

DESI Doubts

By South Asian Americans For Change

EPISODE 5: FRIENDSHIP AND PLATONIC LOVE

We're not going to lie, building community is hard right now.

It's not a secret that building strong community is important for good mental health (Holt-Lunstad, 2024). After all, humans are social creatures, we do better when we come together. Yet, many of us still struggle to build community. We may even blame ourselves when we feel lonely.

While there are active steps you can take to build community (more on that below), it's important to know **it's not all on you**. There are systemic reasons why it's harder to build community right now:

- **COVID-19 Pandemic:** In the years leading up to 2020, people were already socializing less, and spending more time alone. (Kannan & Veazie, 2022) The pandemic made this even worse (Hwang et al, 2020). These decreasing trends in socialization led the Surgeon General, Dr. Vivek Murthy, to **declare loneliness and isolation an epidemic** in 2023 (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Office of the Surgeon General, 2023).

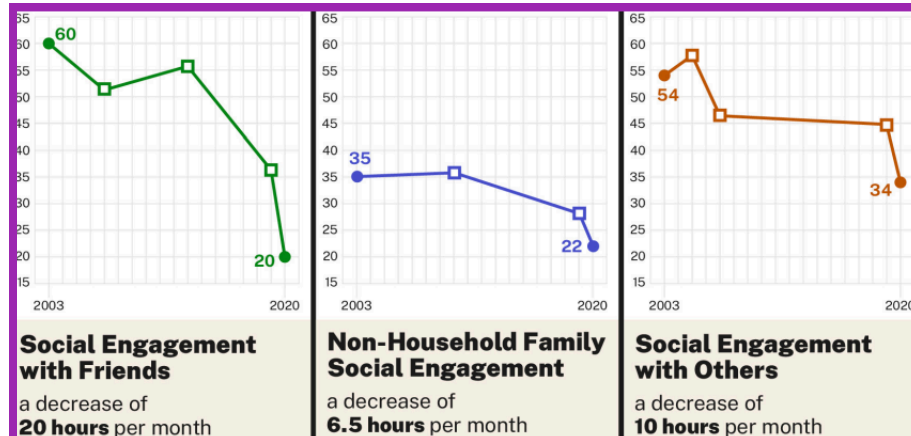


Figure Credit: HHS Rep.

- **Lack of Third Spaces:** Third spaces are physical locations outside of work, school or home that facilitate community (think, libraries, parks, coffee shops, and community centers) (Oldenburg, 1999). These are not new or Western concepts. In South Asian countries our elders found community in mandirs, mosques, markets, or tea houses. These spaces are shutting down for a variety of reasons, including increased rent and online shopping (Finlay et al., 2019). Without them, we lose a central avenue for building community and fostering connection.

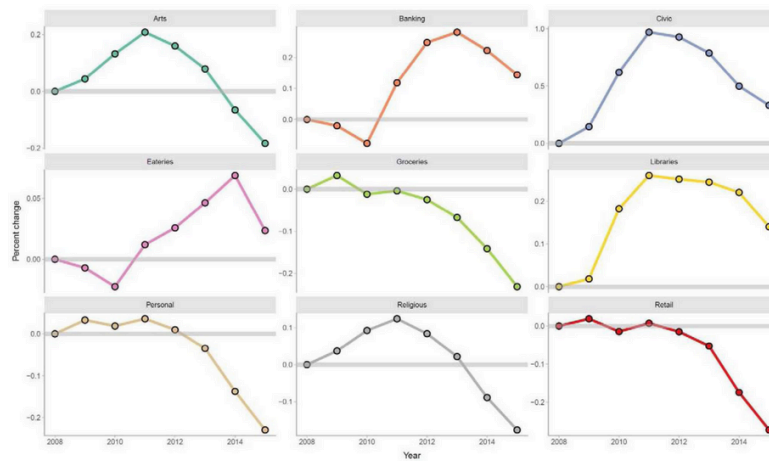


Figure 1.
Percent changes in the number of select establishments from the National Establishment
Time-Series: 2008–2015

Figure Credit: Finlay et al., 2019

- **Technology, Overwork, Fatigue:** A study conducted by Harvard Graduate School of Education suggests that building community is also hard these days because we are too tired and busy, technology is distracting us when we have in-person opportunities to connect, and we lack quality time to build and maintain relationships.

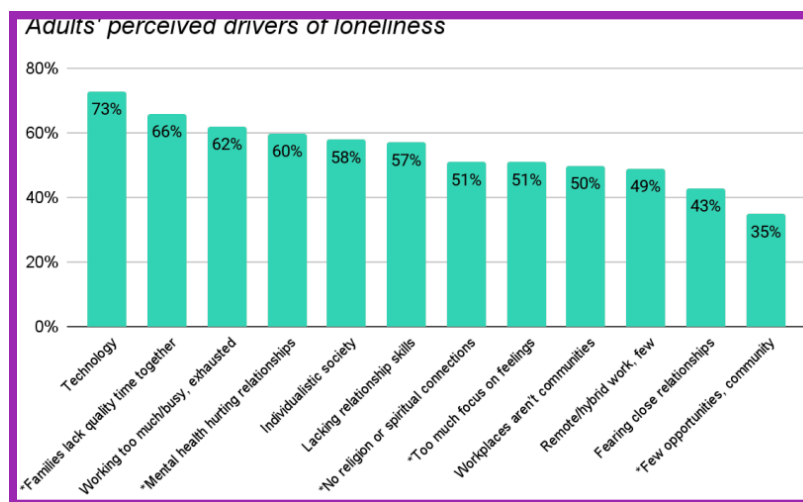


Figure Credit: Finlay et al., 2019

Even though it's hard you can do it, and we promise it's worth it.

Even though it's hard to build community these days, it's still possible. And it's worth it to make the effort because it'll pay off for your health in the long run.

In her work, **Episode 5 Guest, Afsara Zaheed, PhD**, shows that strong social ties are related to better psychological and cognitive health in old age:

- Research shows that **strong social connections** positively impact our **emotional and psychological well-being**. The opposite is also true, lower levels can have a negative impact. A review of 66 different studies on social connectedness revealed that social connection actually *protects* adults from depressive symptoms and disorders (Wickramaratne et al., 2022). The same review also showed that pregnant women with lower social support resulted in increased postpartum depressive symptoms.

- Research shows that individuals that interacted more with *friends* (rather than family) had better global cognition. In older adults specifically, **individuals that interacted less with friends had worse memory** (Sharifian et al., 2019). This is likely because we typically have to actively plan where and when we will meet, and what we will be doing with friends. We are also more likely to do physically or mentally stimulating activities with friends like playing board games or going on hikes, while we're more likely to do passive activities at home with family, like watching TV. These active plans, in turn, engage areas of the brain involved in planning, organization, and memory.
- There is evidence that our **cultures may play a role in how spending time with friends or family shapes brain health**. For example, research among African Americans suggests that having a larger proportion of friends than family in one's social network is related to better cognitive functioning later in life. However, in Non-Hispanic White or Caribbean Hispanic people, the ratio of friends to family in one's social network was not related to cognitive functioning in later life (Sharifian et al., 2019). More research is needed to understand whether these findings differ between family-centered cultures, like South Asians (Kandula et al., 2018) and individual-centered, Western cultures.

Every relationship is not the same, let's define the different types

Most of us don't spend a lot of time defining what we want out of our relationships. But if we want to be more intentional about our connections, it's helpful to know what we're looking for:

Platonic Relationships: meaningful individual friendships that are not romantic or sexual in nature. Our society often prioritizes heterosexual marriages over platonic relationships, but the research shows that platonic relationships are equally important for your wellbeing throughout your life (Policarpo, 2015).

Romantic and Sexual Relationships: Romantic relationships defined by mutual romantic feelings or emotional closeness. Sexual relationships are defined by a mutual desire for sex or physical intimacy. Some LGBTQIA+ models of relationships, like the split attraction model, separate romantic and sexual attraction (Winer, 2024). Some romantic relationships may not include sex and vice versa.

Familial Relationships: These relationships can include our immediate biological families, people who live with us in the home, extended family, or chosen family (Kim & Feyissa, 2021).

Community: While there are overlaps between these individual relationships and community, community is defined as a group with a shared sense of place, social ties, joint action towards mutual goals or perspectives, and differences of identities within the group (Macqueen et al, 2001).

Whether you want to build community or start with one platonic relationship, it's helpful to know your own priorities. Reflecting on the questions below may give you a place to start:

- **Showing up:** What is missing in my current community? If you aren't sure what you need from other people, you can think about how you tend to show up for people in your life (Ex: send check in texts, actively listen, plan fun hang outs). The ways you show up may be the things you need from your community.
- **Identity:** How much does shared experience and identity (Ex: Desi, LGBTQIA+, disability) matter to me in friendships? Am I looking for new perspectives or shared understanding?
- **Support:** What kind of support (Ex: encouragement, distraction, problem solving) do I need in tough moments?
- **Vulnerability:** How vulnerable am I willing to be, and how far outside of my comfort zone am I willing to push myself to find my people?

Think through these questions and then start to brainstorm where you might look for people who might fill these voids:



Ways to build community

Now that you know what you're looking for, you can make a concrete plan to find it. Here are some ideas to get started:

If you need to start small:

- Praise an acquaintance or coworker once a day
- If you work remotely, leave the house at least once a day
- When you're in public, be present- no phones or headphones
- Have lunch in the breakroom at work instead of eating at your desk
- Make conversation with a barista or cashier
- Ask current friends to introduce you to their friends

If you need people who understand your identities or experiences:

- Find an affinity group around a shared identity (like SAAFC!)
- Attend a religious service
- Join political movements
- Attend mutual support groups or listening circles

If you want to find people who share your passions:

- Join a Meetup group for one of your hobbies
- Sign up for a class to learn a new skill
- Join a recreational sports league or watch a game at a sports bar
- Go to a community event, open mic night, or trivia night
- Volunteer in your community
- Join friendship apps or social media groups or servers around shared topics

If you want to bring a group of people together:

- Host a neighbor potluck or block party
- Organize around a local issue in your community
- Host a book club or run club

If you don't have much time to plan hang outs:

- Ask someone to run errands together
- Invite someone to parallel play, or do separate activities in the same space
- Pick a show to watch together

If you want to deepen an existing connection:

- Give an honest answer to the question “How are you?”. Say more than just “Good” or “Fine”
- Being vulnerable can look different for everyone. Challenge yourself to open up about an embarrassing moment, or may share a win you’re really proud of.
- Be curious about the other person’s life. Ask about their job, important people in their life, or passion and really listen without interruption.
- If someone shares a story, art, or a personal experience that moves you, let them know.

If you have kids in your life, you may be thinking about how to help them find friends. According to the **American Academy of Pediatrics (2021)**, adults can help a child’s social development by:

- Fostering play alongside and with others
- Enrolling children in affinity groups, sports, or recreational activities with others
- Modeling repair after a disagreement
- Demonstrating confidence and calm as children leave the family home to explore other environments and relationships

Pick one place to start, and set a due date to keep yourself accountable:

Put yourself out there. Being a little cringey is worth it.

We’re all so afraid of “being cringe” these days, it holds us back from real, vulnerable connection. And we’re not going to lie. You may face some rejection when you open up, and some people might find you cringey. But when you can be yourself with people who get you, it can make everyone feel less alone. Give yourself that chance to find your people. If you’re feeling shame or self-doubt around making friends, review our **resource pack for Episode 4- A Bubble Bath A Day Keeps The Therapist Away**.

Remember, it’s not just about what your community can do for you. You have so much to offer community. It’s worth the time and effort that it takes.

References

American Academy of Pediatrics. (2021). Friends Are Important: Tips for Parents. *Pediatric Patient Education*. https://doi.org/10.1542/peo_document344

Finlay, J., Esposito, M., Kim, M. H., Gomez-Lopez, I., & Clarke, P. (2019). Closure of ‘Third Places’? Exploring Potential Consequences for Collective Health and Wellbeing. *Health & Place*, 60, 102225. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.healthplace.2019.102225>

Holt-Lunstad, J. (2024). Social connection as a critical factor for mental and physical health: Evidence, trends, challenges, and future implications. *World Psychiatry*, 23(3), 312–332. <https://doi.org/10.1002/wps.21224>

Hwang, T.-J., Rabheru, K., Peisah, C., Reichman, W., & Ikeda, M. (2020). Loneliness and social isolation during the COVID-19 pandemic. *International Psychogeriatrics*, 32(10), 1217–1220. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1041610220000988>

Kandula, N. R., Islam, N., Needham, B. L., Ahmed, N., Thorpe, L., Kershaw, K. N., Chen, E., Zakai, N. A., & Kanaya, A. M. (2023). A multilevel framework to investigate cardiovascular health disparities among South Asian immigrants in the United States. *Annals of Epidemiology*, 81, 24-30.e1. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.annepidem.2023.02.012>

Kannan, V. D., & Veazie, P. J. (2022). US trends in social isolation, social engagement, and companionship – nationally and by age, sex, race/ethnicity, family income, and work hours, 2003–2020. *SSM - Population Health*, 21, 101331. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ssmph.2022.101331>

Kim, S., & Feyissa, I. F. (2021). Conceptualizing “Family” and the Role of “Chosen Family” within the LGBTQ+ Refugee Community: A Text Network Graph Analysis. *Healthcare*, 9(4), 369. <https://doi.org/10.3390/healthcare9040369>

MacQueen, K. M., McLellan, E., Metzger, D. S., Kegeles, S., Strauss, R. P., Scotti, R., Blanchard, L., & Robert T Trotter, I. I. (2001). What Is Community? An Evidence-Based Definition for Participatory Public Health. *American Journal of Public Health*, 91(12), 1929. <https://doi.org/10.2105/ajph.91.12.1929>

Sharifian, N., Manly, J. J., Brickman, A. M., & Zahodne, L. B. (2019). Social network characteristics and cognitive functioning in ethnically diverse older adults: The role of network size and composition. *Neuropsychology*, 33(7), 956–963. <https://doi.org/10.1037/neu0000564>

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Office of the Surgeon General. (2023). Our Epidemic of Loneliness and Isolation: The U.S. Surgeon General's Advisory on the Healing Effects of Social Connection and Community.

Wickramaratne. (2022). *Social connectedness as a determinant of mental health: A scoping review*.

Disclaimer

The information in this resource pack is for informational purposes only.

You should not rely on this resource pack or the Desi Doubts podcast episodes as a substitute for medical, mental health advice.

Nor should you rely on this resource pack or the Desi Doubts podcast in choosing a course of treatment.

Seek the advice of your physician or a medical health provider to address any questions or concerns regarding your health.