

Stonebriar Psychiatric Services News & Views

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Loneliness Can Be Hazardous to Your Health

I recently read a soulful yet earthy book called *Blue Like Jazz*, by Donald Miller. The book is a fair survey of one man's stream of consciousness in a pointed direction. The fourteenth chapter is titled, "Alone: Fifty-three years in Space." In his reflective style, Miller likened the words "alone, lonely, and loneliness" to the soul's experience of "hunger and thirst." Prolonged isolation can bring with it an impoverished need (hunger and thirst) for love, emotional security and connection.

Mr. Miller noted that when an individual goes a length of time in relative isolation and solitude, she may lose some capacity to relate. A metaphor for this would be the traditional over-the-counter diet pill. Your natural drive to eat is negated, as one does not recognize the normal feeling of hunger. So you skip the meal . . . and potentially many meals to come as you continue to take the pills. After all, you are not hungry, right?

Falsely Full

About the issue of severe loneliness and isolation, Mr. Miller writes,

"When you live on your own for a long time . . . your personality changes because you go so much into yourself, you lose the ability to be social, to understand what is and isn't normal behavior. There is an entire world inside yourself, and if you let yourself, you can get so deep inside it you will forget the way to the surface. Other people keep our souls alive, just like food and water does with our body."

In the passage, Mr. Miller was referring to a time in his life where he was quite a recluse, hiding away and writing books, plays, and manuscripts. He acknowledges the upside of this. He was frank about his enjoyment of time alone, without the complicated distraction of others, and without having to worry about the emotional welfare of another. He was free to do as he pleased and to enjoy the pleasure of his own company, free from the intrusion of others. He added poignantly that this was, "terribly unhealthy." This is similar to taking a diet pill, in that you do not recognize the natural signal of hunger indicating the need for food.

Touch, Survival, & Oxytocin

In keeping with the diet pill metaphor, let's extend this further and say that relationships can also be nourishing, fulfilling, and vital to our health. However, recognizing this need can also at times be blocked. Let's discuss some interesting points about the importance of connection with others.

First, let's look at emotional connection and physical touch. Positive human touch is a key element in survival, particularly for infants. There are numerous studies confirming this, some of the most well-known involving failure to thrive infants whose deaths were directly linked to lack of human contact. Infants can literally perish due to lack of human touch. On the biochemical level, this lack of touch is connected to impoverished levels of the hormone oxytocin. Oxytocin is a hormone, often referred to by scientists as the "affiliative" neurotransmitter. In the brain, oxytocin is involved in social recognition (recognizing caregivers, trusted persons, etc.) and bonding (creating a close emotional connection with someone).

Oxytocin is released in the body during many experiences, including birth, breastfeeding, bonding in couples, and even sex. When loved ones hug or kiss each other, oxytocin levels are boosted. Oxytocin is a powerful hormone.

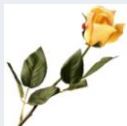
Touch primes the brain to release oxytocin. Even simple handshakes have been found to be directly related to increased oxytocin levels. Positive physical connection can lead to feelings of trust and connection. Paul Zak, Ph.D., a leading neuroeconomist and senior researcher at UCLA, calls oxytocin the "moral molecule" that holds entire families, communities and societies together.

When we feel trusted and safe, our brains release oxytocin and can start a cycle of reciprocation in relationships. Zak explains also that empathy for others is tied with the release of oxytocin,

which compels feelings of love. His studies even linked touch and the release of the oxytocin to expressions of generosity. At the same time, oxytocin can cause the release of another brain chemical, dopamine, in the brain's reward center. This combined spark of oxytocin and dopamine in a relationship can potentially reinforce the perception that someone is both trustworthy and pleasurable. In this way, oxytocin encourages "pro-social behavior." Pro-social behavior includes all the positive behaviors and feelings we share with others: love, trustworthiness, generosity, and compassion.



*Wendy Copeland,
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Loneliness Can Be Hazardous to Your Health

Emotional connection can also be experienced as a sense of well-being or health. Like food and water is nourishing to the body, positive emotional connection to people can be nurturing. This connection can help replenish what has been lost due to environmental demands of stress and past emotional pain.

A leading professional therapist in the field of marital therapy, Sue Johnson, has conducted numerous research studies on emotional connection and couples. In a recent speaking engagement, she shared how relationships are a powerful influence on mental health, physical health, and resilience. She cited a research study that found that emotionally disconnected individuals were twice as likely to die from a heart attack. In this real sense, emotional connection literally is a matter of the heart. Studies have also established a strong correlation between emotional disconnection and impaired immune functioning and depression.

John T. Cacioppo, the director of the Center for Cognitive and Social Neuroscience at the University of Chicago, has conducted a number of studies on emotional isolation and functioning. In 2001, Cacioppo received a grant to study how the social stress of feeling isolated can impact human health. His data suggests that the feeling of enduring emotional isolation contributes to learned helplessness and passive coping. This helplessness can snowball into physical problems, including cardiovascular issues and high blood pressure.

One of Cacioppo's most recent findings is that the distress of emotional disconnection can, in fact, alter gene expression in human leukocytes. Leukocytes are the immune system cells that defend against infectious disease. Specifically, the perceived feeling of being isolated was associated with inflammation. Such inflammation, when prolonged, has been associated with heart disease, arthritis, and even Alzheimer's. Along with this, neuropsychological research has found that feelings of rejection and abandonment are coded in the same location of the brain as physical pain.

Emotional Connection: Healthy Food or Junk Food?

In looking at emotional connection, the substance and quality of connection is important. There is nutrient-dense, healthy food...and there is junk food. A prolonged diet of nutrient-poor junk food can lead to serious deficiencies and even toxicity that over time impacts organ and systemic health. Likewise, there is a vast difference in emotional relationships. Some can be enriching and enlivening. Others are downright toxic.

Cacioppo's work has also shown specific restorative benefits to the positive, harmonious feeling of being included. In following Cacioppo's lead, another researcher named Gonzaga initiated a study of relationship behaviors during marital discord. Not surprisingly, he found that a partner's highly negative emotional response was associated with larger increases in blood pressure, as well as a slower return to normal. Interestingly, those with a negative or hostile emotional style also showed greater decline in four different measures of immunological function. Gonzaga explained that the impact of these behaviors over time grows and becomes cumulative. In an article about his work, he stated, "Every stressor requires an up-regulation, and then a return to normal. The more times you have to adjust up and then down, eventually the system begins to fray." This makes sense in how couples and families, when in prolonged emotional conflict, seem to disintegrate. Frequently, health problems coincide with the relational problems. On the flip side, when people grow in safe connection and improve their relationships, they tend to report improved health and energy levels. They are no longer being drained emotionally and thus are released to enjoy other aspects of health and living.

Healthy emotional and physical connection holds many benefits. From basic survival of the infant to complex adult relationships, positive connection means vitality. We are more resilient to stress and to enjoy cardiovascular and immune benefits. We also can experience pleasurable feelings of safety, love, trustworthiness, generosity, and compassion. As Mr. Miller observed, "The soul needs to interact with other people to be healthy."



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