

HAPPYTALISM, KEY TO RECONNECTION

(RE)CONNECTION IN THE AGE OF DIVISION

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By

L U I S G A L L A R D O

(Re)Connection in the Age of Division

We live in a divided world. And not just politically. The world economy is creating winners and losers, with no clear way to prosperity for millions of people. The last couple of decades have produced great inequality of wealth and, with it, unequal access to the reins of power. We are separated along local, regional, and borderlines, and we are divided into rural and urban parts. We increasingly struggle with differences of class, race, and religion.

But the polarization doesn't stop here. We are also divided politically and ideologically. Race wars, abortion, same-sex marriage, poverty, the use and abuse of power, environmental protection - you name it. These issues elicit strong feelings in people and cut deeply through the electorate. They are also reflected in evident partisan divisions that show up in elections and subsequent laws. The political parties worldwide play a more important role in how people vote and how they think about political issues than we imagine. And the news is no help in that matter.

Although many people reject any party allegiance, many of us lean to one side or the other, and whether we admit it or not, most of us follow its lead and vote for its candidates. These dividers are permeating world politics in a way that, just a couple of generations ago, would have been unimaginable. It is not just that public debate has become ruder, less civil, and mean-spirited. This polarization is interwoven into places we once thought were safe from it, such as the courts. These political, economic, and other polarizations are a clear result of us becoming more and more separated from ourselves, from others, and our planet.

So what do we, as humans, can do about this? The answer is not so complicated. We must boost public understanding about how to participate in the process, from the smallest towns to the biggest countries in the world. We have to be more mindful when it comes to public dialogue. We must strive for collaboration, cooperation, and compromise in all matters of human existence. Only then can we make our first step towards global human flourishing.

In work and life, we have to deal with others with civility and respect. We should try to recognize our differences and value the things we share in common. This means listening carefully, understanding the other's point of view, and finding a way to accommodate differences so that everyone can gain something rather than fights producing winners and losers.

It also means striving not to hurt others for our sake but instead persuading them to reach a result that helps everyone succeed. Finally, it means that we are all in this together, that we are all striving for the common good. The greatness of our species should rest on shared ideals that go beyond labels. Most of us want to believe that better days are ahead, that global and individual progress is possible, and that we can resolve any disagreements rationally and with civility and respect.

The Pandemic of Loneliness

Way before the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, loneliness was already recognized as a significant public health issue, prompting numerous countries to create a strategy to end loneliness. But with the start of the pandemic, and with such measures as lockdowns, shielding, and limiting contact with others, has left millions more dealing with social isolation, lengthy separations, and loneliness.

Disconnection

Loneliness is a feeling of being emotionally, socially, or existentially disconnected from other people. Loneliness is also associated with anxiety and has been directly linked to poor mental and physical health. But the effects of loneliness don't stop there. Unfortunately, loneliness is also a predictor of morbidity and mortality, with evidence of increased risks of cardiovascular diseases, type 2 diabetes, Alzheimer's disease, and poor mental health.

On top of all things mentioned, we live in such times where almost anything you order online can be quickly delivered to your doorstep. And, though this has its advantages, it also stops practically any need for 'going out into the world' and socializing. There is also so-called 'digital exclusion, where people with no understanding or access to new technologies are socially isolated.

In America, just in the past couple of decades, the number of people with zero friends has tripled! More than one-third of people over 45 report feeling lonely, with the predominance among those under 25 and over 65 years old. As former U.S. Surgeon General Vivek H. Murthy writes: 'We live in the most technologically connected age in the history of civilization, yet rates of loneliness have doubled since the 1980s.' What do these numbers tell us? That it's time for us to start seeing health as not only physical or mental but also social.

Key to Reconnection

What humankind desperately needs is a return to wholeness. Deep inside, most people struggle with loneliness due to the lack of awareness about their ultimate wounds (shame, guilt, rejection, denial, separation, repression). Instead of active healing of these wounds, people tend to lock themselves in their states of hurting. On a massive scale, this creates collective suffering, and collective suffering requires collective healing.

The first step is learning how to forgive and love ourselves. It is a reconnection with our basic personal potential and talent, discovering our life's purpose, and realizing our highest personal happiness. But, what are we actually reconnecting with? We are reconnecting with the light and universality of our being, letting our consciousness return to the natural balance. When our consciousness is balanced, then healing begins. From there, we can have the freedom to be, consciousness to expand and evolve, and happiness to share.

The Loneliness Epidemic

“Why do people have to be this lonely? What's the point of it all? Millions of people in this world, all of them yearning, looking to others to satisfy them, yet isolating themselves. Why? Was the earth put here just to nourish human loneliness?” - Haruki Murakami

How can it be that the most connected society in the history of humankind is also the loneliest? It's so easy to forget how far we've come. We've gone from phone calls to text messages to video chats in just a couple of decades. Now we can instantly call anyone across the world and feel more connected with them, something that was practically impossible at any other point in history. Yet, during the same period of digital evolution that brought us online shopping and dating, a generation that lives better than the aristocracy of previous times has found itself more secluded than ever.

Why do we, even after meeting all of our basic needs, feel so lonely? Why are we unhappy and even depressed? Professor John Cacioppo, a US social neuroscientist and a leading expert in the world of loneliness, explains it like this: ‘Why does humankind exist? One major reason is that our ancestors on the savannas of Africa were really good at one thing. They weren't bigger nor faster than the animals they were hunting, but they were excellent at banding together into groups and cooperating (just like the bees evolve to live in a hive). Therefore, humans managed to survive and evolve because they were living in tribes.’

This is undoubtedly true because if you were to be banished from the tribe, you were depressed and anxious for all the right reasons. You would be in grave danger because surviving on your own would be almost impossible. However, current generations are the first people ever in the long history of our species who are trying to disband the tribes, consequently making them feel awful. So how do we solve the problems of seclusion, polarization, and loneliness?

People need to be seen. As mentioned, although we live in digital times where we can speak to whomever with just a click of a button, we still don't feel heard or seen as we are when we talk with others in person. People need to feel they belong. They need to feel their lives have meaning and purpose. We need to know that others see us and value us. And though our society is good at so many things, we've been getting less and less good at meeting these deep underlying psychological needs.

We are obsessed with money and status. We think that our personal wealth will help us acquire the things we need to have a meaningful and satisfying life. But, these are all junk values. So, let me ask you one thing: imagine you are on your deathbed, and you are thinking about your life. Will you think about all the pretty stuff you bought or the likes you got on your social media, or will you think about the moments of love, meaning, and connection?

Naturally, people who don't have their basic needs met tend to feel more anxious and depressed, but what about those with reasonably good income levels? Stuff and money can, to some extent, make us happy, but if we constantly seek it, then this leads to a corruption of values that makes us more unhappy than we can imagine. We need to strive to step off the treadmill and enjoy this limited amount of time we have on this planet. We need to chase real values and things that make our lives more meaningful. This is the right step towards human flourishing.

Solving the Loneliness Epidemic

A year and a half ago, due to the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, the world was thrown into such challenging measures as self-isolation and social distancing. This situation has introduced severe loneliness consequences to many who had never experienced it before, at least not in such a prolonged way. But, the COVID-19 pandemic has only emphasized what millions of people already knew.

Just in the US, more than one-quarter of people over the age of 60 live alone, and more than 43% of them have reported they were lonely even before the pandemic. Loneliness spares no one, whether they are young or old. In fact, according to a recent Cigna study, those aged 18-22 have the highest loneliness scores on the Cigna US Loneliness Index.

Loneliness has significant health consequences, no matter the person's age. According to Julianne Holt-Lunstad, a psychology professor at Brigham Young University, social isolation and loneliness can be equally damaging to people's health as smoking fifteen cigarettes a day! Loneliness also contributes to early morbidity and mortality. In addition, lonely people are also at a greater risk of cardiovascular disease, dementia, obesity, depression and are more likely to lose the ability to perform their daily tasks.

The problem has become so severe that in 2018, then British Prime Minister Theresa May appointed the first Minister of Loneliness, announcing a national strategy to fight one of our time's most significant public health challenges.

We Have to Do More

To truly tackle this problem, people need to do more. We need to see ourselves not just as individuals but as members of our communities. We need to visit our older neighbors and check up on our aging parents more often. We need to call our friends and ask our colleagues how their day is going and take time to listen to them when they need a friend.

We also need to implement good ideas and increase social connectedness on a grander scale. Everything starts with ourselves. If we decide to care for each other like we used to, we can solve this issue tomorrow. Just imagine if we could help others by extending the hand of friendship and togetherness. Wouldn't that be an excellent service to humankind? But first, we need to understand our 'opponent,' and its causes and the effects.

The Effects of Loneliness

Loneliness. A universal human emotion, both complex and unique to every person. Worldwide, loneliness levels have never been higher. In America, nearly half of adults report they either sometimes or always feel alone. In Japan, for example, an estimated half-million people, known as Hikikomori, shut themselves away for months on end, while in the UK, four in ten citizens report feelings of chronic and profound loneliness.

These numbers are alarming, and unfortunately, with the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, they are still growing. The effects of loneliness can be various and very much serious for both physical and mental health. Julianne Holt-Lunstad, Ph.D., a professor of psychology and neuroscience at Brigham Young University, says:

"There is robust evidence that social isolation and loneliness significantly increase risk for premature mortality, and the magnitude of the risk exceeds that of many leading health indicators." As I said, the issue is quite alarming.

To decrease such health risks, numerous campaigns and coalitions all around from Australia, United Kingdom, to Denmark have been launched to reduce loneliness and social isolation. These programs gather research experts, government and nonprofit agencies, community groups, and volunteers to raise the awareness of loneliness and tackle the loneliness and isolation issues through evidence-based interventions and advocacy.

But, is this a growing problem, or is it a condition that we've always experienced? Are we becoming lonelier or just ready to recognize and talk about it?

What is Loneliness?

While common definitions of loneliness define it as a state of solitude, or simply put, 'being alone,' loneliness is, in fact, a state of mind. Researchers describe loneliness as feeling lonely more than once a week.

Loneliness is a heavy emotion. It causes people to feel alone, empty, and unwanted. Lonely people often crave human contact, but their mindset makes it more challenging to form meaningful connections with others. According to experts, loneliness is not necessarily about being physically alone. Instead, a person can feel isolated and lonely even in the crowd. This is how loneliness works into their state of mind.

Causes of Loneliness

Loneliness can be caused by both internal and external factors—for example, physical isolation, divorce, or moving to another location. The death of a family member or anyone significant in a person's life can also cause loneliness. It can also be a symptom of a psychological disorder such as anxiety or depression.

Loneliness can also be related to such internal factors as low self-esteem. People with a lack of confidence in themselves often believe that they are not worthy of the attention of other people, which leads to social isolation and chronic loneliness.

Health Risks of Loneliness

Loneliness has a broad spectrum of adverse effects on both physical and mental health, including:

- Alcoholism;
- Drug use;
- Antisocial behavior;
- Cardiovascular disease;
- Progression of Alzheimer's disease;
- Memory decline;
- Poor decision-making;
- Difficulties with learning;
- Increased stress levels;
- Depression and suicide.

However, these are not the only ways in which loneliness can take its toll. Lonely people also get less exercise, have poor diets, sleep problems, and have more daytime fatigue. Loneliness even disrupts the regulation of cellular processes deep within our bodies, predisposing us to premature aging. Loneliness can even be contagious! According to this study, loneliness can easily spread in social networks. The results indicated that people close to a lonely person are 52% more likely to become lonely as well. According to another study, loneliness may also increase inflammation. The study explains that lonely people have higher biomarkers of inflammation, reduced activity of anti-viral genes, and increased activity of inflammatory genes.

Loneliness as a Health Hazard

Loneliness and the lack of social interaction can be serious health hazards that might be as lethal as chronic smoking or obesity. Unfortunately, most people underestimate just how important it is to have a social support system. Men and younger people are typically most likely to undervalue the role of social connection. You may think this makes sense since women tend to be more friendly and actively engaged in maintaining their social networks.

People often overlook that our psychological health and well-being are tightly connected to our physical health and well-being. So, when we starve your mind, heart, and soul of social connection, we are starving our bodies too, from something it desperately needs.

As mentioned, socially isolated people put themselves in various physical health risks. Recent studies have found that:

- Loneliness considerably increases the risk of premature death from all causes, rivaling such issues as smoking, obesity, and physical inactivity;
- Loneliness is associated with around 50% increased risk of dementia;
- Loneliness is associated with a 29% increased risk of heart disease and 32% increased risk of stroke;
- Among people with heart failure issues, loneliness is associated with a nearly four times increased risk of death, 57% increased risk of emergency visits, and 68% increased risk of hospitalization.

Loneliness as a Mental Health Hazard

Chronic loneliness and social isolation are a different story altogether from occasional feelings of loneliness or cravings of solitude. When mixed with existing mental health problems, it can be pretty dangerous.

Researchers associate loneliness with various mental health problems. Among these are anxiety, depression, sleep problems, low self-esteem, and increased stress. People can even get stuck in a never-ending cycle of thinking that their mental health problems make them lonely and that loneliness damages their mental health. It is a genuinely vicious, unrelenting cycle.

The impact of loneliness and social isolation on mental health can include:

- Withdrawing and deepening the sense of isolation. Lonely people can gradually lose their understanding of how to be with others socially, so they tend to withdraw further, and their lives become small and limited;
- Going hand to hand with depression. It's difficult to say whether loneliness causes depression or depression causes loneliness, but the effects are very much the same;

- Social situation anxiety. Unused to socializing, lonely people tend to avoid social events;
- Poor quality relationships. The worst kind of loneliness is the one in a crowded room.

Finding a solution to the loneliness epidemic in a meaningful way is a challenging thing, and it likely involves not just an individual effort but also community and policy efforts. But, we can all do something - reaching out to friends and neighbors, rekindling old connections, and calling up your family are all great ways to be a little bit more social and help those around you to do the same. In other words, we need an antidote to loneliness.

The Antidote to Loneliness

Human beings are social creatures by nature. We long to connect with others, and we want to be seen, acknowledged, valued, and loved. Likewise, it is customary to want to have someone you can love and care for in return. Yet, despite these facts, loneliness is a growing epidemic.

Way before the coronavirus pandemic, loneliness was already a serious issue. However, with the onset of the current pandemic, loneliness has become a chronic problem. The COVID-19 pandemic and the resulting social isolation have quickly turned our hyper-connected world into one that feels detached and secluded.

Fortunately, the recognition of the dangers loneliness and social isolation pose is also growing. Loneliness has been associated with anxiety and depression, insomnia, lowered functioning of the immune and cardiovascular systems, cognitive decline, and even death.

Loneliness is a global problem. In the UK, prime minister Theresa May appointed a Minister of Loneliness after receiving a report that more than 9 million people in the UK often or always feel lonely. In Norway, 16% of the population reported that they are lonely almost every day. According to a global survey, Brazil has the highest percentage of people experiencing loneliness, including Turkey, India, and Saudi Arabia.

What can we now expect from these times we live in? What can we do to fight off loneliness?

Loneliness Antidote

Michelle Gielan, a founder and researcher at the Institute of Applied Positive Research, says that social connections, ones with depth, breadth, and meaning, are the greatest predictors of our long-term happiness. "Any time we make an investment in social connection, we are combating loneliness," she explains.

She puts part of the blame for human disconnection on our increasing reliance on electronic communication, as well as social media and the news in general. However, technology can't replace the strength and impact of face-to-face interaction. We've evolved as people BECAUSE we've been with others.

But, simply gathering people in one place for the sake of connecting won't, on its own, build those connections. John Cacioppo, the founder of the University of Chicago's Center for Cognitive and Social Neuroscience, makes the distinction between objective isolation (where people are objectively alone) and perceived isolation (where people feel like they are alone, even when surrounded by others). What his research has shown is that perceived isolation is more harmful.

The Solution

While social events can gather people for learning opportunities and making connections, there are specific approaches companies, organizations, schools, and even families can take to combat loneliness and help others forge genuine relationships with one another. Here are a couple of suggestions:

Boost the sense of belonging: Sense of belonging is vital, considering the groups and labels people give to themselves and others. We belong to families, sports teams, various groups, charities, and political parties, to name a few. It is fundamental to the way humans organize themselves. The most critical step to boosting a sense of belonging is effort - so, put in the effort to gather and engage others in any activity that can benefit you and your participants.

Reduce uncertainty: Uncertainty triggers the threat response, which can force a person to isolate themselves. Actions like proper scheduling and planning can help with decreasing uncertainty, increasing predictability, and minimizing the number of social threats at events.

Form connections: Ask your participants to partner up with the person next to them, helping them to connect with their partner instantly. For organizations and companies of all kinds, there are unlimited opportunities for creating experiences for participants to share and make meaningful connections.

Encourage social-impact activities: Michele Gilean was once the first speaker of the day at a corporate event where participants who worked for the same company had spent the previous night serving dinner at a homeless shelter. She says that their energy was 'in a different stratosphere.' Coming together and doing something for the community changes how we perceive the world around us. This way, you create an event where people can make meaningful connections while doing something good for others.

Happytalism as a New Mindset

"Until you make the unconscious conscious, it will direct your life and you will call it faith." - Carl Jung. Practicing empathy, compassion, and consciousness can help prevent and reduce chronic loneliness. As far as compassion goes, we need to divide compassion towards others and compassion towards ourselves. Self-compassion is learning how not to be hard on yourself. We all make mistakes, but we can also have the will to mend things. We need to tap into our spiritual selves (regardless of our beliefs) and awaken our consciousness to accept and love ourselves fully. Once we can value ourselves, we can feel the same for others.

When we are unconscious, we are not aware of problems, obstacles, and limiting beliefs in our character and life, which can be a significant problem. When we are unconscious and shut off, we cannot recognize the things that hinder our growth. When we are unaware of specific issues within our character or life, they can have complete control over us. With time, our lives can go in the opposite direction of how we wanted them to go because we failed to practice awareness and consciousness.

For example - A man who is addicted to arguing turns this lousy habit into an unconscious mechanism. Because of this, everyone around him perceives him negatively, and he fails to create meaningful relationships. In this way, unconsciousness is highly destructive. The unconscious way we deal with relationships can destroy them, the way we eat can ruin our health, the cruel way we treat our environment destroys the place we live in.

The change starts with awareness and self-compassion and continues with learning from meaningful relationships and contributing to the common good. Being mindful, centered, calm, and conscious is the solution to human issues, both on a small and grand scale.

Once we can value ourselves, we can feel the same for others. Once we feel the same for others, we're effectively working against polarization and disconnection from self, others, and nature. A goal truly worth living for!

Happytalism as a movement and organization works to promote all the levels of human flourishing. If you want your life to be more than the mundane passing of time and participate in worthwhile efforts that go beyond personal satisfaction, connect with us. We want to see you free, conscious, aware, and most of all - happy.

<https://www.worldhappiness.foundation/>