

Episode: *Author Interview: "On Health and Loneliness"*

Guest: Amy E. Wendling, PhD

Host: Tim Hoff

Transcript by: Cheryl Green

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[bright theme music]

[00:00:04] TIM HOFF: Welcome to another episode of the Author Interview series from the *American Medical Association Journal of Ethics*. I'm your host, Tim Hoff. This series provides an alternative way to access the interesting and important work being done by Journal contributors each month. Joining me on this episode is Dr Amy Wendling, a professor of philosophy at Creighton University in Omaha, Nebraska. She's here to discuss her article, "*On Health and Loneliness*," in the November 2023 issue of the Journal, [Health and Loneliness](#). Dr Wendling, thank you so much for being on the podcast. [music fades]

DR AMY WENDLING: Thank you for having me.

[00:00:38] HOFF: So, what is the main ethics point of your article?

WENDLING: So, a classic idea from Aristotle is the importance of friends and friendship to a good life and a good ethical life, basically, to being a good person and to sharing life with others. And I think for this audience, one of the pieces that's really important is how our friends make us actually healthier, not just better. Coming out of Aristotle, there are lots of thinkers in the philosophical tradition who explore the importance of friendship in the good life and how you can fall off from friendship and then be in trouble, not just ethical trouble, but also health trouble. So, Hannah Arendt notably talks about how totalitarian societies is what she's worried about, but you could think about large, modern societies in general and some of their norms. And she worries about the isolation of ways of life in modern societies as affecting our health, our political health, but also our physiological and psychological health. I use these examples from the history of philosophy in the article to talk about the contemporary phenomenon of loneliness as we find it in our society.

[00:01:54] HOFF: And so, what's most important for health professions students and trainees specifically to take from this article?

WENDLING: Well, I think what sociologists and others call social determinants of health are enormously important. And so, when we're going in with diagnostics, I always wonder, do we have as full of a picture as we need to come to a conclusion about what health problems might be plaguing us? And also, are we going with solutions that look at the full picture of social determinants of health? So, the article focuses in particular, as does this issue of the Journal, on the effects of loneliness and not having friends on actually health outcomes. And so, loneliness would be one of those social determinants of health that we just don't often ask about, but we maybe should.

[00:02:45] HOFF: And finally, if you could add a point to this article that you didn't have the time or the space to fully explore, what would that be?

WENDLING: I think I thought this morning about two really excellent examples. One is from Aristotle, and he talks about how the elderly as a category struggle at that time in

their life. And that's all of us if we're lucky, right? All of us, if we're lucky, live a full life. And part of the struggle already in Aristotle is you began to lose your friends, and you began, just to death and to illness. And that it can be really, really difficult, right? So, I think I would add examples. The article kind of focuses itself around an example of somebody who's in midlife having a crisis. But I think it's not, the truth there is not wedded to the example. So, I think all of us at the end of our lives, right, will face a time when we lose our, if we're lucky, if we lose our friends, where we lose our friends. And I think that example is really important to think about. And as we lose our friends, we become more lonely. And therefore, I think the elderly are particularly vulnerable to the loneliness that could affect health outcomes, among the many other things that affect health outcomes for elderly people.

I also thought of another example, kind of the extreme example of loneliness, and its effects on health would of course be solitary confinement as a practice in prisons. So, as I was thinking through what's a very routine kind of loneliness most of us will all experience as we age, and then I was thinking about what's a very extreme example, isolated example, where we might see this kind of effect on health? And I'm sure that the sociology is there to back up this point about a kind of extreme example of isolation and loneliness and its effects on health in the form of solitary confinement practices in prisons. [theme music returns]

[00:04:40] HOFF: Dr Wendling, thank you so much for your time on the podcast today, and thanks for your contribution to the Journal this month.

WENDLING: I appreciate it, Tim.

HOFF: To read the full article as well as the rest of this month's issue for free, visit our site, journalofethics.org. We'll be back soon with more Ethics Talk from the *American Medical Association Journal of Ethics*.