

BEING NEIGHORLY

Recently while hiking in the woods with friends, one of them recounted his delight in visiting his cousin in Texas. He said, "We had a nice visit." I was shocked. Visiting someone implies actually talking to someone, having a conversation. How often do we call friends to propose a visit, a time for meaningful conversation?

Social Isolation appears to be a major health issue in America today. Gerontological research since the 1960's has highlighted the prevalence of social isolation among the elderly. Research has linked social isolation and loneliness to higher risks for a variety of physical and mental conditions: high blood pressure, heart disease, obesity, a weakened immune system, anxiety, depression, cognitive decline, Alzheimer's disease, and even death. See www.nia.nih.gov. Some term this as a "Friendship Crisis." David Cordani, president and CEO of Cigna says, "We're seeing a lack of human connection which ultimately leads to lack of vitality."

Only 53% report having meaningful daily face-to-face interactions, including an extended conversation with a friend or spending quality time with family. Generation Z (adults ages 18-22) say they are the loneliest generation and claim to be in worse health than older generations. Social media is not a firm predictor of loneliness as heavy users report only slightly higher levels than non-users, 43.5% to 41.7%. (U.S. Loneliness Index Report, Cigna 2018)

Loneliness is a subjective feeling about the gap between a person's desired levels of social contact and the actual level of social contact. Social isolation is an objective measure of the number of contacts that people have. See www.ageuk.org.uk. Friends of ours deliver thirty meals on wheels each week. They report that none of the recipients see or talk with anyone else. The recipients live in a large 55 and above retirement community where anonymity is achievable.

Other Issues

Possible contributing factors to our national social isolation and loneliness could be our consumer culture and our increasing use of prescription drugs for our physical and emotional problems. A *Consumer Reports* study reveals that 50% of American adults take prescription medications and that the total number of prescriptions for adults and children increased by 85% from 1997 to 2016 while U.S. population increased 21%. Another unrelated explanation may be the growing presence of pharmaceutical T.V. advertising which is only allowed in the U.S. and New Zealand.

Market Watch claims that our consumer culture creates a world-view wherein life seems to have little aim and meaning. People readily move from isolation and loneliness to depression despite so many physical comforts. A 2013 study in the *Journal of Consumer Research* describes the "Loneliness Loop" where exclusive dependence on materialism leads to loneliness and then to more materialism to hopefully alleviate loneliness. Go shopping! You will feel better!

Wrong! Social research at Duke University urges spending money on experiences such as travel rather than “stuff!”

Counter Measures

Of course, some people convince themselves that they enjoy and even prefer living alone and eating alone. *Market Researcher NPD Group* reports that 34% of Americans spend dinnertime alone and that 30% of U.S. households are one person homes.

But if you aspire to overcome social isolation and loneliness here are some ideas, many of which you have probably read innumerable times. What will spark you into becoming more social, less isolated? On World Mental Health Day, October 10, 2018, some suggestions were:

- Get adequate and regular sleep.
- Exercise daily with stretching, cardio-pulmonary, and weight resistance training.
- Develop some form of spirituality that provides inspiration, motivation and fulfillment.
- Neighbors Helping Neighbors: either help a neighbor or allow a neighbor to help you or at least push yourself to know and enjoy your neighbors.
- Start and end your day with gratitude. You cannot be anxious and depressed if you are living in thankfulness for all you have and are.
- Volunteer. We get more from giving than we do from receiving.

If you are genuinely content with your current level of social interaction, rest Easy! If you are not, consider completing the *Geriatric Depression Scale (GDS)*, which is available at www.verywellmind.com. This scale has a short 15-item version and a long, 30-item version. It is in the public domain, free to use and suitable for self-administration and scoring. Inertia and lethargy may be indicative of clinical depression. Hopefully, completing this scale might spur you into action of some sort.

Being Neighborly

Connecting with people living in close proximity to us was probably easier before the arrival of high tech entertainment and communication gadgets. Even so, many of us do succeed in creating vibrant social networks, which provide zest and enjoyment to our lives. Maybe we succeed in being neighborly by following the wisdom of the pioneering, iconic psychotherapist Carl Gustav Jung who said, “Who looks outside, dreams. Who looks inside, awakens.” Perhaps connecting necessitates “awakening.”

Dr. Jim David is a practicing psychotherapist in Silver Spring, MD. Visit his website at www.askdrdavidnow.com or email at jimsue63@gmail.com.

