Alone Together: Navigating Loneliness in Education (w/ Jillian Racoosin) *(Transcript)*

Educator Wellness Podcast
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[PODCAST INTRO] 0:01 | Dr. Kari Vogelgesang:

Hello everyone. I'm Kari Vogelgesang, your host of the Educator Wellness Podcast. Here to share and promote my life's work and passion, all things wellness. But not just any wellness. We're here to discuss wellness specifically as it pertains to educators. I am a former elementary school teacher and I am passionate about helping educators see wellness in a very different way.

This podcast is dedicated to educators across the globe, creating a space for us to come together in an authentic and therapeutic way, sharing our stories, our hopes, our joys, our fears, our sorrows, and hopefully creating some space to share some laughter with one another as well in our journey to learn how to support one another, to prioritize wellness and enhance our overall well-being.

Please join me as we talk with nationally recognized experts to guide us on a transformative journey of self-discovery, helping us to embrace and weave all dimensions of wellness into the fabric of both our personal and professional lives.

Also, please note that the opinions and perspectives that are shared on this podcast do not necessarily represent those at the Scanlan Center for School Mental Health, or the University of Iowa.

[EPISODE INTRO] 1:12 | Kari Vogelgesang:

Welcome to the Scanlan Center for School Mental Health, Educator Wellness Podcast. I'm your host, Dr. Kari Vogelgesang. In this exciting episode, we're going to dive deep into the pressing issues of loneliness and social isolation with our guest Jillian Racoosin. Join us as we explore how these phenomena impact our well-being, and discover strategies to foster connection and improve mental health.

Jillian comes to us today as the executive director of the Coalition to End Social Isolation and Loneliness. In her role, Jillian is responsible for leading the direction of the coalition's operations and programs, including advancing social connection research and innovation. Jillian regularly speaks to national audiences about the crisis of social isolation and loneliness in the United States, and is a contributor to the U.S. Surgeon General's Advisory on loneliness and the healing power of connection.

Jillian has been featured in a variety of media outlets, including The Messenger, Atlanta Business Chronicle, and Vanity Fair. Her passion for health promotion began at Tulane University's School of Public Health and Tropical Medicine and continued to flourish at Columbia University Mailman School of Public Health, where she received her master's degree. Jillian is very passionate, as you will see, about projects that foster healthy behaviors within communities and populations and envisions a more inclusive future with universal access to the support needed to be socially engaged in society. Welcome, everyone. I'm excited for you all to join today's conversation.

Welcome Jillian to the Scanlan Center for School Mental Health, Educator Wellness Podcast. We're so happy to have you here with us today, and this is a conversation that I've been wanting to have for quite a long time. If we're going to talk all things loneliness, actually, today... or maybe we should do it, reframe it in more of a positive way. I like your social connection. I think maybe we should focus more on that. Yeah, we build strong social connection. So Jillian, welcome, welcome, welcome. We're so happy to have you.

3:43 | Jillian Racoosin:

Thank you so much. Really appreciate you having me here and appreciate you focusing on this important topic.

3:50 | Dr. Kari Vogelgesang:

Yeah, it is an important one, and I think it's even particularly important for educators right now. I have often thought, even before COVID, that it's really easy for educators to just kind of go to their classroom and shut their door and teach. And sometimes you're blessed with a really strong team, so a really strong third grade team of teachers or your English team of teachers in high school or whatever, but that doesn't always happen for people, and so you're kind of in isolation all day, except with teenagers or children, which can also feel very lonely sometimes.

So, I've been thinking about this a lot with educators and the impact that loneliness has on our lives and on our health. And so I'm wondering if maybe we can just start there in discussing impact on well-being and learning. So for example, what are some of the key ways in which loneliness and social isolation can impact the well-being and even academic performance of a person?

5:01 | Jillian Racoosin:

Yeah, absolutely. Well, thank you for the question, and always like to take a step back and do a little terminology definitions, just to make sure we're all talking about the same thing because we talk a lot about loneliness and social isolation in our work. Loneliness is really that subjective measure or that subjective feeling, the discrepancy between the relationships that you wish or you want to have in your life and what you feel like you actually do have. So, that missing link right between what you wish you could have in terms of high quality relationships and what you feel like you do have.

And then social isolation is really that objective measure. So, often thinking about the count of social relationships that you have in your life, maybe the frequency of which you're connecting with others, the number of social groups or other organizations that you might be a part of that could bring you into the fold with others. And so both of these things are really critical. And as we think about the age demographics as well, we know loneliness is particularly impacting young people. And we know in 2020, they did a study looking at Gen Z, Millennials and older, and Gen Z were reporting the loneliest, and it was almost 79% were reporting lonely, which is really staggering and-

6:25 | Dr. Kari Vogelgesang:

What? You're kidding me.

6:27 | Jillian Racoosin:

Yes.

6:28 | Dr. Kari Vogelgesang:

So, they're not socially isolated, necessarily. They're reporting-

6:31 | Jillian Racoosin:

They could be.

6: 33 | Dr. Kari Vogelgesang:

... like a desire to have a different type of connection with someone.

6:38 | Jillian Racoosin:

Yeah, and this particular study just looked at loneliness. So, we don't know exactly social isolation. We have seen with other studies that we see social isolation a little bit more with older adults, especially home-bound or those that may not be able to engage as proactively or as much as they wish that they could in society, or perhaps that the conditions of communities are keeping them from others, whether it be the way that the built environment has been set up or transportation or other sort of access to relationship.

But we know for young people that there is this discrepancy and they are feeling it, and they're feeling lonely and alone, and this has real impact on their health and well-being. On their mental health, they're at higher risk for mental health disorders, such as depression, anxiety and sleep disorders, et cetera, as well as physical. We've seen that

chronic isolation loneliness can lead to increased risk of mortality and morbidity of chronic diseases. And so this is really serious, especially as we're thinking about these chronic feelings and conditions over time.

As it relates to academic performance, we know that loneliness can lead school-aged youth to perform poorly in the classroom. So, lower academic achievement and engagement, boredom, lower levels of academic self-belief in their self-efficacy in order for them to perform, and even greater school dissatisfaction. And unfortunately, we're seeing even with disadvantaged youth in particular, they've been found to have higher levels of loneliness, which is further creating disparity in the classroom.

8:21 | Dr. Kari Vogelgesang:

I think this is really interesting too, just because of the hot topic of conversation related to social media in our world in general, but particularly in the field of education and how much time, not only students are spending on their phones, but adults as well. And so it's interesting that we're all so connected and in tune with all these different people and players and characters within our social media platform, and yet, of course what that transforms into or translates into is loneliness on our end. But it's like we can't stop ourselves from doing it. Does that make sense?

9:07 | Jillian Racoosin:

Yeah. It's a crazy dichotomy where we've never been more connected in our lives, right? Yet we still feel this inherent disconnection. And this is where we go back to thinking about the terminology and social connection, which good news, there's something to help us. Social connection is a protective factor. It can help us live longer lives, happier lives, more fulfilled lives.

And when we think about social connection, Dr. Julianne Holt-Lunstad looks at it in three, really, pillars within it or three pieces that make up social connection. The first being structure, and the structure is really going back to that count or the social isolation piece of it where, "How many relationships do I have? What does my social network look like objectively?" And then the function is, "What are those connections and relationships doing for me and what am I doing for them? Is there mentorship? Is there peer support? Is there other type of function that those relationships are serving?"

And then the last piece is super important: quality. So, you could have many relationships in your life, but if they are poor quality, then they're really going to impact the way that you feel about your social connectedness and your belonging. When we think about the mass connections that we have through our phones and digital lives, we maybe want to even question, "What is the function of those relationships? What is the quality? Are they serving us in a positive way?"

And so those are just some of the things that we think about, especially as we go back to sort of the drivers of disconnection and seeing how technology could have played a role.

10:44 | Dr. Kari Vogelgesang:

Yeah. Not that this is all about me, but it is an example. When you said that about the relationships, about having relationships with people and how sometimes that makes you feel even more lonely in some relationships. I mean, that just hit so hard for me.

I think we can probably all think of a time when you've been friends with somebody or been in partnership with somebody in some way, and it was not good for you, it was not healthy for you for various reasons. And once you got out of that relationship, you realized and you took 10 steps back. Sometimes you realize that, "Oh my gosh, I never felt more lonely in my life than I did when I was in a relationship with that person." And that's just crazy, too. That's that dichotomy, I guess, that you were kind of describing, that really thinking through and examining the types of relationships that we have with technology and with people in our lives is so critically important. Yeah.

11:50 | Jillian Racoosin:

Absolutely, completely agree. And I say this with caution, technology is not all bad. It does help us in a lot of ways. And so we think about the promise and peril and how can we better equip young people and educators to utilize technology in a healthy way, and how can we start to think about even the way we teach in school, what we're teaching the content is, what if we had curriculum around digital literacy, and really how to be a healthy digital citizen.

I think that there are some programs that are already starting to do this work and they're doing amazing job, but I'd love to see it in every school.

12:35 | Dr. Kari Vogelgesang:

Yeah, I do know that schools are really trying hard to branch this kind of teaching this curriculum up across the globe, really. Even when we do work with partners in other parts of the world, then they're running into the same issues with it and having to address it in schools as well. And it needs to be addressed in home, in our communities. I mean, it needs to be something that we are all doing together, for sure.

There's this other piece of loneliness that I wanted to talk about with you that I think is interesting because in my experience, loneliness and/or social isolation, it oftentimes carries a stigma with it. People are embarrassed about it. They're embarrassed that they feel lonely or that they don't have what they see as enough friends or the type of friendships that they have, I guess, envisioned for themselves. And how can we work to... First of all, do you see that too in this work? And if yes, how can we work to de-stigmatize these experiences with people in our communities?

13:48 | Jillian Racoosin:

Absolutely. So, I do see it. I think we've gotten a little better over the last five years, especially, as the pandemic... It was, I guess, a little silver lining of it is that we became more familiar with terms like social distancing. We became more familiar with understanding what could be the long-term impacts of that to our health and wellbeing. We all felt it as well. We knew what it was like to be isolated. And so we now all have

also that sort of personal experience and narrative to tie to the work. And potentially, a lot of us felt lonely.

And so I think we know the feeling, we can sort of pinpoint it, and now it's really just around comfort around talking about it. I think we've seen with the mental health movement, there's been a lot of conversation and acceptance around talking about your mental health, talking about physical health. For a long time, people have been comfortable with, and now let's talk about our social health and how do we get there.

And I think the first piece is really lifting up stories of individuals, and whether that be in this context, students and teachers and really allowing them to share their stories in a way that they feel is comfortable for them, and in a supportive environment. The Surgeon General did a really great job over the last couple of months and going on tours to different college campuses, and he hosted these events called We Are Made to Connect. And really thinking about how we can turn the lens a little bit.

We understand that the deficit, the social isolation and the loneliness, but how can we also flip that to say, "We are made to connect. We, as human beings, is sort of innate within us that we need one another, that we want to have that connection in our lives." And so how can we also open up the conversation to we know these things are experiencing... we know we're experiencing these conditions, especially those who might be more at risk for experiencing loneliness and/or isolation. And we are also made to connect. So, how can we be a part of the solution as well, and how can we also influence policy systems and environment, the conditions in which we live, we work or we learn in to better equip us and support us to connect with others?

16:10 | Dr. Kari Vogelgesang:

Yeah, that's a really interesting topic, too. That's kind of like an offshoot of loneliness and social isolation when you start to talk to people about it and they describe their communities and just even how their environments are set up in ways that don't make it easy for people to build connection with each other, to just even have pleasant conversations between... regular conversations between you and a barista several days a week or things like that.

When you start to talk to people, especially people living in smaller communities, you realize really quickly that it's actually really difficult in some spaces, especially as you get older, and we're working remotely and even let's say you do go to church once a week, if you're a religious person. So, that's one time a week that you might see people in a smaller community. I mean, obviously more than that, but in terms of talking to people and exchanging niceties or whatever.

So, I do think this environmental thing is super interesting, which of course directly connects to our environmental wellness and health, and the United States is just... We're so spread out. It makes it hard, right?

17:30 | Jillian Racoosin:

Yeah. And I think schools and campuses have a real opportunity. K-12 schools have a great opportunity to... We've seen some co-location of schools with maybe senior centers or community centers or even being in the same sort of community or

neighborhood, so that it's easier for kids, youth, and even older adults. And it's really seeing that intergenerational connection, but easy transition to after-school activities or other ways to engage, maybe even volunteer in a community, which we know has a lot of positive benefit, not only to who they're volunteering for or with, but also to the volunteer themselves.

I think when we also think about universities, and especially those where students live on campus, it's a real opportunity where we have people in one space together, how can we start to leverage human-centered design and social connection centered-design to create more spaces on universities where people can gather in a positive way?

And also knowing that those are oftentimes of high transition, especially freshman year. You probably remember, when you go to school for the first time, you're leaving home, it's very overwhelming. There's a lot of newness. And any time there's transition, even from middle school to high school, we see some of these points really leading to more high anxiety, potentially prolonged feelings of loneliness. And so this is where we come back to the science and we understand that acute loneliness is okay, and actually it might even be good for us because it helps us with that immediate stress response to change something or to look outside and see our environment in a different way.

It's really that chronic piece that we want to be weary of, that we want to be careful about and starting to acknowledge, which will bring me to my comments around screening and making sure that campuses and schools are offering opportunities that we can identify chronic isolation or loneliness in students and in educators and teachers and others. And so thinking about how we can better equip staff, maybe even RAs, to start to see some of the telltales and the signs of students feeling lonely or going inward or not leaving their room for days at a time. These are the things that we want to think about. And also understanding the questions that they can ask students, to maybe be able to screen for some of these conditions.

20:10 | Dr. Kari Vogelgesang:

Yeah, and I would say the same about educators then too, right? With being kind and caring and thoughtful about your colleagues. And have you not seen your next door neighbor in the school for very often in the last week? What are they doing in their classroom? Because like I said, at the beginning, that can get very lonely when you're able to just... Especially if you're somebody who does actually enjoy alone time, and I'm one of those people and I can ride this danger zone line where I do really like and I need a lot of alone time, but then there'll be times when I start to feel sad or anxious and I realize, "Wow, I really haven't done anything social for a few weeks."

So, maybe even though I'm not... And it's interesting, right? Because you get stuck. It's like you know that exercise is good for you, but you don't always do it. And it's the same... I feel the same way about being social. I know that it's good for me and I know I need to do it, but it's like I have to force myself to let go and do something social with people. And then I feel pretty good after... Normally, I feel pretty good afterwards. But it can be really hard for people.

21:28 | Jillian Racoosin:

Absolutely. And it's definitely a muscle you need to move and practice. And this goes back to even social connection curriculums, where you could to teach pro-social values, pro-social skills, so that you do have, even as you grow into adulthood, some of those skills to lean back on and to remember. And even just to be able to look at your social network and say... Or go through your phone and say, "Who haven't I connected with recently?" Or, "Who haven't I been able to meet up with and connect with?"

But we also want to be very understanding of our current cultural drivers that play a role in this feeling of, "It's a lot of work," right? I'm tired at the end of the day. I'm overworked. I'm worried about 500 things, and maybe going to have dinner with a friend feels like a lot. And so finding ways that you can have some more of that balance, but understanding that there are also some societal kind of pressures that play a real role in the fact that we're feeling this way, not being too hard on yourself.

22:38 | Dr. Kari Vogelgesang:

Yeah, I mean, absolutely. That self-compassion element of it to try to realize that you're not alone in this and that this is just a struggle, all humans have different struggles, is a really key component. I know I have to do that self-talk a lot when I'm working through it.

We kind of already addressed this a little bit, but I have a note in here to talk a little bit about building resilient communities. And so I know we talked about creating environments that make it easier for us to build connection with others. Do you have any other really key strategies or suggestions for people when they're trying to build a life for themselves, whether they're a new teacher in a new community or they move to a new neighborhood or a new school? What would some strategies be that you would give to those people?

23:33 | Jillian Racoosin:

Yeah, great question. So, I will say, at the foundation over the last two years, we've been working on our social framework. And the social framework really looks across different sectors and then also looking across the sociological model. So, to break that down a little bit more, we're thinking about what are the strategies, from an individual all the way up to societal level, that we can employ to really become more socially connected individuals, communities, society, et cetera?

And we've gone sector by sector and kind of broken this down a little bit. And so we do have a report on the education sector, and so I'm happy to share that report link with you and your audience, so that they can read it. And in there is a lot of rich information around different strategies for students and educators in schools.

But I will mention just a couple. I spoke a little bit about screening. I think removing barriers and increasing access to screening, treatment, and outreach for social and mental health services on campus is really key. I think also bringing in some of that function piece. So, mentoring programs, peer support programs, thinking about other ways that students can maybe even volunteer on campus or in the community and providing opportunities for them to be socially engaged is really critical.

As it relates to the curriculum in schools, there are lots of different programs, there are free programs like the Kevin Love Fund that provide social emotional learning

curriculum for teachers, and you can sign up on their website and do a training and be able to utilize all their resources.

And as we think about after school activities, thinking about in the community, how we can create really welcoming third places and spaces. So, of course your first place might be your home, your second place for youth is going to be school, for adults will be work. But really, that third place of meeting, of connection, whether it be a park near the school, whether it be your community center, maybe a coffee shop. How can we make those places and spaces more welcoming for people to come together?

So, those are a couple of some of the strategies that you might see within the report. There's also a lot around the peer learning pedagogy that's in there. And so small group learning and being able to share peer to peer.

26:10 |Dr. Kari Vogelgesang:

So, those people who work remotely, and we have teachers who teach remotely, oftentimes. If you have a little globe or glass ball and you could see into the future, do you feel like working remotely is a serious problem for people or do you feel like it's still something that you can balance it out? You just have to be cognizant of these things and work hard on it?

26:39 | Jillian Racoosin:

Great question. And it's funny timing because I'm actually speaking to a group of business leaders later today, so I know this question will come up. So, I know that, of course, there's pros and cons. I think, as we think about the socially engaged or socially connected employee and a satisfied employee, a lot of that is related to agency and choice and how they can make their schedule and not feeling micromanaged by their manager and being able to really feel autonomous over their work.

And so there is a little bit of that, as it relates to coming back into the workspace and having that freedom and a little bit of trust to do your work, but also maybe do it in a way that fits best for your work-life balance. There's also research that's been done to show that those water cooler conversations are actually really good for us. And being able to even come in once a month versus not at all, has seen really big gains. As you continue to add the gains, get a little bit less. Let's say you're coming in once a month, you're coming in once a week, a couple of times a week, every day, the gains get a little bit less in terms of how it makes individuals feel. But we know that there is positive impact and outcome to having that in-person connection and being able to know who you're working with and know them not only by name, but also a little bit beyond that.

So, we have a hybrid team at the Foundation for Social Connection. And something that we make sure to do in all of our team meetings internally, and some of our external meetings as well, is we start with a moment of connection. We start a couple of minutes at the top, to share something that made us smile during the week or a highlight of the week, and also a vulnerability of the week and something that maybe is giving us a little anxiety or a little pause. And of course, it's an option, but most of us do share, and it's a way to get to know each other on more of a human level, and then also have a little bit of grace for each other before we're coming into this space of work.

And so we've found that really helpful for our teams. And I think as it relates to your initial question for remote work, pros and cons, but we're seeing a lot of pros with having even some of those loose ties and connections in the office.

29:12 | Dr. Kari Vogelgesang:

Yeah, I always think that's interesting because there's this one piece of my brain that says, "You are not there to improve other people's social lives." And then there's this other piece, part of me that's like, "No, it's actually important that you know your coworkers and you kind of know a little bit about their life." So again, it's like this internal battle that I think sometimes some of us, especially as introverts, have within ourselves.

Okay. One final question for you today. Where do you see this going? So, if you think about all the literature around social connection, social isolation, loneliness, where do you see this body of research going or how do you see this playing out in our near and long distance futures?

30:09 | Jillian Racoosin:

Really good question. As it relates to research efforts, I think we're at the foundation, and even in the field more broadly, doing a lot of work to understand and evaluate the effectiveness of interventions. And not only on an individual level, there's been some great work done there. But as we go out to the community and even broader levels, even organizational, there's not that much research that's been done to understand what strategies are working in the workplace, are working in school settings, are working for educators, or even in community settings. And so focusing more attention and investment there.

I think also thinking more about measurement and how we can come to more standardized measures as a field is something we're focused on. And then in terms of schools and places of learning, particularly, I think we're going to see a lot more programs being developed and deployed and implemented around social connection curriculum, around support systems, that are either peer-led or led by other staff and faculty.

We actually were a part of a wonderful project of an organization called Young Futures, and they are about to launch, I guess next week. There are 10 initial grantees, and it's a group of 10 nonprofit leaders who are all developing solutions to help teens socially connect in the digital world. And a lot of the, as you can imagine, because where teens are for most of the day, a lot of the solutions are really targeted towards schools and education and how we can support students better in their ability to socially connect with others in a healthy way.

So, I think we're going to see a lot more development of solutions, evaluation of solutions, and I think we're also going to see a lot more intergenerational connection, which I'm excited for because the older adult population in the United States continues to grow, and it's going to keep growing, especially as Baby Boomers are reaching that older adult age range, and they're also high functioning. They're healthy a lot of the time, and they're wanting to contribute to society in a meaningful way. And so, how can we leverage that power for good?

32:26 | Dr. Kari Vogelgesang:

Yeah, that's a really interesting thought too, and I would imagine that's something that we will definitely be talking more about and working on in our communities, for sure. Well, Jillian, I really appreciate you taking the time today to talk with me and to talk with all of our listeners about this important topic. I know it really does impact our overall wellbeing and health, individually and as a community as a whole. So, I really appreciate your expertise and all of your good work. Thank you.

32:56 | Jillian Racoosin:

Thank you so much for having me. And feel free to check out our website, Social-Connection.org for more information.

33:03 | Dr. Kari Vogelgesang:

Let's do that. Thank you. Thanks, everyone.

33:06 | Jillian Racoosin:

Thanks.

33:07 | Dr. Kari Vogelgesang:

Thank you for joining us on this episode of the Scanlan Center for School Mental Health, Educator Wellness podcast. Today, we've delved into the complexities of navigating loneliness and social isolation in today's world, and the crucial role that social connection plays in fostering a healthier, happier life.

Remember, building connections isn't always easy. It's a muscle that must be exercised, but it is a vital part of a healthy life. And by prioritizing these bonds that we can create with people, we can not only improve our overall wellbeing, but we can help students achieve their academic and social goals. Until next time. Take care, everyone. Stay connected, and know that I am forever cheering you on.