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HARKIN ON WELLNESS SYMPOSIUM

FIRESIDE CHAT WITH DR. VIVEK MURTHY AND REKHA BASU

DRAKE UNIVERSITY

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CART PROVIDED BY:

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>> ADAM SHRIVER: So with that, I am now going to introduce our fireside chat participants. I'm very excited to introduce them. So we're, of course, really honored to be joined today by U.S. Surgeon Dr. Vivek Murthy. He was confirmed in the U.S. Senate in March 2021 to serve as the 21st Surgeon General of the United States. As the nation's top doctor, he advances the health and well-being of all Americans and works to address critical public health issues. Especially relevant for our program today, he's issued Surgeon General advisories on the youth mental health crisis and social media's impact on youth mental health, the epidemic of loneliness and isolation, and on burnout in the health worker community.

Dr. Murthy also issued a Surgeon General's framework on mental health in the workplace, and he is the first Surgeon General to host a podcast, and I know there are many fans in here, including the provost, and it's called "House Calls with Dr. Vivek Murthy." And he invites guests and listeners to explore how we can all build more connected and meaningful lives together. As Vice Admiral of the U.S. Public Health Service Commissioned Corps, Dr. Murthy also oversees more than 6,000 dedicated public health officers serving underserved and vulnerable populations. Dr. Murthy will be joined by Des Moines Register Opinion Columnist Rekha Basu.

So Rekha is a columnist, commentator, public speaker, and coach for the op-ed project. Her syndicated commentary articles have appeared in the New York Times, Los Angeles Times, International Herald Tribune, USA Today, and newspapers in all

but two U.S. states. She draws deeply on her multicultural background to speak truth to power on critical social issues, and her columns have had tangible results in creating change. She's also the author of "Finding Her Voice," a compilation of her Des Moines Register columns on women, and she's made numerous appearances on network television shows like Tom Brokaw, Brooke Baldwin, Carol Costello, Erin Burnett and Gwen Ifill. And when she retired, she had a really nice quote that sort of summed up her career where she said, "Every opinion column you write is a statement of values, and sometimes figuring out where you stand requires digging deeper into the story and yourself." And I'll also just say really briefly that I grew up in Iowa before living a lot of other places and then recently moving back, and Rekha's columns, when I grew up, were always the ones that I looked forward to most in the Des Moines Register. They stood out to me as demonstrating a deep commitment to improving the world to challenging oppressive systems and to showing compassion and empathy to those who are ignored or harmed by inequitable power structures. And, actually, just this past week she wrote a column that highlighted a program that's sort of near and dear to our hearts of The Harkin Institute, the Uplift program. And she pointed out, again, things that are being done to help or harm people who, you know, need our attention.

So as I said, her columns for me growing up were kind of an archetype. As I moved around to different cities, I would look for the columnist who wrote about issues I cared most about. And if I found someone who I thought was writing really great stories and had empathy that spoke to me, I would think, oh, this must be this city's Rekha Basu. I finally found her. But if I didn't find a columnist like that, I would be sort of, like, hmm, I don't know about this city, you know, we need something more going on.

So anyways, all of that is to say we are incredibly thrilled that Rekha has agreed to host this fireside chat with us today, and thank you all for being with us today. And so with that, I will turn the floor over to Rekha Basu and U.S. Surgeon General Dr. Vivek Murthy. Thank you.

(Applause)

>> REKHA: Thank you so much for that generous introduction, Adam. Thank you for having me, and I'm sorry that Tom is not able to be here. I know he feels very bad about it. We spoke on the phone last night, as did you, Dr. Murthy, and he wishes us all very well. So I am absolutely thrilled to have this chat with you. I've been admiring and following your work for a while. I recently wrote a paper that you knew nothing about, all about you and your work. On loneliness. And so it was a real thrill to hear that you were going to be here and then that I was going to be able to moderate. So, welcome.

>> VIVEK: Thank you so much.

>> REKHA: We really look forward to hearing from you.

>> VIVEK: Appreciate that, Rekha.

>> REKHA: Let's get right to business and start with a warning that you issued last year about a mental health and loneliness crisis in the United States, which you called a national epidemic. Loneliness, isolation, and what were the other words you used? I think there was isolation, lack of connection in the U.S. Could you tell us more about this public health crisis and what motivated you to release this advisory?

>> VIVEK: Absolutely. Well, I'm so glad to be in this conversation with you, Rekha. And thank you to all of you for the warm welcome to Iowa. This is my very first trip to

Iowa, and I've been wanting to come to this state for a long time, and I'm grateful to Senator Harkin for inviting me. And one thing I was just mentioning to some of the folks earlier this morning is that I met Senator Harkin some years ago, but I had heard about him long before I met him and I think his legacy of contributions to health, particularly around disabilities, but even much more broader than that, around health care and prevention for our country. That's a very powerful legacy and one that has certainly inspired me along the way. So it's a true honor for me to be at an institute that holds his name and to know that his impact is still being felt in health long after, you know, he has left the Senate.

You know, with that said, you know, I do want to -- I'm eager to talk about this subject because I'll tell you, I did not -- if you had asked me when I first met Senator Harkin back in 2013 when I was being considered for the post of Surgeon General, what my priority issues would be, this issue would not have been on my list. It was not on my list. It's not something I talked to him about or that I talked to the Senate about during my hearings. I really came to this issue because of conversations I was having with people around the country during the very beginning of my first term when I went on a listening tour and just tried to ask people what would be helpful. And I heard a lot of stories that I expected in some ways. People were concerned about rising rates of heart disease and obesity. They were worried about the opioid crisis that was burgeoning in our country at the time.

But the stories I did not expect were the stories about loneliness. And they usually came about not using that word lonely or loneliness. People wouldn't say, "I'm lonely," but they would say things like, you know, "I'm a college student on this campus surrounded by thousands of students, but I feel like nobody really knows me. I feel like I can't really be myself. Or they would be busy parents who would say, you know, "I've got all of these challenges and burdens I've got to carry on my shoulders, but I feel like I have to carry them by myself. And there's nobody who can, like, help me with this. I'm not living close to family. My friends are really busy with many other things. I feel ashamed about the fact that I'm struggling as a parent, so I just bear it on my own.

So that I was even hearing this from CEOs and from, actually, from members of Congress as well who in hushed tones and quietly would tell me that they felt all alone in their position, and they weren't quite sure that they could talk openly to people about what they were going through. They were worried that they would be judged in their own way. So it felt like so many people were struggling with loneliness, but they didn't know that they weren't the only one. They didn't know how many others were in the shared struggle. And that's what led me to dig into this subject. And the thing is, like, I was actually, in some ways, I was attuned to what they were saying because of my own experiences with loneliness as a child.

You know, I had struggled a lot as a kid who was very shy and introverted to make friends. I wanted to be social. It just took me more time to make friends.

And I still remember the scariest time of the school day for me as a kid was lunchtime. When you walk into the cafeteria, and you wonder, is there going to be somebody to sit next to? And so I still remember that. I wasn't scared about tests or teachers. I was worried about that, about who I would sit next to and whether I would have friends.

And so that feeling of loneliness, it's interesting how those feelings we have as

children stay with us. I still feel that viscerally right now as I'm talking to you. But during that time I never talked about it with my parents or with my sister. Even though I knew that they loved me unconditionally, I was very close to them, still am to this day. But I felt this sense of shame that if I'm lonely, I probably did something wrong, something's wrong with me. Maybe I'm not likeable. All of these thoughts go through your head. Loneliness erodes and chips away at your self-esteem which makes it harder to go and interact with other people, so it becomes a vicious cycle.

So lastly, I would say with all of this and all of these signals coming in, it sort of prompted me to dig more deeply into the science around loneliness, and that's where I realized two critical things. One, loneliness is extraordinarily common. One no two adults in the United States are living with measurable levels of loneliness, but the numbers are much higher among young people, which we'll talk about during this conversation.

But the second thing I realized was in addition to being common, loneliness was extraordinarily consequential for our health. And it turned out that when we were disconnected from one another, that it increased our risk of depression, nearly doubling our risk of depression, increasing our risk of anxiety and suicide. But it also increased our risk of physical illness as well. There was a 29% increase in the risk of heart disease. 31% increase in the risk of stroke. 50% increase in the risk of dementia among older people. And the increase in mortality that we were seeing with people who were socially disconnected was on par with the mortality effect that we see with smoking daily. And it was even greater than that which we see with obesity.

So I mention those two in particular because no one would argue that smoking and obesity are classic public health issues. But what the data was telling us very clearly is that loneliness and isolation are public health issues that are just as important, and even, I think, just as urgent for us to address.

>> REKHA: So was the COVID crisis what drew you to finally sort of come out about the issue as a public health crisis? Was that partly what prompted it? You had been clearly interviewing people about this before. But the fact that people became so isolated during those years when they couldn't go to work or school greatly exacerbated the problem.

>> VIVEK: It certainly did. You know, I had started talking about it before COVID, about the issue -- I wrote a book on it, which nearly killed me. I realize I'm an incredibly slow writer.

(Laughter)

Painfully slow writer. I don't have your skills. I don't know how you turn out articles all the time.

But, yeah, I was doing all of that, but the reason I decided to issue a Surgeon General's advisory on it when I came back to government was because I felt like it was getting worse, not better, and COVID did have something to do with that.

I think for many of us, certainly the first year of COVID, we weren't seeing as many people. You know, our kids weren't in school in the early part in much of 2020, right? And that was really hard for everyone.

But the impacts lasted beyond, you know, when kids got back to school and when we started going back to the workplace. We still are feeling the reverberations today.

When I go to schools and talk to young people as I do all the time, in fact, we just

finished a big college tour talking to students all across America, they often tell me that they felt like the pandemic made them age backward in terms of their social skills. They say that they feel like they are still trying to get back to where they were in terms of their comfort interacting with other people. And even friends that they knew.

And if this sounds odd, right, it really isn't because just think about the analogy of going to the gym. So how many of you have been on a gym routine and then you kind of fell off the wagon at some point? I certainly have.

(Laughter)

Okay.

>> REKHA: Everyone.

>> VIVEK: We all know what that's like. What I want you to think about is what it felt like to go back to the gym after you fell off the wagon. You probably remember that it was hard to motivate to actually get to the gym the first day, you actually went back. Maybe the weights felt heavier. Maybe the run felt more exhausting, the elliptical felt more intimidating. You know, it was harder.

But then when you kept going back day after day, it felt like it got easier. You build your strength back. And then you felt good.

That muscle, if you will, that you are exercising and building back is very similar to the social muscle that got weaker when we pulled back from interacting with other people. And we have to build that muscle back up again.

And sometimes, like, you know, I was at an event the other day where people were coming back to the workplace. And one person said, well, I came back after being remote for a long time, and it just felt strange. So does that mean it's not right for me? And I said no. It does not mean that it's not right for you. It just means that we all have to go through that adjustment period as we're building our social muscle back up again.

And so I still think that we are contending with that challenge. And the truth is it's not just young people who are struggling with that. Many of us -- like, I find even myself that I had to push myself to actually go and reengage with people again. It was sometimes very easy to just take the path of least resistance, which was to stay home. And thank goodness I have my wife, Alice, who prods me periodically and says, hey, you need to go do this, you know, and get out of the house, stop working, whatever.

But she reminds me, you know, as we all need to be reminded, that we need to proactively build social engagement into our life, especially because we live in a world which isn't always structured to facilitate that interaction where we might be, you know, in our own homes, you know, siloed off, you know, not seeing close family or friends, sometimes for long periods of time.

And while that may feel efficient or convenient in some ways, what the science of loneliness tells us is that it's not good for our health.

>> REKHA: It's interesting that you mentioned some people feeling uncomfortable when they returned to the workplace as if they didn't belong there. By the way, I went back to the gym yesterday for the first time in three months.

(Laughter)

Very timely.

>> VIVEK: How did it feel?

>> REKHA: Great. In the beginning I was nervous, but by the end of it, I felt

wonderful. I decided I'm going to go every day or maybe two days a month or, maybe some amount of regular time.

(Laughter)

>> VIVEK: Okay.

>> REKHA: But I think that some workplaces actually capitalized on that feeling of employees and said, okay. Well, you know, we'll sell off the building, and everybody can work remotely. That works better for everyone. In other words, ways to save money for themselves. So that, you know, they could shrink the workplace and have everybody remote, which is what I'm hearing from you, not necessarily a great thing.

>> VIVEK: Yeah. It is tricky. You know, I think the pandemic was a crisis, and the question, the challenge we have now is how to take that crisis and try to come out stronger and better with better systems and better ways of living than even before the pandemic. And work presents one of those opportunities.

In some ways having some remote work or hybrid work can be helpful for families, right? If you have a long commute, you can save time on that commute. That's time you could be with your family, time you could be caring for yourself, time you could also be working as well. There's a lot of benefits to having some flexibility there. Especially for people who also may have not only kids, you know, who are small to care for but who may have elderly relatives at home that you're caring for. Like, that flexibility can be vital.

But it's also true -- we have to be honest about the tradeoffs. And one of the tradeoffs is in human connection. Like, you connect differently on Zoom than you do in person. And we have over thousands of years evolved to connect in person. Like, we are processing not just the content of someone's speech but also the tone of their voice, their facial expression, their body language, their pauses. Like, all of that is going into us, forming a strong bond, which is why I often, like, encourage people and remind myself that when someone calls you, right, which I know is weird. People don't call these days. They just text, right?

(Laughter)

But when people call you, I always think it's great to pick up the phone if you can, even if it's just for ten seconds to say, hey, I'm about to walk into this session with Rekha. I can't talk right now, but I'll call you back. That takes five or ten seconds, probably about the same time as it does to text them. But there's a really big difference in how they and you feel after that ten seconds of conversation, because they've heard your voice. You might feel the warmth in their voice and say, hey, I'm so excited to talk to you! I'm really excited to talk to you, but let me give you a call later. All of that matters, like, to how we feel.

So we have to recognize that when it comes to remote work, that is something that we lose, as well as we lose, like, the unplanned interactions. So it often would be that if I was in a meeting and we were all sitting around a conference table and we had a discussion, and I noticed that, let's say, Rekha was quiet during that meeting, unusually quiet. Or maybe I said something, and she kind of made a funny sort of -- I'd notice her body shifting kind of uncomfortably. I'd did I say something that made her feel uncomfortable? In normal times what I would do is maybe after the meeting, I would just maybe go up to her and go, hey, I just want to check in. Did I say something that made you feel funny or weird? I hope I didn't offend you. I might do that after the

meeting. But when the Zoom meeting ends, everyone clicks end and it's gone. You don't run into people in the hallway. Those unplanned interactions, they seem small, but they are an important glue that actually helps us build bonds with one another.

So I think that's just something we have to balance, right? And that means as we think about flexible work approaches, thinking about how we can periodically bring people together in person, how we can create small-group environments even virtually for people to get to know one another as human beings and not solely as skill sets. That becomes vitally important.

I'll lastly share one small example what we do in our office, because we have had to, over the last few years, deal also with hybrid situations and figure out how do you build a team, honor people's flexibilities but create the bonds needed in the workplace? One of the small things is every week we have, during our all-staff meetings where everyone comes together virtually, we have something we call our humans of OSG, Office of the Surgeon General. We'll pick two people. Let's say it was the two of us. I would have the chance for ten minutes to interview Rekha about her life, right, in front of everyone.

And it could be about anything about your life as long as it wasn't about your current job. So I might ask about, you know, where you grew up, about what did you dream about doing when you were young? Like, who were the people who were your heroes when you were younger? Who had a real big influence on you when you were growing up? What unexpected turns did your life take? What do you do now when you're looking for peace or respite from the crazy world around you? I may ask you questions to learn about you. I'm not asking you, how did you get to be great at excel.

>> REKHA: I'm not.

(Laughter)

>> VIVEK: It's not about your job. And the point is that even in ten minutes, in that short period of time, we come to learn so much about somebody that fills out our picture of who they are, that creates touch points of commonality where we're, like, oh, that sounds interesting. Or I like that, too. And so we feel closer to them. And we -- I felt that so many times in these conversations. We might have someone in the office for six months, but ten minutes of being able to learn about them as a human being makes us feel closer.

So we have to be creative building both in-person and online opportunities to truly connect as human beings and understand and build relationships. I'll lastly say it doesn't happen on accident or on its own. He can no longer assume that's the case. We can also no longer assume that if you just throw a bunch of people together in a room for a company picnic or dinner, that they are all of a sudden going to bond with one another. Because given everything we've been through recently, we need to add a little bit of structure, a little bit of intention. That can go a long way to actually helping people connect.

>> REKHA: That's so interesting what you say, especially about letting the phone go to voice mail as opposed to answering it when you're in the middle of something just for two minutes. I think it's something that we all sort of know intuitively, but it's too easy to just let it go to voice mail, and so we don't take the time. But we don't really weigh the impact on the other person. This is very, very helpful guidance, actually. Thank you.

>> VIVEK: And one thing I think -- there is an asymmetry also in how we understand

impact on other people. And I was just listening to this wonderful -- for those of you who don't know the journalist Shankar Vedantam, the Hidden Brain podcast, a brilliant human being. He was interviewing somebody about the asymmetry in how we sometimes perceive the impact we have on others and how they perceive that impact. So often, for example, when we're extending an act of kindness towards somebody, we might think, well, are they going to get utility from what I'm offering? So if I were to go up to somebody on a cold day and give them a cup of coffee, right, like, we might be thinking, well, what if they don't drink coffee? What if it's too hot? Right? What if it's not enough? The cup is too small? What if it's too much and now they can't drink it? Now they're, like, where do I put this? We are thinking about the utility in very practical terms.

The other, the recipient, though, not only thinks about the utility, but they think about the intention or the sentiment. So even if they don't drink coffee, they end up feeling better because they're, like, oh, wow! Rekha thought enough about me to just come and offer me something. That was really nice. Because what's happening is that we are living in a world where many people don't feel seen and don't feel like they matter.

And simple acts of kindness remind people that they are seen and that they do matter. And that actual utility of what you're doing is actually far secondary to that primary function of helping people feel seen and feel a sense of warmth in a world that can sometimes feel very alone and cold.

>> REKHA: Wonderfully said. Let's talk a little more specifically about the health of K-12 students and especially how that, with the mental health, especially, and how it was impacted by COVID. And what are some other things that you see, social issues, going on with them, technological issues that might be setting back their mental health?

>> VIVEK: Yeah. So I'm pretty -- I'm really worried about what's happening to young people in our country in terms of their mental health. It's one of the reasons in 2021, the first year I was in office during this term, I issued a youth mental health advisory from our office, calling attention to the fact that we had seen 57% increase in the suicide rate in the decade before the pandemic among young people. We were seeing that nearly half of high school students were saying that they felt persistently sad or hopeless. A third of our high school girls had seriously considered taking their own life.

I mean, these are -- I say these numbers with a caution, which is that we should not get numb to these numbers. We should not accept these as just baseline, as this as normal. There is nothing normal about these numbers.

And we should not accept a world where one in every three girls seriously considers taking their own life. Childhood should be a time where our kids are growing, where they are building, where they are understanding and exploring the world but also where they are looking forward to a future that they can help create. And too many of our kids don't feel that way right now.

There are a few things that are driving that, to your question. I think one is the experience of loneliness and isolation. I think depending on what study you look at, anywhere from 60% to 70%, in some cases more, of young people are saying that they are struggling with loneliness. When I mentioned I went on a college tour recently, some of the schools that we went to said that -- decided to actually survey their own

students before we came. One large public university in the western part of our country with more than 100,000 students ended up surveying their students, they came back to us and said 80% of our students are saying that they are struggling with loneliness, 80, 8-0. Another school we went to on the East Coast also looked at their data before we came, and they said that 93% of the students who were seeking mental health services at the university were citing loneliness and isolation as key reasons why they needed those services.

So this is really rampant. But it's not the only thing that's happening. There's another challenge, I think, that young people are facing with regard to technology. And I think unfortunately, the experience of social media for many young people has contributed mightily to the mental health struggles that they are having. And the thing is, the reason that I came to initially understand this is because this is what young people themselves were telling me.

Everywhere I went around the country when I talked to young people, they would tell me three things consistently. They would say social media makes them feel worse about themselves as they're constantly comparing themselves to others. It makes them feel worse about their friendships as they constantly see other people doing things without them, and they feel left out. But, third, they say they can't get off it. And that is not because, like, the current generation of young people is somehow defective in the will power gene. Like, that's not what's happening.

If we grew up with the technological environment that young people are growing up in today, I believe we would be equally challenged. Right? But what's happening is that the platforms themselves are designed to maximize how much time people spend on them. The revenue model is driven by time spent, which generates advertising dollars and falls to the bottom line.

And so you have the best product engineers in the world with some of the -- in some of the most resourced companies in the world that are spending a lot of time, money, and expertise figuring out how to keep us online, how to keep us on that platform.

And then you take an adolescent who is going through a critical phase of brain development, when their impulse control is not fully developed, when they are especially sensitive to social suggestion and social comparison. And what's happening is the platforms are effectively preying on those vulnerabilities that our children have.

And so the question parents were asking me, the reason I decided last year to issue a Surgeon General's advisory on social media and youth mental health, was because the most common question parents were asking me was is social media safe for my kids?

It's a very reasonable question. We asked that about the car seats we buy for our kids, about the cars we put our kids in later in life, about the food that our kids take, baby formula, toys. We ask this question commonly, and we should.

But when we dug into the data around it, it became very clear that there was not enough evidence to say that social media was safe for our kids, and by contrast, there is, in fact, growing evidence that was telling us that there may, in fact, be harm associated with social media use.

So in our report we actually noted that adolescents who were spending three hours or more on social media a day face double the risk of anxiety and depression

symptoms, double. And do you know how much the average use is per day today among adolescents? It's 4.8 hours a day, right? And this is not all digital. This is social media specifically. Right?

So we are in a real difficult situation here. You know, on surveys, and you ask what are students telling you directly? On surveys nearly half of adolescents are saying that social media use makes them feel worse about their bodies, right? And as we look at, you know, the significant number of young people struggling with eating disorders and with body dysmorphia, I worry that this has become an important contributor, particularly for girls, but now increasingly for boys.

So there are real reasons to be concerned. And my worry is that up until now, we have essentially said that the entire burden of managing the harms associated with social media are on the shoulders of kids and parents.

And this is not only hurting kids, but it's actually hurting parents, too. Because when you ask parents about parenting, is it easy? Hard? Harder than before? They say it feels harder than before, and the top two reasons are technology and social media. Those are the top two reasons that parents cite.

And so I think that we have done a real disservice to kids and parents in the country by not putting in place actual safety standards to ensure that, number one, we demand data around safety and demand that that be shared openly with the public, and to also make sure that we have standards in place like what we put you in place for cars.

You know, when I was growing up, Rekha, in the '80s, we had a pretty high rate of car accident-related deaths. And, you know, we didn't say, oh, you know, that means you should get rid of cars entirely and go back to horses. We didn't say that. (Laughter)

But we also didn't say this is just the price of modernity, the genie is out of the bottle. People are using cars. What can you do? We just have to tolerate all these deaths. But that's actually what we've been doing with social media. You look at the public conversation on it.

People say, oh, the genie is out of the bottle. What are you going to do? I heard about somebody who had a benefit from social media. So maybe we don't want to change anything. You know, people were benefiting from car in the '80s, it took them from point A to B but came at a massive cost. What's happening right now is we're doing the equivalent with social media of allowing in children, allowing children to drive in cars with no safety features on roads with no speed limits, no traffic lights, and no stop signs.

And we're saying, do your best. This is just the way the world is. That's unacceptable. And what we have to do is to take the kind of action that got us seat belts and air bags and crash testing that ultimately made cars safer and reduce motor vehicle-related deaths. We've got to put those safety standards in place to protect our kids from harmful content, from exposure, also to the addictive features that seek to reel them in, you know, and prolong their use, even at the expense of sleep and in-person time.

And we've got to put in place the requirements for data transparency as well, because researchers tell us all the time that they cannot get full access to the data to even analyze what the full health impact is on our kids so that they can share that with

parents.

Social media has been around for 20 years. The fact that we have not put in place any meaningful safety standards at a national level, to me, is an utter failure of responsibility. And it's abdication of one of our most sacred responsibilities as a society, which is to take care of our children.

And that's why, in our advisory, I called specifically for Congress to put in place these safety standards, because the truth is that if you are a mother or a father or a child out there who's struggling with social media, if you've talked to the parents that I have talked to, so many of them who have lost children to suicide after they were mercilessly harassed and bullied on social media, you don't want to hear that this is just too complicated an issue to deal with or that it's politically thorny or that it's an election year or that we just need to take more time.

You need help now. You need relief today. And that's what we should all be demanding for our kids.

(Applause)

>> REKHA: One quick follow-up, and then we're having some questions from the audience. But I'm just curious, what do you think about schools allowing cell phones? Yeah, these are the audience questions coming up. What do you think about schools allowing cell phones with students in class? That's something that actually is permitted here in some Des Moines schools, and it surprises me a lot.

>> VIVEK: Yeah. You know, this is -- I think one of the challenges in this space is that, like, our lives have changed so much in terms of technology that what is normal has also dramatically shifted, right?

And it's happened fast, but at the same time it's also happened gradually in a way that, like, sometimes it's, like, oh, it's not that big of a deal. People are doing in class what they do at school, what they do outside school. Is that big of a problem? But then you step back and, hey, learning geometry and history and economics was pretty hard 30 years ago. Can you imagine try to learn it in class while you're also scrolling through your phone and trying to post and liking other people's posts? Like, I would probably drop out of school if I was doing that today.

>> REKHA: Right.

>> VIVEK: So this is very, very hard. I think there are two important consequences. Phones in schools that we have to take into account. One is the consequence for learning, as I mentioned, in terms of distraction and attention span.

The second, though, is the social consequence. You know, I mentioned this tour that I've been on recently, this college tour. You know one of the most disturbing things that young people say to me on the tour? It's a question, actually, they pose to me. They say, how are we supposed to build relationships with other people when the culture isn't really for people to talk to each other?

And the first time I was asked this question on a college campus, I pause.. I thought I didn't understand it. Can you say that again? They say the culture is not for people to talk to each other, so how are we supposed to build relationships? And they're actually right, is that the culture has shifted such that everyone is on their devices. They've got earbuds in, they're looking at their phone, but they are also getting less and less comfortable with in-person interaction because so much of our interaction has shifted online. Right? So that muscle is getting weaker. And the

barriers to interaction are getting higher.

So it's harder to initiate in-person interaction. And this comes up in school as well. Right? So one of the schools that I visited not that long ago, a couple of states over, in fact, they had, after our advisory, they had put in place a policy to restrict the use of phones in school.

And they told us -- I asked them, well, what did you see as a result of that? They said it was amazing. The volume went up in the hallways because students were actually talking to each other.

>> REKHA: Wow.

>> VIVEK: They went into the library and saw for one of the first times that students were on the ground playing games with each other like Jenga and board games and just having fun.

And this is really important because, like, for those of you who went to high school or college, think about the cafeteria in high school or college. Was it quiet or was it loud? Right? Raise your hand if your cafeteria was loud in high school or college. All of us, right?

One thing I found on our college tour is the cafeterias are quiet now. Because people aren't talking to each other.

>> REKHA: It's eerie.

>> VIVEK: They're all on their devices. So if school is a time where we should be building the foundation for a healthy life, it turns out that our relationships, our social connections, are an important part of that foundation. It's a critical part of our well-being. It's just as important as learning how to read and write and learn history, is learning to build healthy relationships. It's what's going to sustain us for life.

And I do think that phones are creating a challenge there. Now, I think that getting phones out of the classroom time, out of classroom time, is really important so that kids can focus on learning but also making sure that, like, during lunchtime, in between classes, kids focus on each other, that's really important, too.

I know that parents sometimes have concerns saying, well, what if I want to reach my child during an emergency? It's a very legitimate question. And there are maybe ways, you know, to actually do this. Because many schools are already moving in this direction. You may have designated times in the day when a child can utilize their phone. You may have, you know, a child keep a device on them but have a rule that they can't use it. You know, again, except in case of emergencies. There are different ways to do this.

And what I always encourage schools to do is to start a conversation with parents and students about how to design their phone-free policy.

Because one thing, I think, that is relatively clear to me is that the current policy of having no policy does not work, either for learning or for social interaction. And this, again, might seem really hard to do, but it is happening.

I just came back from the UK from a trip there. Schools all over the UK, many of them, have already gone to this policy. And they are seeing the difference that it's making. A number of schools are trying to do that in the United States as well.

But I would just encourage schools to do that in partnership with students and parents because ultimately parents want the same thing as what educators want. They want their child to learn. They want their child to build healthy relationships. They

don't want their child to be on their device all the time as their grades fall and as their relationships fall apart. So we want the same thing here. We just need to be a part of that same conversation.

>> REKHA: That's very helpful advice. Thank you. Oh, here's a great question. How do you, Dr. Murthy, take care of your social well-being?

>> VIVEK: Ah. Well, I have learned a lot because I didn't do well for many years, right? And that was part of the journey I had to go through.

When I was -- after I, you know, served my first stint at Surgeon General, I found myself suddenly out of government without any community at work. And I had made this, like, critical mistake, actually, along the way, which is during my time in government, I had largely neglected staying in touch with friends. And even when I was with family, I was distracted a lot. I was on my phone. I was checking email. I was checking the news.

And I had the same excuse that a lot of us have for why we put work over people, right? This work is really important. I only have a short period of time to do it. I need to stay up on what's happening so I can do my job well, right? There are a lot of reasons.

But I realized the consequence of that was that I ended that first stint as Surgeon General feeling profoundly alone. And I didn't even fully realize it until my wife one day pointed it out to me. She noticed that I just seemed really down, like, all the time, and I was really struggling. She said, you know, I think that you need a community. You don't have a community anymore.

And I felt embarrassed, actually, to call some of the friends I had lost touch with because I had been so bad at staying in touch during those couple of years that I thought, you know, gosh, I wasn't there for them during important moments in their life. Are they really going to want to talk to me? I felt this real sense of shame.

But I encountered a friend, you know, a few months after that who said to me, you know, Vivek, I know what your problem is. It's not that you don't have friends. Your problem is that you are not experiencing friendship. We have, I had, and I think many of us have people in our lives who we may have lost touch with. Maybe we had a falling out. Maybe our lives just diverged. We went in different directions.

Maybe just time sort of led us to fall out of touch. But the truth is with many of those people, if we reached out to them, we might find that they would be very happy to hear from us. We might find that they, too, might be struggling with a sense of disconnection, with a sense of loneliness.

And so that encouragement was really important for me. And it led me to make certain changes in my life, number one, to reach out proactively to friends. So what I try to do is each day, I try to spend at least 15 minutes a day talking to someone, either in person or on the phone, whether that's a good friend or a family member. The second thing I try to do is to make sure that I am fully present with people when I'm actually with them on the phone or in person, that I'm not checking the scores on ESPN, even though I'm really excited about how the women's basketball team is doing here in the tournament. Congrats on the Final Four, by the way. That's amazing.

You know, I try to be focused. And the other thing I try to do, I mentioned about the phone, is I actually try to pick up the phone when people call, even if it's for ten seconds because I realize I need to hear their voice. It's not just for them, it's actually

for me.

The last thing I'll mention to you, I maybe encourage you to think about maybe in your own life or to suggest to other people. I built something in my life called moai, and this is an Okinawan tradition on the book I wrote on loneliness. And the tradition was that when young people would be, you know, at early stages in life, their parents would bring them together in groups of six, seven, eight and would say, okay. All of you are now a part of a moai, and your job for the foreseeable is to look out for each other and take care of each other. What a simple and beautiful thing.

I realized I have these two good friends that I love dearly, but I would maybe see them once a year at an event. We lived in different cities. Every time I saw them, I would think, gosh, I wish we saw each other more. But it would never quite happen, right? It might sound familiar to some of you. We let it happen to a lot of us.

So the three of us realized at one point, in 2018 when we were at a retreat, that we were all struggling with being lonely and feeling lost in our lives. And so we decided to build a moai with the three of us. What that meant was that once a month we would videoconference with each other for two hours. And during those two hours we would talk about the things that really mattered to us, including things we didn't normally talk about with friends, our health, our families, our finances, whatever was on our mind, our insecurities.

The other thing we committed to is that when things came up in our life in between when we were struggling with something, a hard decision or something happened that made us really upset at work or something exciting happened, we would text each other to share that.

And if need be, we would get on the phone and do an impromptu call to help each other figure things out.

And that moai has changed my life. I had to make critical decisions over the next couple of years that I was able to make because of that moai. I had a job, actually, that I was offered around that time, 2019 or so, that on paper sounded like an amazing job. It was incredible. Nobody -- everyone would have said, oh, my God! That's incredible! You have an amazing job. But when I got on the phone with my moai, they were saying to me, you're saying all the right things, but you don't sound excited. There's something that's missing. It sounds like you're trying to convince yourself to take this job. And I reflected on it, and they were right. And I ultimately said no to that job. In retrospect, thank goodness. It wasn't the right fit. It was one of those jobs that was good to have but not good to do. That was really important.

So these are the things that I do in my life. But it is a work in progress. I go through periods where I feel more disconnected than others. This is an ongoing process. And I think just like we work at staying in the gym and eating healthy, I think we have to work on building a cadence of social engagement in our lives that keeps us connected.

>> REKHA: We've been given the five-minute warning, actually, about five minutes ago. Oh, one minute now, right. Okay. So can I just ask a question of my own?

>> VIVEK: Yeah.

>> REKHA: You wrote about one of your patients. So tonight there is a \$1.1 billion Powerball drawing, I believe it is, or mega millions. Can you share the story of your patient who was struggling, because of something to do with the lottery?

>> VIVEK: Yes. When I was -- lived in Boston years ago, I had a patient who came to see me in the clinic. And I hadn't met him before, so I was learning his story for the first time. And one of the first things he said to me when he walked in, I won the lottery, and it was the worst thing that ever happened to me. And I thought he was speaking in metaphors. Oh, what kind of lottery are we talking about, et cetera? But he was literally talking about the lottery. And he said that before winning the lottery, he had this great job in the hospitality industry. He had colleagues he loved. He had clients who really enjoyed his work. He lived in a pretty modest house in a pretty modest neighborhood.

But he knew his neighbors and, you know, it felt like a neighborhood. It felt like home. Now, after he won the lottery, he figured, I don't have to work anymore. So he quit his job. He moved to a really fancy community by the water. He bought the big house. And he found himself all alone. Right? He didn't have his neighbors anymore. There were big walls between all the houses. He didn't have his coworkers. There was nobody who was appreciating the work he was doing. And there were no more clients there.

And he became sadder and sadder and angrier and angrier because one interesting thing is among older men, loneliness often manifests as anger and irritability. I see a lot of women nodding who may have experienced this directly in their own relationships, perhaps.

(Laughter)

And shortly after that, he developed high blood pressure and diabetes, and that's what brought him to come see me. And I think about that story often because it's not just a story about loneliness. It's a story about what we teach our kids is important in life, about what success is.

One of the questions I've been asking students as I've traveled around the country is how do you define success? And what they often tell me is what society is telling them, which is they say society is telling us to be successful, we have to build our brand. We've got to build followers. We've got to find a way to be famous and become an influencer. That that -- then we can be successful, make lots of money, and if we're famous and we're rich, then we've made it. Right?

But I suspect many of us know people who are famous and rich and who are really unhappy. And those who are famous and rich and happy will probably tell you that it wasn't the fame or the wealth that actually primarily made them happy. It was something else. And that something else is what I've been clued into over the years through not because of any wisdom I have but because of what patients have told me over the years.

You know, in those final moments when you're blessed to be able to sit with somebody toward the end of their life, when you are able to, as I've been able to sit down and hold their hand and hear the stories they tell about their life, about what really mattered in their life, those stories, I have found, are not about how many followers they had on Instagram or how much money they had in the bank. Those stories are about their relationships. It's about the people they loved, people who love them, the people who broke their hearts.

The truth is we don't have to wait till the end of our lives to recognize that powerful lesson, that it's our relationships that truly matter when it comes to our happiness and

well-being.

We can recognize that right now. We can help teach that to our children right now. But the message many of our kids are getting today is very different. A lot of the messages coming to them from different channels, from social media, traditional media, from conversations. Think about who we write books about, who we make movies about. Those are the people we hold up as models of success, and our kids are listening. They watch. And they take in that success, again, is about fame, followers, and fortune.

So we have to fundamentally shift the models of success that we hold up for our kids. And, you know, I think that at a time when so many people are not feeling it grounded, right, when we're feeling like, gosh, there's so much happening in the world. It's almost like we're caught in a hurricane. And every time we open up our phones or look at the headlines, it feels like a new gust of wind is, like, whipping by, you know, and pushing us off center with some new tragedy that's taking place in the world. We're constantly hit with everything that is wrong and broken about the world, and it's hard, and it's hard not just because I think it's somewhat distorted, that we are hearing much more about the bad than about the good, but it's hard because our roots have become weaker over time.

This is something that my mother, who was my first spiritual teacher in life, taught me. She said, Vivek, as you grow up -- she was, you know, just an incredible human being, my mother, and continues to be, and reminded, she just called me, actually, before I got on. I have to call her. But she taught me, she said, long after your dad and I are gone, she's, like, you have to be able to manage yourself. And that means you're going to need strong roots. And I remember telling her, what do you mean, strong roots? Well, the roots I want to give to you are the roots that you'll have from family, from faith, from community, from purpose. She's, like, this is what will help you feel grounded.

And I think about that a lot because many young people tell me that not only that they're getting lonelier, the people, the roots, are dwindling, but in terms of purpose, the root -- the purpose of roots is often purpose that's grounded in something bigger than ourselves, right? Service also roots us. When we serve our people, it's not just good for them. It lifts us up. We have a lot of science that tells us.

But these three critical things, purpose, service, relationships, these are all dwindling in people's lives. And so I don't think it's also surprising that we are also feeling more buffeted by these storms when the roots are dwindling. So I think the challenge for me as a parent raising children who are 6 and 7, the challenging thing for all of us is people who care about children, whether we're parents or grandparents ourselves or people who have kids in our life is to figure out how do we rebuild relationships, a sense of purpose, engagement with service for our young people and for all of us? How do we rebuild the ethic in society that it is actually our connection to one another and our commitment to one another that actually will help lift us all up and help us thrive? Like, that's the challenge that we face today.

It's not something you can pass along and solve, right? But it's part of what I think of as a critical struggle that we have right now in our country and increasingly around the world between the forces of love and fear. Right? Fear is pulling us toward insecurity and anger. But there's love also in our lives, which many of us feel, you

know, which prompts us to be generous and kind and thoughtful and compassionate.

And right now, like, the world is telling our kids that to be kind and compassionate is to be weak. Right? And that's not true. That's not what life experience tells us, but that's what the narrative tells them around us.

And so I'll lastly say this, that in that struggle between love and fear, what we have to recognize is that our kids from their earliest ages are hardwired for love, that their true nature is to be kind, is to be empathetic. And things happen to them over time that tell them that that doesn't matter, they have to hide that, or that's weak. And they shift in a different direction.

And we have to change that, because this is about returning fundamentally to our greatest source of strength. My son, who is 7 years old, he taught me this the other day, because I was at the dining table with my two kids. And my daughter reached over to give me something. And I instinctively just reached for it, forgetting that for the last couple of months I had been dealing with this frozen shoulder, which means that when I make sudden movements, I'll get this lancing pain that goes through my shoulder. So I reached for it, then realized, oh, my God, this is so painful. I dropped to my knees, holding my shoulder.

But at that moment my eyes were squeezed shut. I was trying to, like, push the pain away. I felt a small hand gently on my shoulder. I felt a small head tilt and lean against my head. And I opened my eyes, and there was my son, holding me. Not because anyone taught him that that's how you respond to pain or suffering, but because he instinctively knew, that as human beings, you respond to each other. We take care of each other. We're connected to each other. Our kids know this from their earliest of ages. And we just need to remember that that beauty and that goodness that's inside our children is inside us, too.

It may be buried under layers of cynicism and worry and anxiety and disappointment over the years, but it's there. And our challenge today is to scrape off all those coverings that are hiding that deep love and compassion inside us, to courageously express that and extend that to other people in our life, to hold up those in our communities who are kind and compassionate and generous as role models for our kids to see. And if we do that, then we will build a society that's connected where people thrive, and most importantly, our children are happy, healthy, and fulfilled.

>> REKHA: That is so beautifully put. And I want to thank you for giving such a wise and compassionate message to us today, and also for uplifting the messages about loneliness from a personal problem to a societal problem that we all need to pay attention to. This has been wonderful. Thank you so much for being here.

>> VIVEK: Thank you.

>> REKHA: Really appreciate it.

(Applause)