

How much social time do we need?

Background

Since the 1980's, North Americans have gotten less face-to-face social time with others. Simultaneously, the prevalence of loneliness has dramatically increased (Twenge et al., [2019](#)). While the link between less in-person social interaction and loneliness has strong face validity, it is unclear how much social interaction a person needs in order to not feel lonely.

Purpose

The purpose of this brief is to examine how much social time individuals should get to avoid loneliness. In exploring this question, we recognize that there may be considerable personal variation in preferences and needs for social interaction. Such biological variation is normal: just as individuals vary with respect to caloric and nutritional needs, the need for social stimulation also differs from person to person.

Evidence from Existing Studies

To our knowledge, few studies have explicitly examined how much social time is needed to avoid loneliness. Among the most well-known statistics, Gallup reports that people need to spend at least 3 hours per day socializing – with additional benefits of increasing social time accrued even as individuals approach spending 60% of their waking hours in social situations (Gallup, [2011](#); Crabtree et al., [2011](#)). Another study by Luo et al. ([2022](#)) showed that among older adults, more social interactions per day is associated with less loneliness and more positive affect. However, they reported that this effect peaked when participants engaged in 2-3 times their typical level of social interaction. While most studies don't provide explicit estimates, there are many that laude the benefits of a robust social life. For example, Zhang et al. ([2018](#)) report that more frequent social engagement results in significantly lower levels of loneliness. Seifert et al. ([2020](#)) report that daily contact with neighbours is associated with less loneliness. Hall et al. ([2021](#)) also report that more routine social interactions are associated with better subjective wellbeing and less social energy expenditure.

Descriptive data is also available describing how much time people tend to spend socializing. While the amount of time people spend socializing is not necessarily equal to how much social time people want or need, rational choice models of behavior would suggest that people, on average, consume about as much social time as they need. With this in mind, cross-national studies suggest that individuals get about 1 hour of social interaction per day or 6 hours per week (Bureau of Labour Statistics, [2021](#); OECD, [2020](#)). As mentioned at the outset of this brief, Twenge et al. ([2019](#)) reports that this number reflects a significant decline since the 1980's when individuals spent approximately 13 hours per week socializing with their friends. Similarly Dunbar ([1998](#)) reports that average social time in tribal and pastoralist societies is around 24.5 hours per week. As such, some caution must be taken in relying on these estimates as individuals may be facing increased barriers to accruing the time they need with others.

In addition to these descriptive estimates and those showing a protective effect against loneliness, various studies have examined the role of social time in helping individuals to build relationships. These studies provide a mechanism by which increased social time may improve health and wellbeing. For example, Hall et al. (2018) reports that individuals who spend more time together experience greater closeness. In particular, they find that it takes approximately 94 hours for someone to transition from an acquaintance to a casual friend, 164 hours to transition to being a regular friend, and around 219 hours to become a good or best friend. While this does not explicitly provide insight into how much social time one needs on a regular basis, it does demonstrate that in order to have a healthy social network, individuals must invest time in their friendships. This logic underlies the assumption that individuals must regularly engage with others in order to avoid the onset and perpetuation of loneliness.

Other authors have similarly reasoned that regular contact is required for the maintenance of relationships. Roberts and Dunbar (2011) found that time since last social contact predicted emotional closeness within social networks. In fact, among those with greatest emotional closeness, the average number of days since last contact was less than three. Rico-Uribe et al. (2016) also reports that frequency of contact (rather than absolute network size) predicts health outcomes and that this effect largely operates by improving the quality of relationships with one's social network. Among older adults, Zhaoyang et al. (2021) showed that more frequent social interaction was associated with greater cognitive performance and Ballard et al. (2022) suggested that as little as 1 hour per day of social interaction is enough to improve quality of life among seniors in care-settings.

Case Study: Changing Needs for Quantity and Quality of Social Time

Carmichael et al.'s (2015) hypothesized that the quantity and quality of social activity time in early adulthood (20s and 30s) is correlated to levels of social connection and psychological outcomes midlife (age 50). To test their hypothesis, they recruited 129 middle-aged adults (age 48-52 years) for a 30-year prospective study. These participants provided diary data that documented social activity (longer than 10 minutes) during their undergraduate years (age 18-22). A subset (n = 85) of these participants also provided diary data from age 27 to 31. Results of these analyses indicated that participants who reported higher quantities of socializing in their 20s were better socially integrated and had better quality friendships at midlife – this suggests that time spent socializing is critical for relationship development and maintenance. Additionally, higher quality interactions throughout participants' 20s predicted high quality interactions in their 30s, which were correlated to better psychological outcomes at midlife. Taken together, this study indicates that prioritizing both quantity and quality of social interactions is critical to an individual's health and wellbeing.

Analyses from the Canadian Social Connection Survey

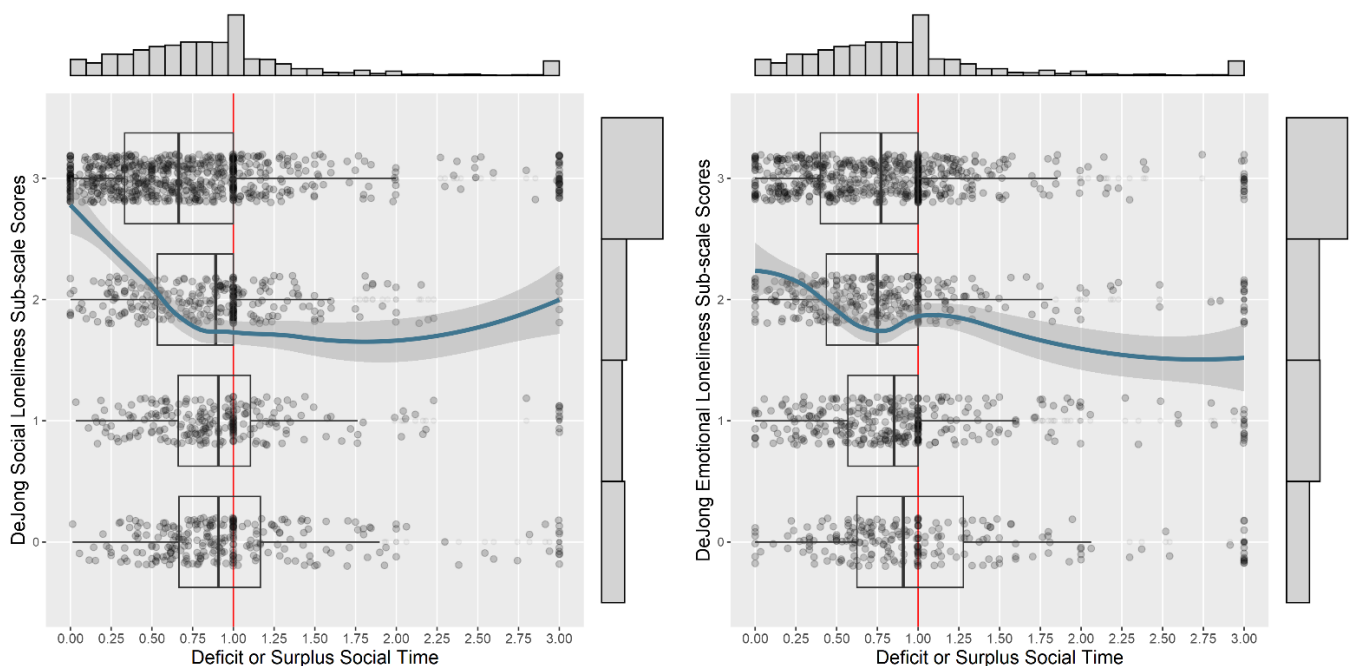
Using data from the 2022 Canadian Social Connection Survey, we find that the median person wants to spend about 5 hours (Q1, Q3 = 3,12) socializing with family and 5 hours (Q1, Q3 = 3,10) socializing with friends. When considering the desired amount of time with any social network contact (e.g., family, friends, coworkers and classmates, acquaintances, neighbours, and strangers) individuals report wanting a median of 14 hours per week socializing others



(Q1, Q3 = 6, 32). When calculating the deficit or surplus amount of social time someone gets, we find that people are deficient an average of 4 hours (Q1, Q3 = -10, 1) per week and only get 78% (Q1, Q3 = 47%, 107%) of the social time they want.

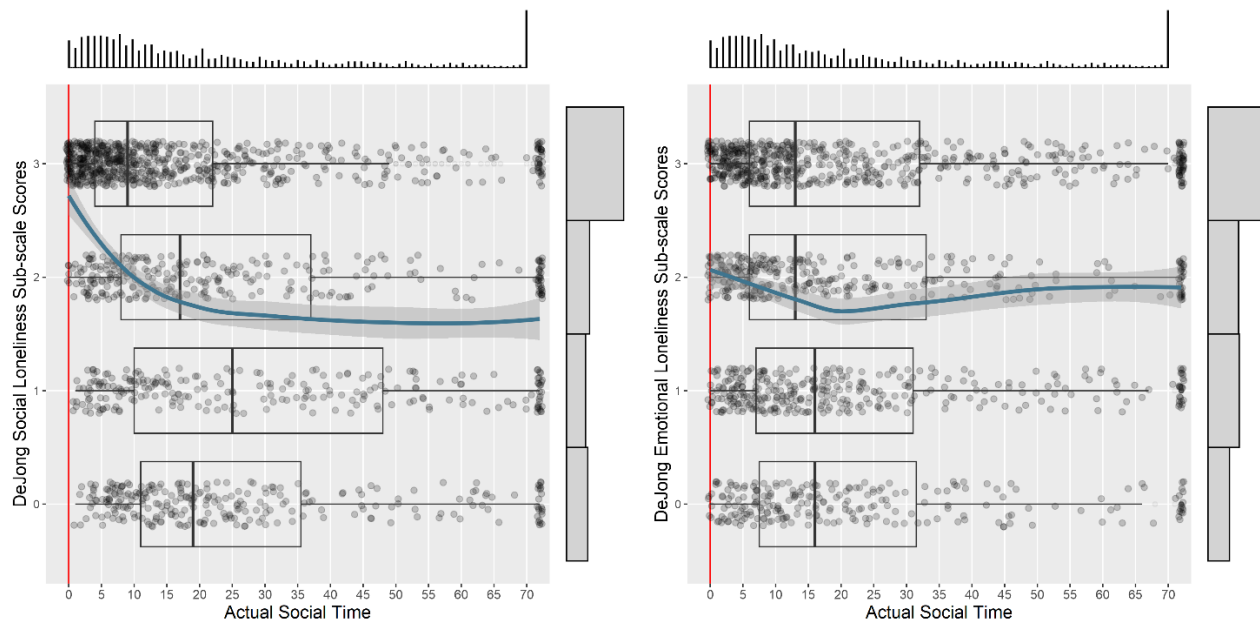
In multivariable regression models controlling for demographic factors and big five personality traits (including extraversion), the relative surplus or deficit number of hours spent socializing as well as the absolute number of hours spent socializing were important for preventing social loneliness (though only the relative surplus or deficit predicted emotional loneliness). This suggests that meeting individual needs, as well as increasing the absolute amount of social time one gets are both important to improving social wellbeing. However, it appears that the effects operate through different mechanisms (i.e., emotional vs. social loneliness).

Comparing levels of emotional and social loneliness across levels of deficit or surplus social time, we find that as individuals approach meeting 100% of their social time preference they see the greatest drops in loneliness – suggesting that the amount of time people want to spend with others is an adequate proxy for social need. While continued declines in social loneliness are seen as individuals get up to a 300% surplus in social time, levels of emotional loneliness begin to increase at that point.



In terms of the total number of hours per week needed to minimize risk for emotional and social loneliness, we find that after about 20 hours per week, there is little decrease in social loneliness and even some increase in emotional loneliness. Cut point analyses seeking to identify a lower diagnostic limit for emotional and social loneliness indicate that individuals should get at least 9 hours (95% CI: 7-16) of social time per week to avoid emotional loneliness and at least 11 hours (95% CI: 6-12) per week to avoid social loneliness.





Discussion

The weight of existing evidence suggests that time spent socializing with others on a regular basis is important for building and maintaining relationships that buttress a person against experiences of loneliness. While the exact number of hours an individual needs to prevent loneliness is difficult to pinpoint (and likely varies from person to person), our analyses suggest that somewhere around one to two hours per day (or 12 hours per week) – is needed to avoid emotional and social loneliness and maximize the benefits of social interaction. To account for individual variations in social need, we suggest that individuals should strive to accrue approximately 75% of the social time they hope for on a weekly basis. Of course, while time with others is important, it is also evident that individuals need breaks from social interactions. According to Luo et al. (2022) periods of solitude provide an opportunity to regain social energy. As such, it should be recognized that there is also an upper limit at which increased social time begins to negatively impact an individual. In our analyses, the benefits of increased social time are diminished as individuals exceed 20 to 25 hours of social time per week or approach twice their preferred number of weekly hours.

Conclusion

Based on the available evidence and our analyses of the Canadian Social Connection Survey, we recommend policies and programs that support regular and frequent social interactions between individuals such that they are able to meet their individual social health needs. In recommending a specific number of hours that individuals should strive for, we suggest that 1 to 3 hours of social interaction per day (7-21 hours per week) may be optimal. However, we know that this may vary considerably across individuals and therefore recommend that people should strive to get approximately 75% of the social time they feel they need.

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