage in/garbage out." Well, this is absolutely true when it comes to your health and nutrition. I am not convinced that you are lonely, anxious and depressed because you have a deficiency of Prozac. You are lonely, anxious and depressed, perhaps, because your body is not supporting the pathway to make neurotransmitters or hormones on its own, either because:

- You do not have the essential nutrients to do so, or
- You are missing the nutritional cofactors along key neurotransmitter pathways (i.e. dopamine, Gaba, serotonin, etc.) or
- You are deficient in important nutrients or
- You are stressed and forming quinolinic acid instead.

There are also a number of other factors that can decrease the amount of key neurotransmitters in your body. They include:

- Seasonal affective disorder
- An excess of estrogen
- A low-protein or high-carbohydrate diet
- Chronic stress
- Excessive caffeine or alcohol consumption
- Thyroid disease
- Habitual use of tranquilizers, benzodiazepines, or sleeping pills
- A deficiency of beneficial gut flora, which impacts the gut-brain axis

You could also be impacted by heavy metals and endocrine disruptors in the environment. These chemicals can block receptors so that the neurotransmitters can't get inside the cell to perform their function. In that case, it isn't actually a deficiency problem, but a binding problem.

We have given up two hours per day for our screens. What have we given up or sacrificed in the name of Instagram, TikTok, and being on our devices? Healthy eating, exercise, sleep and community. We need to ditch the technology and get back to the foundations of health. A simple suggestion for people is to start connecting in person with people vs via social media or texting through a device. *Real connections. Not artificial ones. We need to get nose to nose and heart to heart with our children and face to face with one another.*

## **What signs would you tell parents, friends, or loved ones to look for in young people they think may need help? Can you please explain?**

### **The signs of loneliness in younger children may include:**

- Creating imaginary friends to make up for lack of real friends
- Clinginess or asking you to play with them more than usual
- Attention seeking by misbehaving, acting silly, or interrupting you when they know they shouldn't
- Acting timid or unsure of themselves
- Crying more often than other children their age

### **The signs for adolescents and teens may include:**

- Retreating to their rooms for long periods of time
- Talking to you more than usual
- Sad mood
- Not having friends to hang out with outside of school
- Not hanging out with friends that they used to spend a lot of time with
- Talking negatively about themselves

By contrast, if your child or teen seems to be spending a lot of time alone, they may not actually be lonely. There are some children and teens who enjoy reading or popping in a pair of earbuds to listen to music over trips to the mall or parties. The easiest way to figure out if your child or teen is just introverted or whether they are lonely is to start a conversation with them and ask.

## **In your experience, what are the Things Each Of Us Can Do To Help Solve The Loneliness Epidemic Among Young People?" Please give a story or an example for each.**

The best way to solve the loneliness epidemic is to put the emphasis on prevention. Just like thirst or hunger evolved in us as an aversive state, so has loneliness. It is an aversive signal, which means that it is our brain's way of signaling to us to "go find people". It is our brain telling us to do something to improve our social well-being.

A key to our survival is water, and the signal in the body to get water is thirst. Loneliness, like dehydration, profoundly affects our health and well-being. We have evolved as social beings. We are wired to connect. We are better together. Prolonged periods of time alone are harmful to our well-being, which is why they put prisoners in isolation to punish and torture them.

*Our brains react to social pain and pleasure in much the same way as they do to physical pain and pleasure.* Humans are naturally social beings, and as much as we may deny it, we need to form real-life connections with others. There is emotional and physical safety in numbers. When we are alone, we are more vulnerable to an onslaught of psychological conditions.

When your mental health is in check, it means that you have a sense of well-being, are able to function in your daily life, and feel confident in your abilities. Loneliness is not a factor, as you feel connected to yourself and others. As with your physical health, there are steps you can take to decrease your feelings of loneliness and boost your well-being by following these suggestions.

10

1. **Connect with others by participating with people who share an interest.** Join a club or group of people who share your interests. Being part of a group of people with a common interest provides a sense of belonging and is good for your mental health. Ideas include joining a sports club, a band, an evening walk group, a nature group, a dance class, a theatre or choir group, or a book club. Many times, you have to push yourself to try new things. Challenge yourself to learn a new skill or take on a challenge to meet a goal. You could commit to a fitness goal, learn to cook a new recipe, or take part in a new club at school. Learning improves your mental fitness while striving to meet your own goals, builds skills and confidence, and gives you a sense of progress and achievement. Develop and maintain strong relationships with people who will support and enrich your life. The quality of our personal relationships has a great effect on our well-being. Putting time and effort into building strong relationships can bring great rewards.
2. **Take time to enjoy.** Set aside time for activities, hobbies, and projects you enjoy. Let yourself be spontaneous and creative if the urge strikes you. Do a crossword, take a walk in the park, read a book, go to the library, start an art project, listen to music, dance together, draw pictures with your kids, play with your pets, start a garden, care for a plant – whatever takes your fancy.
3. **Contribute to your community.** Volunteer your time for a cause or issue that you care about. Help out a neighbour, work in a community garden, start your own garden, or do something nice for a friend. There are many great ways to contribute that can help you feel good about yourself and your place in the world. An effort to improve the lives of others is sure to improve your life, too.
4. **Take care of yourself.** Combine physical activity with a balanced diet to nourish your body and mind and keep you feeling good, inside and out.. Physical and mental health are closely linked; it's easier to feel good about your life if your body feels good. You don't have to go to the gym to exercise – gardening, vacuuming, dancing, walking, and hiking all count. Deal with stress by becoming aware of what activates your stress and how you react. Stress is a part of life and affects people in different ways. It only becomes a problem when it makes you feel uncomfortable or distressed.

A balanced lifestyle can help you manage stress better. If you have trouble winding down, you may find that relaxation breathing, yoga, or meditation can help. Make sure you are getting plenty of sleep. Go to bed at a regular time each day and practice good habits to get better sleep, such as getting off your devices a minimum of two hours before bed. Sleep is a critical factor in how you can handle daily challenges, as it is restorative to your mind and body.

However, feelings of fatigue can still set in if you feel constantly rushed and overwhelmed when you are awake. Allow yourself some unfocused time each day to refresh; for example, let your mind wander, daydream, or simply watch the clouds go by for a while. Take a moment to notice each of your senses each day. Simply 'be' in the moment – feel the sun and wind on your face and notice the air you are breathing. It's easy to be caught up thinking about the past or planning for the future instead of experiencing the present. Practicing mindfulness, by focusing your attention on being in the moment, is a good way to do this. It's OK to add 'do nothing' to your to-do list!

5. **Unplug.** As adults, we need to set the example and get off our devices. We need to connect – nose to nose, belly to belly, and heart to heart – with our children. We wouldn't leave alcohol out for children to consume at all hours of the day. Our devices are another way we seek dopamine hits, and these also need to be managed just like any other addiction.

Start by having meals together and making them digital-free. Set, maintain, and enforce boundaries around technology. Technology time is at an all-time high amongst our children, and happiness levels are at an all-time low – perhaps there is a correlation? A "like" on TikTok is not the same as a hug in real life from someone who cares about you. Find the time to talk to your children – authentic connections are the key factor in decreasing loneliness and helping children feel more supported and optimistic.

The stigma of loneliness tends to prevent people from getting help. This also has to change. If your child is struggling, get them help. One thing I did for my son when he was getting bullied in elementary school was I took him to a counsellor who focused on developing the skills of emotional intelligence.

These include: empathy, kindness, cognitive flexibility, growth mindset, grit, authenticity, self-compassion, gratitude, resilience, mindfulness, self-efficacy, purpose, autonomy, optimism, and integrity. There are bumps along the road of life for everyone, and there are people who can help you. If you don't get the help you need, first off, keep asking until you do.

*Our language has wisely sensed these two sides of man's being alone. It has created the word "loneliness" to express the pain of being alone, and it has created the word "solitude" to express the glory of being alone.*

We are hard-wired to connect with others, it is what gives meaning and purpose to our lives, and without it, there is suffering"

**You are a person of great influence. If you could inspire a movement that would bring the most amount of good to the most amount of people, what would that be? You never know what your idea can trigger.**

This is such a wonderful question. Many ideas come to mind, such as instilling gratitude in people, teaching mindfulness, spreading kindness, pay it forward campaigns, and building self-compassion.

12

As a society, we have taken a significant turn off the main highway in pursuit of money and power over people and relationships. We are disconnected from nature, and as a result, our planet is in a state of environmental disrepair. *A movement I would start is getting back to the community by including a connection with nature.*

As the old African adage goes, “it takes a village to raise a child,” and we have lost that village with our global aspirations. One way to start a community would be to bridge the gap between the two generations that are experiencing loneliness at the highest rates: the elderly and our children. Have teenagers connect to an elderly person who is in a home by working together to plant a community garden or going for a weekly walk in nature.

Other ideas to connect these groups are a games club. This could start with playing Scrabble or cribbage together in person. Or, you could have a sports team adopt an elderly person as a “cheering support” – they bring them out to enjoy watching them play their games. A community that plays together, stays together.

*Dr Alpha Grace, PhD*  
CEO,  
RituelsNature.com