

EPISODE 256: ALISON NAGEL - THE LONELINESS EPIDEMIC

Alison Nagel

I think being alone can feel peaceful. Being lonely feels like something is amiss.

Female Voice

From William & Mary in Williamsburg, Virginia. This is Leadership & Business, produced by the William & Mary School of Business and its MBA program. Offered in four formats: the full-time, the part-time, the online, and executive MBA. For more information, visit wm.edu.

Ken White

Welcome to Leadership & Business, the podcast that brings you the latest and best thinking from today's business leaders from across the world. Sharing strategies, information, and insight that help you become a more effective leader, communicator, and professional. I'm your host, Ken White. Thanks for listening. According to Gallup's State of the Workplace, one in five employees currently feels lonely at work. And the World Health Organization estimates 1 in 6 adults worldwide experiences significant loneliness. The downstream effects of loneliness at work include poor performance, reduced creativity, and higher absenteeism. Loneliness among young people, in particular, Gen Z, has reached an alarming rate. The University of Virginia is home to the Connection Project, which trains over 1000 students each year to manage loneliness. Alison Nagel is a licensed clinical psychologist and professor of psychology at the University of Virginia. She visited William & Mary recently to talk about loneliness and how the Connection Project is equipping students with the tools to feel more connected to others. Before her talk, she sat down with us at the McLeod Tyler Wellness Center on campus. Here's our conversation with Alison Nagel.

Ken White

Well, Alison, thanks so much for joining us today. Before you're going to meet a number of people at William & Mary. I appreciate your time.

Alison Nagel

Yes, thank you so much for having me.

Ken White

So let's start by defining loneliness. What is it?

Alison Nagel

Yeah, so I think of loneliness as, I mean, very simply that kind of gnawing pain or sadness that can show up when there is an unmet need for connection. I think human beings, and we kind of know this science backs this up, are pack animals by our very nature. Right. We need other people in order to survive, in order to thrive. And so when we don't have someone or a community that we can rely on for emotional support, for a sense of well-being and safety, it really shows up both physiologically and in kind of our overall sense of mental wellness. And it feels sometimes like a sharp pain, sometimes like a kind of shadow just lingering in the background. But we can feel it.

Ken White

If someone's introverted, do they still need that connection?

Alison Nagel

Well, unmet needs are really also kind of person-specific. So, you know, for some of us, that need is really big, and the gap between what we need and what we have feels really huge. Sometimes that gap is smaller. I think that can be kind of individual. But we all. We all need authentic connection in our lives.

Ken White

What are some of the causes that have gotten us to this level? I mean, the surgeon general called it an epidemic. You know, what are the causes?

Alison Nagel

Right. I mean, I think that, whew. I could talk for way more than 15 minutes because I think it's such a multifaceted problem. We know that the emotion of loneliness is not intrinsically an issue. We all feel lonely at some point, and it's a little bit like an alarm bell, like, hey, ooh, I'm missing something. I need to seek it out. What has become problematic is now loneliness is really widespread, quite intractable. And I think that has come along with other shifts in society. Right. So this has started being an issue that social scientists and other kinds of professionals started noticing more than 15 years ago. We started understanding the physiological impacts of poor social relationship quality, which actually outpaces cigarette smoking, alcohol abuse, obesity, in terms of predicting early mortality. That was all way pre-COVID. Right. Pre some of these other shifts we've seen in terms of our structure of society, but certainly then COVID didn't help. So the donning of technology, the way that we've all grown up, and then being forced into social isolation for several years, I think all of those things have really impacted the way we seek each other out.

Ken White

Technology the main driver.

Alison Nagel

Yeah. The, you know, evidence for the causal impact of social media and smartphone use as being the thing that has changed, say, skyrocketing rates of internalizing disorders, anxiety, and depression. That evidence is correlational, and so we don't know for sure. Right. If that is the thing. But certainly, it was a huge change for the way that society has become organized.

Ken White

Yeah.

Alison Nagel

Right.

Ken White

What's the difference between loneliness and being alone?

Alison Nagel

Good question. I think being alone can feel peaceful. Being lonely feels like something is amiss.

Ken White

Yeah. Being alone. That's why people hike to be alone. Right. That's why they go off on the run to be alone and clear their head. Wow, that's so interesting. Something amiss when they're lonely. Wow. How did you get into this?

Alison Nagel

Well, I started back when I was getting my PhD in clinical psychology, working with Joe Allen, who is the founder of the program I now am the director of. And really, it was because I've always understood people as being kind of just the why behind everything. Right. Why I wake up in the morning, why I want to do this work. I, on a personal note, have two children, one of whom has pretty profound disabilities, and it really personalized the mission of creating a world where people can lead with kindness and compassion and be met with the same in return. I just really wanted to help people access that part of themselves because I think it's in us.

Ken White

So what's the Connection Project?

Alison Nagel

So the Connection Project is a social belongingness intervention that Joe Allen, who I just mentioned, developed back when I was a little baby grad student. And I've been

working on it ever since. I've had the privilege of kind of growing alongside it and helping it to grow. We take groups of students, six to ten students, and put them together with two co-facilitators who are also students, students who we train and supervise. And we lead these small groups through a 12-session intervention where every session focuses on different conversations around what relationships mean to us, who we are, what we value, what we need from others, how we communicate, how we manage conflict. And we do it in a way that is hopefully fun enough and engaging enough that the goal is for everyone in that room to let down their guard a little bit and have an experience of going, oh wow, we all have a lot more in common than I thought, that's, that's really cool. And we know that in that experience, we have evaluated the program, and it reduces loneliness, it reduces depressive symptoms, it enhances a sense of belongingness. And so the, the benefits are, are really quite profound.

Ken White

So this isn't a group that you intend to stay together and hang out for the rest of their lives?

Alison Nagel

No, although sometimes that happens, and that's adorable. We've had some, some BFFs, some very cute romances come out. You know, I found my roommate, my best friend for life. But oftentimes these are people who are strangers walking in the room and leave, and continue to be friendly faces that they can leave to on their college campus. And that the ripple effect means that it feeds into the way each group member perceives themselves in relation to others, that it changes their relationships that are outstanding from, with, you know, within the group, but also outside of the group that they'll continue to have for the rest of their lives.

Ken White

So a student who steps up and says, I'd like to be a part of this is not feeling necessarily lonely.

Alison Nagel

No, not necessarily. I think a lot of students join because we offer credit, and that's why a lot of students take classes. Yeah, I think a lot of students kind of just underneath that are curious about what this means and what it would look and feel like. And some students join because they know they need connection. Right. They feel that unmet need. But oftentimes it really is just kind of a, oh, I wonder what this will be about.

Ken White

What are some of the skills they take away?

Alison Nagel

Yeah. So we know that students report feeling like they have a much better understanding of themselves and understanding of others. They often talk about kind of the the power of hearing other stories and that sense of awareness that everyone you meet has a story that has shaped them and has changed the way they're showing up in the world. And they kind of carry that wisdom that feels then very salient in that moment with them outside of the group. It helps them be more aware of how they engage in relationships. So how do they? What are their expectations of others? How do they tend to communicate those expectations? What do they do when it gets hard or uncomfortable? And so a lot of those conversations come up, then I also think we end the groups with what's called a strength bombardment exercise, which is where really everyone just says really nice stuff about each other. And it is the cutest. And that moment of feeling liked for who you are, I think, is really important for students.

Ken White

We'll continue our discussion with Alison Nagel in just a minute. Our podcast is brought to you by the William & Mary School of Business. When it comes to choosing an MBA program, there's much to consider. The curriculum, fit, cost, quality, and the time it takes to earn your MBA. Well, one major component is the learning environment. And for that, the William & Mary MBA program cannot be beat. For the fourth year in a row, Bloomberg Business Week has ranked the William & Mary MBA program number one in America for learning. The faculty are simply outstanding, and the students support one another inside and outside the classroom. If you're thinking about pursuing an MBA, choose a program in which you'll learn. One that transforms you and takes you to the next level and beyond. Check out the MBA program at William & Mary at wm.edu. Now back to our conversation with Alison Nagel.

Ken White

Some of the numbers are really dramatic when we hear how many people feel lonely. I mean, you're at the University of Virginia. You're visiting here at William & Mary. Two incredibly vibrant campuses with smart, phenomenal students. And it's hard to say, how can someone be lonely? How can they? How's that happening?

Alison Nagel

Right? I mean, I think increasingly students are starting lonely. And I mentioned before, we have these staggering rates of anxiety among young people. So Gen Z, most of whom makes up our current campus communities, they have the highest levels of loneliness of any age cohort in the United States. And so they're coming lonely. And then again, the way that we seek out relationships and our comfort with discomfort has really evolved and in maybe a way that doesn't help us. So there is something just fundamentally uncomfy about putting yourself out there in order to make real new connections. Right?

Ken White

Yeah.

Alison Nagel

And assuming that you don't come with all of your friends from high school or your entire community, and you arrive on campus, you know, with maybe no one or maybe just one or two other people, that's really what you're tasked with. And when there are our own thoughts or kind of structural norms that make it very easy to get in our own way, then it's, that's kind of a self-perpetuating cycle.

Ken White

Yeah. I think we might forget people generally do go to college alone. Right. That's the whole point. You don't know anybody.

Alison Nagel

Absolutely.

Ken White

That's a lot of work to fit into the dorm or fit in wherever. Yeah. Wow. What do you, what do you recommend? We've many managers and leaders listening, and they're thinking about their workplace. What can they do to help?

Alison Nagel

Yeah. Such a good question. So, you know, increasingly we are finding that managers and hiring managers are struggling a little bit with understanding how to help young adults fresh out of college settle into their role in a way that works for everyone. Right. So there's, you know, really high number. I think it's like over 60% of hiring managers regret hiring a Gen Z worker or release them within six months. And the most common, least cited reason is identifying relationship or communication issues among Gen Z workers. Right. But, but there's really, it's not just one person's problem, and it's not just one generation's problem. This is our future. These are our young people. They're taken, they're taken over, and they're supposed to; we want them to. And so I think from the perspective of a hiring manager or a manager, a boss, being able to tap into their own humanity to create authentic connection, to allow for their new hires to be comfortable and to build strong relationships, you have to model that work and you have to kind of show what it is that, that you're looking for. And you have to be patient and clear and have good, healthy boundaries.

Ken White

Yeah. And if you have one of those teams where people feel connected, wow. They'll stay, they'll do great work.

Alison Nagel

Absolutely.

Ken White

Obviously, so today you're going to do some workshops. You're going to meet with a number of people from William & Mary. What's your day look like? What will you be doing?

Alison Nagel

I'm talking so much. I'm giving four presentations today, two of which are kind of the introduction to the Connection Project for a general audience or whoever's interested. One that focuses a bit more on the curriculum, how we built it, and how to implement it, and one focused on the research that we've conducted on the Connection Project, both in its evaluation, but also just things we've been interested in and potential ideas, really just getting faculty or researchers interested in what they could do with it.

Ken White

And you have some other schools that are interested?

Alison Nagel

Yes. So we've already worked with and are really well established at Georgetown and Virginia Tech. They've kind of taken this program and made it their own and run with it. They're doing amazing work, and this year are working with Arizona State and Penn State. They're in their first kind of early stages of rollout.

Ken White

Yeah. Fantastic. Last question. Advice for people who are lonely. They're realizing, yeah, I'm unhappy, I am lonely. I have that unmet need for connection. What do I do?

Alison Nagel

Yeah. So I think one thing that helps me, and I think helps people, is to understand that our brains were really designed and evolved to keep us safe, not to keep us happy. And so our brain perceives threat and tells us to run away from it, but it actually can't tell the difference between an emotional threat and a bear in the woods chasing us. And so helping you understand that your brain is tricking you a little bit because there is fear, but that fear is normal, and we have a bias. We think that people won't like us more than they than is typically true. We think that initiating kind of taking that first step, people think poorly of us. But actually, research shows the opposite, that people really appreciate it. It's way more successful way more often than your brain is trying to tell you. And it's worth it.

Ken White

That's our conversation with Alison Nagel and that's it for this episode of Leadership & Business. Our podcast is brought to you by the William & Mary School of Business, home of the MBA program, offered in four formats: the full-time, the part-time, the online, and the executive MBA. Check out the William & Mary MBA program at wm.edu. Thanks to our guest, Alison Nagel, and thanks to you for joining us. I'm Ken White, wishing you a safe, happy, and productive week ahead.

Female Voice

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