

## Attending an open mic event can have some serious health benefits

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The evening begins with an open mic. Volunteers from the audience share their writing and we applaud after each poem. While I don't remember names, I do remember the poems - the poets' truth, voice and story. Most recently, my son and I went to Art Walk: Literature on the Lawn, hosted by Inlandia Institute, in front of the downtown Riverside Public Library. As usual, I left feeling more optimistic and happy. My son and I enjoyed a lively conversation about the different poems and poets, and the lady who wore a unique skirt with tiny lights like stars, creating a mood of magic in dusk.

In *The Gift of Imperfection*, Dr. Brené Brown explains that, "We cultivate love when we allow our most vulnerable and powerful selves to be deeply seen and known, and when we honor the spiritual connection that grows from that offering with trust, respect, kindness and affection." Everyone who participates in an open mic is brave in allowing themselves to be so vulnerable. Open mics are a safe place for people to explore new ideas and reveal struggles and emotions that often are not talked about at work or in the course of everyday chats.

As a black mother of two sons, when I hear about young black men being murdered I have a place where I can mourn and reveal my own fears I have for my sons' safety. This giving voice to what I would otherwise not talk about is a healing because I know I am not alone. Sharing my writing or listening to others, I always leave feeling inspired, energized and more connected with my past – my future and everyone around me. From what research reveals, this feeling of connectedness, empathy, and well-being is not unique. This face-to-face bond of trust between reader and listener is part of the antidote suggested to help alleviate our current epidemic of loneliness.

Loneliness is different from being alone. As we all might have experienced at one time or another, one can feel lonely in the midst of a crowd or sitting next to a loved one. Loneliness has to do with the feeling of being misunderstood by and disconnected from others. According to a nationwide [study](#) conducted by Cigna close to half of all Americans feel lonely, regardless of geographic location, gender, race or ethnicity. For a variety of reasons, those who are most prone to loneliness are Gen-z, people between the ages of 18 and 22, and the elderly. Lonely people are more often affected by physical and mental health problems, cardiovascular problems and premature death.

So what does all this dire news about loneliness have to do with open mics?

Jennifer Latson's article *A Cure for Disconnection* offers a variety of suggestions to help remedy loneliness. I am just going to mention a few that one might experience at an open mic.

1. *Face-to-face interaction.* At an open mic this would be a call and response - finger snaps - head nods, applauds, smiles, misty eye quiet confessions which boosts endorphins, the brain chemicals that ease pain and enhance well-being.
2. *Physical touch.* At an open mic a hug, handshake, dap, a squeeze of a hand, at a powerful moment, a tap on the shoulder, a pat on the back is healing medicine, releasing oxytocin which lowers stress and help fight infection and inflammation and strengthen social bonds.

3. *Talking about your feelings can make you feel less lonely.* At an open mic try a freestyle dare, share a poem you wrote, or read or recite a poem you like that says what you feel, even if it's not something you wrote.
4. *Just chatting about anything.* Research conducted by Susan Pinker, author of *The Village Effect* says, "We can feel much better after just 30 seconds of talking to someone in person." So, at an open mic linger a while, let a poet know what you enjoyed, talk about an idea or performance, find out about other readings, have a cup of coffee or tea with someone there.

There are a wide variety of readings with different age ranges and themes. Choosing one that compliments your age group and interests makes conversation more comfortable. Remember you don't have to participate in the open mic to reap the health benefits of just showing up and being an active listener. No dieting or exercising - this may be the easiest health improvement plan I have ever experienced.

*Romaine Washington, M.Ed. is a poet and an Inlandia Institute workshop leader in San Bernardino. She is the author of "Sirens in Her Belly", Jamii Publishing.*