

Module 9 Transcript

Community and Isolation

“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

For our ancestors, the hunter-gatherer ones, community meant survival. The tribe was life. It was connection. It was trust. Love. Protection. Your ancestor, on average, would have had a total lifetime social circle of fewer than one hundred people.

Today, the average social media user has virtual contact with many times that number every single day. And yet, more than 60% of the population, across generational and geographic boundaries, report feeling lonely and isolated. And the most interconnected generation in history, in a stroke of irony, is also the most starved for true connection.

The human brain is an organism of connection. Every adaptation, every facet of your mental health, is built to respond to interaction with your tribe. To socialize, to engage, and to converse. So what happens to this same brain when social paradigms shift more and more toward isolation?

Let's first look at a sample day--not a particular special one--simply a standard work day. You wake up. Maybe good morning to your immediate family, or whoever you share your home with. Then it's a commute. Surrounded by fellow commuters. Then you're at the office. Talking to coworkers. Talking to clients. Back to talking to coworkers to complain about the clients. Back home. Or maybe not. Maybe a night out? A few friends. Then home. Unwind. Bed. Then you do it all over again. A working-aged person, on average, connects in person with at least twenty to twenty-five people per day.

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It turns out that as rates of working from home increase, and people spend more time alone, levels of depression are on the rise. What, then, is missing?

Social media use was tied to loneliness as well, with 73% of very heavy social media users considered lonely, as compared with 52% of light users.

And the social interaction that does happen online doesn't seem to be particularly healthy, or natural. According to a recent study, the simple act of accruing likes on social media causes "activation in brain circuitry implicated in reward, including the striatum and ventral tegmental area." In other words, a random click on the other side of the world can jolt the same areas of your brain that are stimulated by in-person approval, and a simple thumbs-up emoji can cause the brain to release dopamine.

It's important to understand the exceptional impact that these new online social platforms can have on the pleasure centers of our brains. It's imperative that we begin to examine them with the same seriousness as other brain-affecting activities--think gambling or compulsive shopping. What are these online algorithms replacing? And what risks do we see presenting when the brain is starved of what it's actually craving...real human connection?

Scientists conducted a study measuring the link between mental well-being, face-to-face interaction, and digital communication.

Over a five-day period, participants completed a daily diary checklist at the end of each day and reported on their social interactions (i.e., quantity and quality) and self-esteem for that day. Not surprisingly, findings suggest that only high-quality face-to-face interactions are associated with longer lasting gains to psychological well-being. All to say, the research suggests that while social media relationships may help facilitate some aspects of our

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mental health, when we neglect our in-person, face to face relationships our mental health suffers.

The risks associated with a lack of in-person, direct connection are neither ethereal nor simply abstract. In studies, people exhibiting habits of loneliness show markedly higher levels of depression and anxiety. They are at a 50% higher risk of developing dementia. And “Social isolation significantly increased a person’s risk of premature death from all causes, a risk that may rival those of smoking, obesity, and physical inactivity.” This is the health effect of loneliness.

Studies and polls show that one in four Americans has exactly zero friends they feel capable confiding in. And it’s on the rise. Fostering human connection, deepening our human connections, expanding the group of people that we trust and confide in is one of the fundamental tenets of building your mental fitness. It’s one of the ways that I know in my clinical practice that my patients are getting better. Remember how we said earlier, that your human brain is an organ of connection? Well that’s really, fundamentally how I feel I know your brain is working at its best. When I see you making more, real, genuine, face to face, human connections.

In the year leading up to this recording, the percentage of the population working remotely increased to above 43% for the first time ever--every social structure built around community interaction is decreasing: the very constructs by which we have been naturally social are getting reimaged and reconfigured as we try to understand a new, modern, digital lifestyle. So much of that is exciting and compelling and opening up new avenues for all of us to have more human interaction. But what we must also pay attention to is how these new social structures may also be decreasing the very type of human interaction that we all need and crave.

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So what can we do here? Is there even an adjustment we can make? While the societal macro levels continue to adjust, there are some things that you can begin instituting in daily life that will have tremendous impact on your feelings of social connectedness.

Oftentimes when I meet people they're struggling with feelings of depression or anxiety and socializing is incredibly challenging. So on a micro level let's start talking about some way that you can increase connections in your life. Like anything, I really like to start with a diagnosis or assessment. Who are the people in your life? Sometimes just having a list of the folks who, either you've been really close to and you need to improve that relationship, or a list of people that you really can confide in, gives us a notion that we're not as alone as maybe we sometimes feel. But beyond the connections that we have or don't have in our lives, building your mental fitness and improving your mental health means throughout our lives, continuing to pay attention to the connections that really matter and fostering more of those. Some of the techniques that I use in my practice is starting to create a framework to help them build social connections. Oftentimes, simple things like joining a sports league, or finding a book club, or connecting with more co-workers or people who you already have some connection with but sense there could be more works wonders.

Oftentimes I'll help people in their dating life, working to deemphasize the pressure that so often people feel in dating to find the one, that perfect partner, and to think it as more about making connections. Maybe you won't find your perfect partner on that next tinder date but you could make a powerful and meaningful human connection. It's one of the skills that I like to help patients foster and grow. How can they do a better job as a communicator and as a listener in fostering connection? How can they deepen relationships in their own lives? So often, it is quite strange and paradoxical that we're surrounded by people who love us, but we really haven't worked on deepening and improving those human connections.



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Connection, in regards to mental fitness, is necessary, not discretionary--even for those of us who identify as introverts. Your brain is constantly reaching out for connection, and by prioritizing the need for socialization, you can create a better context for mental health and a better overall quality of life.