

Your social feed hides a loneliness trap, and the people you barely know are at the center

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A first-of-its-kind study of U.S. adults suggests that all of those strangers you're friends with on social media are not helping you to feel less lonely. Credit: Oregon State University

A first-of-its-kind study of U.S. adults suggests that all of those strangers you're friends with on social media are not helping you to feel less lonely. On the contrary, social media connection with people you don't know in person is associated with increased loneliness, according to scientists at Oregon State University.

In a nationally representative study of more than 1,500 adults ages 30–70, connecting online with people you actually do know was not linked with greater loneliness, but neither was it associated with decreased loneliness.

Key findings on loneliness and health

The findings suggest that "people experiencing loneliness may wish to critically examine their interactions with strangers on social media and to prioritize in-person connections over social media ones, even when those social media connections are considered close," study leader Brian Primack said.

The research was published in *Public Health Reports*. The agency developed a deep interest in loneliness following the 2023 [report on the nation's loneliness epidemic](#) by then [Surgeon General](#) Vivek Murthy, said Primack, a professor in OSU's College of Health.

The surgeon general's report notes that even before COVID-19, about half of American adults reported measurable levels of loneliness, and that lacking connection brings health risks on par with smoking.

People who often feel lonely are more than twice as likely to develop depression. They also face a 29% increased risk of [heart disease](#); 32% increased risk of stroke; 50% increased risk of developing dementia (for older adults); and greater than 60% chance of premature death.

Filling gaps in social media research

The research by Primack, two OSU faculty colleagues and two graduate students represents a step toward filling a knowledge hole regarding social media's role in loneliness. Most prior studies, Primack said, have looked at teens and young adults, whereas this study examines adults in midlife and later adulthood.

"This [gap in the literature](#) is important because people who aren't teens or young adults comprise 75% of the U.S. population. These people are heavily exposed to social media, and many of the downstream health impacts of loneliness grow increasingly severe as adulthood progresses," Primack said.

The researchers note that overall, about 35% of the study group's social media contacts were people they had never met in person. They suspect that one reason interacting with "strangers" on social media is associated with loneliness is because of social media's high potential for facilitating misinterpretation.

"We know that social media interactions can result in [idealization](#) of other people's friendships with each other, which can exacerbate the effects of social comparison," said study co-author Jessica Gorman. "This idealization is possibly stronger when those friendships involve people you've never met because there is no personal experience to counter that idealization."

How the study was conducted

Research assistant professor Dawn Hyosin Kim and graduate students Geethika Koneru and Memuna Aslam also contributed to the research, which took place in summer 2023 and was supported by the National

Institutes of Health. Study participants reported their personal (non-business) engagement with 10 social media platforms: Facebook, X, Reddit, YouTube, LinkedIn, Instagram, TikTok, Snapchat, Pinterest and WhatsApp.

The project builds on earlier work by Primack and Gorman linking loneliness to the [amount and frequency of social media use](#) and adds to a growing body of scholarship by OSU researchers exploring [loneliness' link](#) to conditions such as [insomnia](#) and [nightmares](#).

More information: Closeness of Social Media Contacts and Loneliness among U.S. Adults: A Nationally-Representative Study, *Public Health Reports* (2026).

Provided by Oregon State University

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