

Lifestyle With Dr. Z



Brian Zehnder, MD

“Dr. Z is a practicing Family Physician in Utah. His mission is to encourage and give hope in the lives of others. An entrepreneur, he developed and owns medical clinics, office buildings, and multifamily dwellings. He is committed to Wellness and forward-thinking complimentary medicine, personally enjoying an ultramarathon lifestyle and focus for optimal health.”

One of Sentierre’s Wellbeing pillars, mental and emotional health has become increasingly important for people of all ages.

What is our fastest-growing public health problem?

Heart disease? Obesity? Tobacco use? Opioids?

Our former surgeon general, Vivek Murthy, says it is loneliness. “During my years caring for patients, the most common pathology I saw was not heart disease or diabetes, it was loneliness,” Murthy wrote in the Harvard Business Review in 2017.



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We’ve thought of loneliness as a social problem. Now, we find that it’s not just bad for our cities, it’s a real health and safety threat.

Weak social connections can shorten a person’s life by 15 years — roughly the same as smoking 15 cigarettes per day, noted a groundbreaking BYU study in 2010. Research from the American Psychological Association, looking at over 70 studies and 3.4 million people, found that social isolation can be more harmful to our health than obesity. For some, it can kill.

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According to an AARP survey, more than 42.6 million adults over 45 suffer from chronic loneliness. More than a quarter of the United States population lives alone, and more than half are unmarried. We are seeing the same trends in Utah. Living alone doesn't mean you aren't connected per se. I enjoy running in the Wasatch Mountains nearly every day. But the studies are showing linkage, just like we know that people who are overweight tend to have more health problems, like diabetes.

Finally, and sadly, we're finding that loneliness has an effect on health and safety in our schools. Young people compare themselves to others on social media and may feel ugly and unpopular. Others may feel lonely if they're struggling to fit in after moving into new homes or schools, falling out with friends or losing someone close to them. As more of our youth are isolated, we see higher rates of suicide all over America. Suicide is violence to oneself; shootings in schools are violence to others.

What help is available?

For older Utahns, the AARP [Connect2Affect](#) tool can help. Simply take an online survey, and the results can let you know your risk and direct you to resources in your zip code.

For our youth, the [Hope Squads](#) is a peer-to-peer program to prevent youth suicide that is now in over 300 Utah schools. Students are trained to recognize warning signs in depressed or suicidal peers, and they can report those signs to an adult.

The [SafeUT Crisis Text and Tip Line](#) is a statewide service that provides real-time crisis intervention to youth through texting and a confidential tip program — right from your smartphone.

What can you do today?

If we look at social interaction as a habit, we will find that we are not only in better shape, but also in a healthier community. As we exercise, eat our veggies and refrain from smoking, so too can we bring a meal for an elderly neighbor, call a dear friend or take the neighborhood kids on a hike. Reaching out heals and deepens relationships. We are wired for strong bonds with others. I suspect it's somehow part of our DNA.

Let's find ways to connect. Our lives and our community depend on it.

