

Satisfying Our Hunger for Companionship

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Anyone born in the thirties, forties, fifties and even the sixties will no doubt remember a time when the milkman's bill would be settled by leaving the money outside on the door step under the milk bottle, something that would be inconceivable today. Or you may recall when you never locked your door, day or night, everyone knew their neighbours and everyone was always looking out for each other. The thought of establishing a new MP to tackle loneliness during those decades would have been a farcical notion because no such post was needed. The community spirit, neighbourly concern and family unity was very different back then compared to today. In the past decades, we have seen family life deteriorate, divorce and single parent families have skyrocketed¹. It is a sad reality of our modern age that millions around the world are tormented with the terrible burden of loneliness and social isolation.

Loneliness and Social Isolation

Loneliness is a subjective emotion. In other words, it is based on or influenced by personal feelings or opinions. So, a person may feel a sense of lacking desired affection, or an absence of closeness and social interaction with others.² Whereas social isolation refers to a lack of contact with family, friends, companions, community involvement, or access to services.²

What we have seen is that loneliness and social isolation are a modern-day scourge one that is not a respecter of a person's gender or age. Teenagers, single people, the middle-aged and senior citizens have all known its bite. This invisible ailment cannot even be conquered with wealth and position, they cannot protect us from it. It is something that can strike us at any time in our lives leaving us as helpless victims. It is sad to say, but some even want to end their lives when faced with this burden. And the most surprising of findings from research is that if you are someone suffering from loneliness, it can produce definite physical and emotional symptoms that could seriously damage your health.^{1,3,4,5,6,7} The loss of a loving human companionship, and I am not just talking about losing someone in death, someone that we trusted and relied upon, but rather the absence of social contact in people's lives, from a friend, our family, people in the community, the loss of that human interaction, we can suffer with loneliness. Too many people are feeling unloved, unwanted and have no one to talk to and share their lives with. So why is loneliness and social isolation such a problem today? How bad is it really? Why is it such a hot topic for discussion reaching as far as the political arena? Who does it affect?

This article's aim is to explore these questions and more. Are there any dangers that are associated with loneliness? Can anything be done to combat this problem? Firstly, let us discuss what triggered this dialogue in the political agenda in the first place.

“Tackling Loneliness One Conversation at a Time” - Jo Cox

Joanne Cox, who was brutally murdered on 16th June 2016, is one of the first to bring the subject of loneliness to the fore front, so that people have an awareness and so that it is firmly on the political agenda today. Jo was elected as a labour MP for Batley and West Yorkshire in 2015 and she quickly got to work to raise the profile of this epidemic crisis of loneliness. Jo, along with the conservative MP Seema Kennedy and Rachel Reeves MP, who have continued this work, set up a cross-party commission of MPs and Charities to highlight the fact that we can all do something to help lonely people in our community. It is of interest that Jo herself, had her own experience in this matter. Upon finding herself a 'fish out of water' at university she experienced deep loneliness⁸. So, who is affected by loneliness?

Loneliness Has No Discrimination”- Jo Cox

Can you resonate with any of the following?

“I’m cut off, sad, just putting in time. I’m alone. I eat alone, walk alone, sleep alone and talk to myself. There isn’t anyone around to hear me. Nobody except myself. There is no one I know that really understands me!” These suicide notes were the final plea of a person overwhelmed by loneliness.⁹

Loneliness is something that can affect anyone at any time. There may have been the tendency to associate loneliness with just old people. Indeed, research indicates that 3.6 million people aged 65 and over use television as the main form of company.¹⁰ More than 1 in 3 people aged 75 and over say that feeling of loneliness are out of their control. About 9 million people across England are lonely, many saying that they can go days, even with no social interaction at all.



However, findings show that it is definitely not just old people that can suffer with loneliness. The Office for National Statistics state that young adults are more likely to feel lonely than older age groups with almost 10% of people aged 16 to 24 were ‘always or often’ lonely.¹⁰ This is more than three times higher than people aged 65 and over. It may surprise us to think that with our digital world which young people are more involved in that they could possibly be lonely. Surely there should be no need for loneliness to flourish for anyone when there are Telephones, Smart Phones, The

Internet, Email. Facebook, FaceTime, Glide for texting and video calling, Messenger and of course we have Twitter and no doubt you could name many more modern ways to communicate. You can communicate with someone on the other side of the world with a touch of a button. The problem with the digital age is that it harms our ability to communicate face to face. Instead of bringing people together it actually makes people

more insular. So young or old from all backgrounds most people can feel moments of loneliness. The disability charity Scope UK uncovered the high level of loneliness experienced by working age people with disabilities, particularly young adults¹¹. From a survey of 1,004 people with disabilities, 45% of working age people with disabilities say they always or often feel lonely and 85% of young adults with disabilities (aged 18 to 34) feel lonely.^{12,13} Life and what it can throw at us can trigger feelings of loneliness for anyone. Perhaps you can resonate with some of these life changing events:

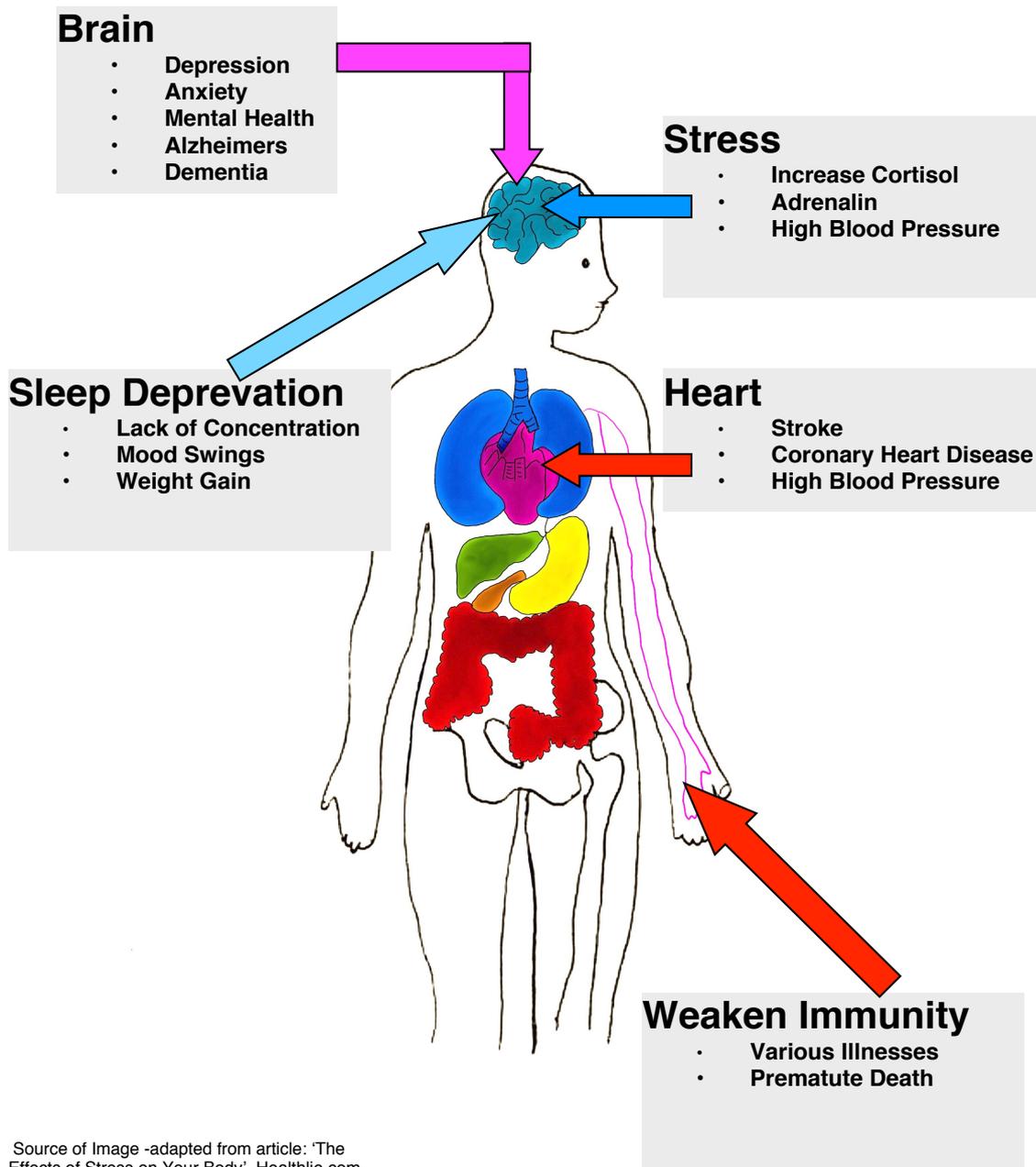
Leaving the care system. Young children and teenagers, not fitting in can face bullying at school and become withdrawn and isolated. There is an example of this. Recently (November 2018) it was reported on national television that a young Syrian refugee, aged 15, was attacked outside of Almondbury Community School in Huddersfield, West Yorkshire. A video of this awful and disturbing incident has been widely shared online. It shows the refugee being thrown to the ground and water poured onto his face.

Poor health can prevent us from associating the way we once did. Losing our home. Children growing up and leaving home and maybe living many miles away even abroad. Moving jobs or moving home to a new area. Divorce or a relationship break down. Having a disability of any kind. Can you imagine being Deaf or Deaf and Blind without companionship and support? That would indeed be incredibly lonesome. Equally, losing a life-long partner and companion in death. Retirement, moving into a care home, all these life changing events are, without a doubt, a cause of loneliness.

No doubt you could add many more scenarios to this list of life events that can trigger loneliness. Research however, has shown that loneliness, when it is sustained over a period of time, that is when the real damage both mentally and physically can occur. In fact, loneliness is one of the most pressing public health issues that we face today. So what sort of damage can loneliness and social isolation cause?

Impact on Health

When you think of a serious illness, loneliness might not be something that comes to your mind. But the evidence is growing which indicates that persistent social isolation and loneliness can have serious consequences to both the mental and physical well-being of a person. Researchers who analysed the results of 148 studies concluded that low social interaction is a predictor of early death and that as a risk factor, it is “twice as harmful as obesity”. Mark Robinson, former Chief Officer of Age UK Barnet said: “loneliness can kill.



Its proven to be worse for health than smoking 15 cigarettes a day.”¹⁴ One study showed that feelings of loneliness marked an increased risk for morbidity and mortality.¹⁴

Feeling lonely has been shown to increase blood pressure and the risk of cardiovascular diseases,¹⁵ Studies on loneliness have shown that lonely people have consistently elevated levels of cortisol or the ‘stress hormone’. Cortisol and adrenaline are released when feeling stressed, which has the effect of increasing the heart rate in the body, especially when this is prolonged it can disrupt most of the bodies processes. Chronic high blood pressure and prolonged increase of the heart rate can lead to heart disease.

Research reveals that feeling lonely can weaken the immune system,¹⁶ that is our natural bodies defence system. If this is weakened, then our bodies are more susceptible to

illness. A study,¹⁴ Loneliness, social network size, and immune response to influenza vaccination in college freshmen showed that those with both high levels of loneliness, coupled with a small social network did not produce antibodies quite as well as non-lonely people to the flu vaccine.

Loneliness can impair sleep quality which causes memory problems, trouble with thinking and concentration. It contributes to a weakened immunity and increases the risk of diabetes. Lack of sleep can lead to mood swings and heightens feelings of depression, anxiety and increase vulnerability¹⁶

Self-perceived loneliness doubles the risk of developing Alzheimer's disease.¹⁷ There is evidence that loneliness and social isolation are associated with reduced cognitive function. With one study showing that lonely people have a 64% increase chance of developing clinical dementia. It is, however, interesting to note that evidence shows that for the older ones that are actively socially engaged experience less cognitive decline and are less prone to dementia.¹⁸

Studies have also shown that people that are lonely can often choose a poor lifestyle in terms of behaviour. To alleviate the feelings of a meaningless life or depression, anxiety and social isolation, some use alcohol.¹⁹

A Political Issue

Loneliness is such a serious problem having an impact on the National Health System that on 17th January 2018 the UK Prime Minister, Theresa May, set out how the Government is tackling loneliness and combating social isolation²⁰. Theresa May said: "For far too many people, loneliness is a sad reality of modern life. I want to confront this challenge for our society and for all of us to take action to address the loneliness endured by elderly, by carers, by those who have lost loved ones. We should do everything we can to see that, in Jo's memory, we bring an end to the acceptance of loneliness for good." She added "Jo Cox was absolutely right to highlight the critical importance of this growing social injustice which sits alongside childhood obesity and mental wellbeing as one of the greatest public challenges of our time." So, what is the Government's strategy for tackling this crisis?

Firstly, A new minister, Tracey Crouch, was appointed to tackle this problem, she said this: "I am proud to take on the generational challenge to tackle an issue affecting about nine million UK people - young and old."

These are some of the Government proposals:

- Expansion of Social Prescribing across the country. This connects people to community groups and services through connector schemes where 'link workers' introduce people to support based on their individual needs
- Invest millions of pounds in ways of connecting people with community support to restore social contact
- Creating new community spaces such as community cafes, garden and art spaces
- To grow voluntary and charitable organisations
- Support development of Business Champions to tackle loneliness in the work place
- Encouraging simple acts of kindness from taking a moment to talk to a friend to helping someone in need

Can Care Homes Remove Loneliness?

Could care homes be the answer to combat loneliness in old age? After all, there are lots of other residents in the home to talk to and you have the 24 hour support from the carers. It seems like the ideal arrangement. However, when you look beyond the surface there are a number of pressing issues that make this ideal arrangement a massive concern. Research carried out by a PhD Student in the university for Health Research, shows that this 'ideal' arrangement is far from the truth. Sadly, more than 80% of older people with mental health problems, who were asked the question, 'Do you feel lonely?' have admitted to feeling lonely in their care home and long for staff to spend time with them.²¹ Once again, we see that a lack of connection with others, specifically not enough communication with care workers, no doubt because of their workload, is making many residents wish for more quality time to talk to staff. Furthermore, staff at care homes are often paid the minimum wage or a low wage, coupled with the huge work load, there is no surprise that there is a high turnover in staff within these care homes which will not help with the continuity of communication with the residents.

There is another problem that has to be tackled. The Government has to face a growing crisis in social care after a number of care home businesses are going bust. One report estimates that nursing homes are closing at the rate of one per week in England.²² Mike Padgham, Chairman of the Independent Care Group said “ These figures come as no surprise, we have been warning for years that the £6 billion cut from social care would eventually see more care homes closing - and here we have the evidence.”²³ The Charity Age UK have highlighted this same issue. As a result of local council funding cuts, care homes are struggling with debts. They have warned that social care is at risk of imminent collapse in the worst affected areas, that almost 1.2 million people aged 65 and over do not receive the care and support they need with essential daily activities such as eating, dressing and bathing, and that half a million older people spend every day alone. Caroline Abrahams, Director of External Affairs Age UK, made a sobering thought. Closure of care homes will have an effect on those that live in them. She said “ these figures reflect that the care system is underfunded and in crisis. When an older person goes into a care home they want to view that as somewhere there’ll be left in peace to live their life and not having worry and anxiety that they could have to move... they need continuity not unsettling change.”²⁴

An increase in cost, a cut of budgets and a fall in profit margins has indeed created a crisis. This matter is of great importance because of the rapid growth of the ageing population in the UK and the increasing number of adults with mental health issues creates a huge problem. According to the Office of National Statistic (ONS) one in twelve of the population is projected to be aged 80 and over by 2037, which means that loneliness is going to become more of a problem over time. It is worrying that more and more care home closures could leave vulnerable older and disabled people with nowhere to go. Age UK have highlighted this that with the deep cuts of the Local Authority’s budgets since 2011 have led to a major deterioration in social care at the same time as demand for it is increasing.

Conquering Loneliness

Robert J. Waldinger is an American psychiatrist and Professor at Harvard Medical School. He is known for a TED talk about his findings from the Grant Study, a 75-year-long Harvard study on adult happiness. This study tracked the lives of 724 men, about 60 of these men, at the time of his talk were still alive most were now age 90.²⁵ The clearest message that they got from this study is this:

“Good relationships keep us happier and healthier”.

The following lessons were learnt.

- Social connections are really good for us • Loneliness kills
- People that are more socially connected to family, friends and their community are happier. They are physically healthier and they live longer than people that are less well connected
- It's not just the number of friends you have or whether we are in a relationship, but it's the quality of your close relationships that matter
- Good relationships don't just protect our bodies they protect our brains. Being in a securely attached relationship to another in your 80's is protective
- People who are in relationships, where they really feel they can count on the other person in times of need, those people's memories stay sharper longer.

Dr James Lynch of the University of Maryland School of Medicine agreed with these findings. He said “The mandate to ‘Love your neighbour as yourself’ is not just a moral mandate. It is a physiological mandate. Caring is biological. The more connected you are in life the healthier you are.”²⁶

Satisfying Our Hunger for Companionship - First Steps

We all have an innate need to satisfy our hunger for social connection, for friends, companions and for good relationships. As human beings we are social creatures and we thrive on this and without it we become lonely and slowly deteriorate both mentally and physically. There are no doubts that first steps to this challenging problem have been taken. With an injection of £20 million of funding, from the UK Government, including £11.5 million Building Connections Fund to support voluntary, community and charitable organisations, these are indeed steps to tackle loneliness. However, the UK Governments vision is for this country to be a place where we can all have strong social relationships, will not be solved with money alone. Many more steps will be needed to connect older people with new ones. Helping them feel like they have a role in society will no doubt help to reduce loneliness. Steps will be needed to tackle loneliness without stigma or shame so that everyone looks out for one another. Whether this can be achieved and the negative effects of loneliness-and social isolation be conquered and our hunger for companionship is truly satisfied, only time will tell.

Conclusions

- Decades ago the Community Spirit was more connected in comparison to today, and loneliness was less of an issue
- Loneliness can affect anyone, rich or poor, at anytime, it has no discrimination
- Sustained periods of loneliness can seriously damage your health, both mentally and physically and can be worse for you than smoking fifteen cigarettes a day
- Loneliness kills
- It is on the political agenda being described as one of the greatest public challenges of our time. For the first time in history a new minister has been appointed to tackle this problem
- Care homes are not the solution, with residents claiming that they are still isolated and lonely
- Good relationships keep us happier and healthier.

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