

COVID-19 and Its Tsunami of Loneliness ©

How Social Distancing Brings Loneliness Into All Our Lives

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For the 35% among us who were already chronically lonely,¹ the arrival of COVID-19 hit like a hurricane storm surging up on shore precisely at high tide. But what about the loneliness we all feel in the midst of the pandemic?

The History of Loneliness in Two Paragraphs

There was little or no socially produced loneliness in traditional society.² Before the industrial revolution, individual lives took place within tightly interlaced networks of connection. The word *family*—presumably for the entire history of mankind up to that point—had denoted what in our era we call *extended family*. On top of this intergenerational connectivity, each traditional family was inextricably enmeshed in its particular community. And it was within that community that people grew up alongside their cousins and childhood friends, married someone their parents knew and approved of, and grew old among those they had known their entire life.

Chronic loneliness as we know it was an unintended consequence of the urbanization that accompanied industrialization. In fact, the word “loneliness” only came into the English language around the year 1800.³ Prior to that, there simply had not been enough social space to allow a psychologically healthy person to become chronically lonely.

An Epidemic of Loneliness

But that was then. Today in the United States, just under two-thirds of us live in an urban setting,⁴ and we do so outside of most of the traditional family and community networks of yesteryear. It is in this setting that chronic loneliness has become, in the words of the U.S. Surgeon General, “epidemic.”⁵ As for what is left of “family,” recent studies have shown that

¹ Edmonson, Brad, “All The Lonely People,” *AARP The Magazine*. November/December 2010.

² No doubt there was some degree of psychologically induced loneliness—the subjective sensation of loneliness in particular individuals that is derived from their failed relationships. But that is a very different topic.

³ Alberti, Fay. “The History of Loneliness.” *The Week*. October 13, 2018. But see: Worsley, Amelia. “A History of Loneliness.” *The Conversation*. March 19, 2018. Worsley located the word “loneliness” listed in a glossary of “infrequently used words” written in 1674 by the naturalist, John Ray.

⁴ www.census.gov/newsroom-releases/2015/xb15-33.html. “U.S. Cities are Home to 62.7 Percent of the U.S. Population, but Comprise Just 3.5 Percent of Land Area.”

⁵ Murthy, Vivek, Surgeon General of the United States. *Together*. HarperCollins. 2020; pp. 25 ff.

the nuclear family of post-WWII suburbia is fast becoming an endangered species—reminiscent of what happened to the multi-generational family two centuries ago. In 2018, 28% of adult households in the U.S. were single person households,⁶ and only half of the adult population was married (versus 58% in 1990).⁷ As for the life-long interpersonal networks that had comprised everyday life in the world of community-- most of us now live in urban settings where we barely know the names of our neighbors. We truly have become “strangers in a strange land.”

Given all this, it’s hardly surprising to learn that in 2010, 35% of respondents described themselves as chronically lonely, up from 20% in 1990.⁸

Then Came The Pandemic

Then, on top of this “high tide” of loneliness, came the psychological tsunami of COVID-19. Suddenly we are yet further separated and distanced from one-another. We are masked, gloved, and advised not to touch or brush up against one another—save only for those at home (if you’re lucky enough to have someone at home).

According to a Kaiser Family Foundation study of March 2020, about 45% of surveyed adults reported that “the pandemic has affected their mental health,” with 19% saying that it did so with major impact-- especially for women and people of color.⁹ We know from past epidemics that we can expect a material increase in panic behavior and collective hysteria,¹⁰ and we already see signs of this in findings from current studies about increased hopelessness, desperation, and suicide.¹¹ We know from a Korean study earlier this year that respondents who saw themselves as living cut off from their family members-- along with those who reported a low level of support from their personal social networks-- were far more likely to experience the pandemic with pervasive anxiety.¹²

While unquestionably there are additional psychological and personality disorders that are aggravated by the pandemic and its aftereffects, surely one among them is loneliness. We know now that the effects of this COVID-19-invoked-loneliness will not be limited to the additional

⁶ Vespa, Jonathan; Lewis, Jamie M., and Kreider, Rose M. “America’s Families and Living Arrangements: 2012 (Washington, DC; US Census Bureau Report, 2013).

⁷ Geiger A.W. and Livingston Gretchen. “Eight Facts about Love and Marriage in America.” *FactTank*. The Pew Research Center. <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/02/13/8-facts-about-love-and-marriage/>

⁸ Edmonson, Brad, “All The Lonely People,” *AARP The Magazine*. November/December 2010.

⁹ Panchal, Nirmita; Kamal, Rabah; et al. Kaiser Family Foundation. “The Implications of COVID-19 for Mental Health and Substance Abuse.

August 21, 2020. <https://www.kff.org/coronavirus-covid-19/issue-brief/the-implications-of-covid-19-for-mental-health-and-substance-use/>

¹⁰ Barbisch D, Koenig IKL, Shih FY. “Is There a Case for Quarantine? Perspectives from Ebola.” *Disaster Med Public Health Prep*, 2015; 9:547-53.

¹¹ Thakur V, Jain A. “COVID2019-suicides: A Global Psychological Pandemic.” *Brain Behavior Immun*. 2020; S0889-1591:30643-7. See also: Orsolini L, Latini R, Pompili M, Serafini F, Volpe U, Vellante F, et al. “Understanding the Complex of Suicide in Depression: From Research to Clinics.” *Psychiatry Investigations* 2020; 17:207-21.

¹² Lee M, You M. “Psychological and Behavioral Responses in South Korea During the Early States of Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19).” *International Journal of Environmental Residential Public Health* 2020; 17:2977.

havoc it will cause in the lives of those who suffer from chronic loneliness.¹³ It will also affect the rest of us, if to a more modest extent.¹⁴ We each now find ourselves compelled to remain separated and distant from important people in our lives—including people we love. This imposition of disconnection rouses in us the sensation of loneliness, and what we sense when we feel lonely and disconnected, is *pain*, because loneliness hurts—a lot. That's why a broken heart hurts so very much more than a broken bone.

¹³ Olds, Jacqueline and Schwartz, Richard. *The Lonely American: Drifting Apart in the Twenty-First Century*. (Boston: Beacon Press, 2009); Cacioppo, John T. and Patrick, William. *Loneliness: Human Nature and the Need for Social Connection*. (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 2008)

¹⁴ We see this clearly in a just reported survey study of a thousand teenagers: 64.1% of them reported experiencing loneliness during the pandemic-- a higher number than reported feeling anxious (61.7%), depressed (54.4%), or angry (41.1%). "Youth Mental Health Survey." Mental Health Initiative of *Wellbeing.org*.