Loneliness?

Loneliness is a painful anxious feeling. It can lead to chronic illnesses, psychological problems, even premature death. Loneliness is associated with risks similar to smoking 15 cigarettes a day. It has been called the new public health crisis.
Consequences of Loneliness

PHYSICAL
- Heart Disease
- Obesity and Type 2 Diabetes
- High Blood Pressure
- Increase in Mortality

COGNITIVE
- Decline in Problem Solving Skills
- Planning
- Organizing

PSYCHOLOGICAL
- Increase in Depression
- Chronic Anxiety
Three-fourths of Americans experience moderate to high levels of loneliness.  
22% of Americans say they have NO friends.

In 30 years - since the 1980's loneliness rates have more than doubled.

In 2000, Robert D. Putnam wrote “Bowling Alone” discussed the 50-year decline of American Communities and “Social Capital”.

Loneliness across adulthood: Loneliness appears to spike in the 20s, mid-50s and later in life.
The Loneliness Epidemic

Loneliness is a new public health crisis. It can reduce life expectancy up to 15 years.

In one study of 20,000 American adults:

- Almost half report feeling alone (40%) or left out (47%) much of the time.
- 43% felt their relationships are not meaningful and they feel isolated.
- Generation Z (those born after about 1995) were the loneliest generation.
Loneliness and overall well-being are closely interconnected. 

History has shown us the humans are social animals. We are healthier and happier when we have satisfying support and connections.
Why are Americans not connected?

- Many live alone, work from home, have few social involvements.
- Disconnected from communities
- Smaller Families
- Greater geographic dispersion
- Longer life expectancy, health concerns and losses in later life.
- Social media and technology – decrease in face to face interactions, more online relationships.
Broaden and Build theory: Walking Therapy Combating Loneliness
Walking can combat loneliness and poor health: Small steps make a big difference

Walking is one of the best ways to combat stress, improve our overall health, and increase longevity and functional years. It is inexpensive and flexible.

Walking in nature especially decreases negative feelings and increases positive emotion. Walking leads to a “resilience” mindset” which can lead to being better able to cope with stress and anxiety.

Walking enhances cognitive skills.

Group walking – group walking brings people together, leads to more regular walking, and helps reduce loneliness.
People who are physically active have a lower risk of chronic diseases—heart disease, stroke and depression.

More Americans are walking: 62% of the population walk at least 10 minutes a day.

According to the CDC - 15 million more American adults were walking in 2010.

Still most Americans are not getting the recommended 2 ½ hours of exercise per week.
Walking and pets

- Pets can reduce stress, anxiety, and depression, ease loneliness, encourage exercise and playfulness, and even improve cardiovascular health.
- Walking your dog also leads to more social interactions and a less sedentary life improving style.
Where are people supposed to walk:
Walkable communities are important
People need safe places to walk
Building Livable Communities
Programs that combat loneliness, promote walking and social and engagement

AARP Livable Communities and Cities for All People & WHO Consortium of Age Friendly Cities and Communities.
One national and one global program - that help people of all ages stay more active and socially engaged.

- Programs designed to help people of all ages and all backgrounds live integrated healthy active lives.
- These organizations work to support life solutions, transportation, housing, social participation, **livable and walkable outdoor spaces**, communication and information, and other community services.
- The AARP and WHO projects also combat ageism and promote respect for diversity and inclusiveness.

- This program now has dozens of members around the globe.
- It connects cities, towns, and communities that are focused on providing residents of all ages a safe health promoting places to live regardless of age and background.
AARP - Great Places for all people

“AARP Livable Communities supports the efforts of neighborhoods, towns, cities and rural areas to be great places for people of all ages. We believe that communities should provide safe, walkable streets; age-friendly housing and transportation options; access to needed services; and opportunities for residents of all ages to participate in community life.” (AARP, 2019).

The AARP Livable Communities program helps to support the efforts of towns, cities, and communities to develop programs that can promote the health and well-being of all residents - physically and psychologically.
A street that's made safer for an older adult to cross is also safer for a child, a parent pushing a stroller, a bicyclist, a jogger. In other words, a walkable community benefits everyone.

See AARP Website for walking information and tool kit:
WCU AARP and WHO Website

http://agefriendlyworld.org/en/property/westchester/
Video of WCU Community

http://www.wcupa.edu/sciences-mathematics/psychology/agefriendlywestchester/
Loneliness and walking are inversely related; the more people spend walking, especially in nature, the more resilience they build to combat loneliness, cope with stress, and connect with others.

Livable and walkable communities are an important part of creating more widespread awareness of the relationship between an person’s capacity to stay healthy and integrated and the community and cultural context in which they live.

People cannot stay healthy and engaged alone; communities planners, politicians, and service providers and others need to promote awareness, design usable safe walking spaces, and support integration of all community residents.
References and related work

- Psychology Today Blog by Jasmin Tahmaseb McConatha

Books:

