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Social Isolation and Disconnection in America and How We Can Fix It

Over the years we have been becoming more and more distant from each other. Americans are becoming socially isolated and disconnected. We just don't know it yet, because most Americans do not have a sense of comparison. There isn't a high value placed on personal life and relationships in America. Whether it be because of our phones, social media, work, lack of transportation, or lack of mobility, as the decades go by a vast majority of people are becoming increasingly socially isolated and disconnected, mainly in America, and it is impacting our health negatively.

Social isolation and social disconnection often get confused. It often gets confused because they sound similar and seem like an impression of each other. People may not even realize if they are experiencing social isolation and/or recognize that they are socially disconnected. It takes reflection of certain situations and knowledge of the two definitions to be able to distinguish which one of the two you're experiencing. According to the National Institute of Health, social isolation is "the lack of social contacts and having few people to interact with regularly" (2021). Social disconnection, according to the National Institute of Health, is "an objective, long-standing lack of social/family relationships and minimal participation in social activities" (2021).

Social isolation and social disconnection looks and manifests differently for everyone. An example of social disconnection would be being in a room full of people, but not one person acknowledges the next person or stirs up face to face conversation. Everyone is on their phones totally unaware of the person that just walked into the room or sitting right besides them. Another example would be where you may be taking a walk in the neighborhood when someone walks past you with a fixed stare, looking straight ahead, not saying hello or at least cracking a smile towards you. It's as if you do not exist and did not pass another living and breathing human being. An example of social isolation would be not engaging in conversation with friends/family or people, avoiding social interaction, being forced to isolate due to health reasons, domestic abuse, and many more.

It is thought that our society has embraced being socially isolated and disconnected, accepting it as the new norm. Family values aren't appreciated as much anymore as they were in the past and in other countries. It's often blamed on modernity. "Modernity has been characterized as the awakening of the traditional bonds that used to connect people to their communities and extended kinship groups" (Parigi & Henson 156). Before modernity, people were defined by communities such as activity/team members, organizations, neighborhood associations, and etc.

In society today, people aren't establishing connections with people as they were before. You'd think in this day and age establishing connections with people would be easier due to technology, but unfortunately it isn't. "Having many ties does not necessarily produce more meaning and can potentially increase the cognitive costs of maintaining relationships to a point of creating a sense of isolation, i.e., of having no friends with whom "talking about important

things matters" (Bearman & Parigi 2004) (Parigi & Henson 163). In fact, it is argued that social media could make you even more socially isolated and disconnected.

There are many factors that contribute to social isolation and social disconnection. Some of those factors include ever evolving technology, which "reshapes the landscape of our emotional lives" (Parigi & Henson 155), living alone, a loss or life change, financial hardships, cognitive challenges, limited social support, being a caregiver, living in a rural neighborhood, language barriers, not engaging in activities/groups, hearing loss, older in age, health status, and etc (NIH 2021). A good amount of these factors are inevitable and are the results of life or external factors. More recently, the 2020 pandemic of COVID-19 has only exacerbated social isolation and social disconnection in America due to the strict social distancing rules and lockdown. As a result of the pandemic and lockdown, feelings of isolation could produce feelings of emotional distress which could exacerbate existing health issues. "Loneliness among heart failure patients was associated with a nearly 4 times increased risk of death, 68% increased risk of hospitalization, and 57% increased risk of emergency department visits" (CDC 2021).

According to the Commonwealth Fund, "the percentage of those who reported feeling isolated jumped from 27 % in 2018 to 56 % after the start of the pandemic" (Horstman & Lewis 2022). Social isolation and social disconnection is a significant public health problem that is associated with a wide range of negative effects. Examples of these negative effects include early mortality, exacerbation of preexisting health conditions, hypertension, mental health issues such as anxiety and depression, and etc. "A recent meta-analysis found that social disconnection was linked with a 29% increased risk for development of coronary heart disease and a 32% increased risk for stroke. The risk for dementia is also heightened, as well as memory decline in older adults" (Green et al. 243). "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” (CDC 2021).

A study done in the UK showed how people in the older age group with health concerns had the highest score of being socially isolated. “A major finding of the current study is that social isolation was significantly, independently related to health status and HRQL, even when depression, physical comorbidity, age, gender, living alone, employment status and accommodation type were accounted for” (Hawton et al. 64). Social isolation impacts one's health in all aspects which include emotionally, physically, and mentally.

Social isolation and disconnection is becoming relatively common in America. This issue needs to be addressed and mended. Some ways this issue could be patched is by speaking to a health professional, such as a therapist. Speaking with a therapist allows you to describe how you are feeling which can help the problem become identified and solutions found. Taking extra measures to take care of yourself by getting enough sleep every night, exercising, eating healthy, and engaging in activities helps you to relieve stress and remain physically and mentally healthy.

Volunteering is also a good option because it helps you to feel a sense of purpose in life which may help to boost your mood and cognitive function. Joining social clubs or groups help to give you that human face to face interaction and steer clear of any forms of social disconnection. “People who engage in meaningful, productive activities they enjoy with others feel a sense of purpose and tend to live longer” (NIH 2022). Lastly, staying connected with friends and family on a regular basis whether it be in person or through technology will help you to stay interactive and sociable.

Works Cited

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