



Social Isolation, Towards a Monastic Epidemic

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Editorial

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Editorial

Social isolation occurs when people do not support or feel part of a social network made up of family members, friends or community members. Social, psychological and medical studies have shown conclusively that there is a direct correlation between the degree to which a person feels connected with others and their physical and mental health. There is now clear evidence that social isolation and the associated feeling of loneliness significantly increase the risk of premature death, and this risk is higher than for many other health indicators.

As a result, given the increasing share of the elderly population, where the risk of social isolation is greatest, the specialists are concerned about the impact of this phenomenon on public health. In many developed countries of the world, such as the USA, where a significant increase in the phenomenon of social isolation is reported, there is already the talk of a loneliness epidemic.

Among the common effects of social isolation on the state of physical and mental health, we find, first of all, chronic fatigue and the increased risk of developing chronic diseases. For example, a study recently published in BMC Public Health magazine that included 2861 men and women between the ages of 40 and 75 shows that men living alone are at increased risk of developing type 2 diabetes [1], with specialists already claiming that this group should be considered as high risk from the point of view of public health and that the list of risk indicators for diabetes also include the size of the social network and the periodic participation in social activities.

Also, middle-aged and older people who feel lonely report more chronic stress and feelings of helplessness. Social isolation can lead to more episodes of illness and a longer recovery time, following illness or trauma. It also increases the risk of depression, while the occurrence of Alzheimer's is twice as likely in people with loneliness [2].

In general, socially isolated people have a shorter average lifespan. For example, according to a team of researchers from the England, longevity is estimated to increase by almost 25% for people over 70 who have a wide circle of friends, compared to those with the smallest social circle [3].

Given the serious impact of social isolation on physical and mental health, as well as the already worrying and increasing level of social isolation and feeling of loneliness that the population in developed countries, especially those over 40, report, experts suggest public health policies to pay more attention to this phenomenon and to actively promote, as integral components of the healthy aging process, social connectivity and social commitment of the population in the community. Also, active aging programs should also include a strong social component, based on educating the population to prepare both financially and socially for retirement age. Another recommendation proposes that the medical screening of adults over 40 years also include questions about their social connection.

Mandates of social distancing may make life feel monastic during a pandemic. It is thus, a great time for this era of compulsory monasticism to make daily meditation part of a life routine.

A recent longitudinal MRI case study of a Buddhist monk indicates that regular meditation may slow down brain aging over time, in addition to the immediate benefits of meditation, such as reducing stress, maintaining equanimity, and relaxing your nervous system [4]. The scientific literature describes equanimity as a state of inner calmness and tempering evenness, particularly in a difficult situation, referring to a mind that is at ease even in the face of traumatic and negative experiences.

Typical aging is followed by a reduction of grey matter brain volume. Researchers [5] showed that the brains of

long-term meditation participant group were 7.5 years younger than the control group of non-meditators, by age 50.

We see around us manifesting both the dangers and the benefits of change. We see unprecedented solidarity unfolds, and I am not just referring to donations and humanitarian actions, but also a closer contact with family by daily phone calls.

How has social isolation changed us? I noticed the tendency to erect imaginary walls and stigmatize, there is always somebody to blame; we lost patience with our children, with our life partner. We are in a state of uncertainty and alert because we do not know how long it will take.

We seem to all live a strange illusion, the world seems inverted, like in the mirror. Everything that was normal, healthy and moral before seems pathological, harmful and immoral now. Now it seems okay to be overpowered by panic, binge shopping and other emergent crowd behaviors we often seen on TV and in social media networks. Our nightmares are slowly becoming validated. Socialization is forbidden. Suddenly non-acting is good, you save humanity by sitting on the couch and watching movies. The technology, that until yesterday was increasingly considered an evil source that is causing dementia, is now wonderful. We all meet on Skype, Zoom, Google Hangouts and many other chat platforms with our family and at work; even education has moved online.

Conservation instinct will always prevail, fear and anger come hand in hand, and they are an inseparable set of survival tools. Hate is something else, it is nothing more than a misuse, a wrong intellectualization of them.

Our brain seeks patterns and explanations everywhere and always, even when we dream, even in psychosis. Blaming others when it is obvious that it is nobody's fault is a kind of social delirium. In psychosis, delusional ideas are the brain's way of trying to make sense, a story, from deeply pathological experiences. But delirium isolates people from reality, alienates them, assigning guilt and judgement. The great danger of the COVID-19 pandemic represents, in essence, the alienation of people and nations.

Many have begun to feel a loss, to feel that they have lost the freedom of decision over their own lives, lost their businesses, jobs, identity and, above all, security. There happened a death not a physical one, but an emotional, spiritual death, a sudden death of the routine of life. Most people have consciously given up on their needs, habits or life plans, for the sake of common good. And yet they made these gestures with power, with suspicion, with uncertainty. It was against their will. At first you do not realize the effects

following, but then they begin to come clearer. After the confusion and the desire to cover the uncertainty, another reality follows. Anger is starting to strive within us, when realizing that we are being wronged. An anger not from fear, but from the ignorance and disregard of others, from the defiance of the infected, the collapse of the national medical systems, the lack of reaction of the governmental forces, the reasons can be countless.

Therefore, if in the next three to four months there will be no improvement changes, to relax the situation, riots will occur. People need hope in order to move on. They need to know what follows after such a loss. We all need to hope, to look beyond something, to believe that life goes on, not just spiritually, but economically, socially, and emotionally.

COVID-19 is indeed a modern pandemic. A killer virus in a much more educated and informed world. With a power and freedom of decision considerably different from a few hundred years ago, when humanity went through such situations. But what has remained constant over time for us, people, is the need to be with one another, to accompany someone in our traumas and sufferings. A vital thing in healing a loss, is to accompany the person in their experiences.

That is why the psychological support is important now. For this, actions are now being taken with private support initiatives for doctors, pharmacists and medical auxiliary personnel, law enforcement, employees of companies, elderly. Because no one wants to be alone in suffering or despair. We want to feel that someone can walk with us. We need to express our emotions, feelings, thoughts, more than ever, mental health now plays an essential role for us.

At the same time, there unfolds a psychological pandemic which still looks from the inside to the outside chaos. When all this is going to be over, we better be prepared for the next phase, in which our souls will need more attention than our bodies. We got to be resilient in order to mentally survive emotional discharges, mourning, sadness, depression accompanying the loss of something either family members, jobs or our own identity.

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