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Broken Tribe: The importance of social connection in depression

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Keywords

mental health, social connection, depression

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What effects do loneliness and social isolation have on mental wellbeing? It has been suggested that the costs of loneliness (e.g. hypertension and other negative health effects) manifest in older age, whereas loneliness had an evolutionary function in younger ages.¹ The benefit during youth was a painful drive to keep us in touch with a community providing protection and assistance and to heighten our awareness of threats.¹ However, there is a mismatch between the dangers of social isolation in the past and present. The pain that served to reconnect us in order to stay alive is still painful today, where both social platforms and immediate survival threats have changed.

Some factors influencing social connection include postpartum social shifts and work-family conflict, social rankings as early as kindergarten, community involvement, social networks at school, bullying, competition, special risks surrounding sexual minorities, life transitions such as the beginning of college, neighbourhood status, and multigenerational living. These also affect risks for depressive symptoms, while various forms of social support provide protection against depressive symptoms.²⁻¹⁴

Historical Social Environments

Information on social structure in ancient hunter-gatherer groups is lacking, but studies of contemporary hunter gatherer groups demonstrate cooperative behaviours such as food sharing, alloparenting, fluid social networks and shared living with a number of related and unrelated people.¹⁵ Prosocial behaviour was beneficial in several ways, including the ability to buffer unpredictable environments and the promotion of information exchange where frequent interactions allowed innovations to flourish.¹⁶

The Influence of Technology

Modern technology has given many options for expanding social networks. People are able to travel further faster and can communicate across long distances. However, that same technology allows people to become isolated, as they can work at home and order food and other necessities right to their door. This is a major shift in how people obtain resources, as historically resources were gathered through direct human contact.¹⁷

Technology allows for greater access to resources, including information and people, but with North American youth spending up to seven or eight hours per day as sedentary screen time it is important to understand its limits for physical, emotional and psychological health.¹⁸⁻²⁰ Actual screen time is difficult to measure but research points to additional concerns such as negative content, negative social comparison, decreased emotion-regulation skills, avoidance of social interaction, cyberbullying, issues of privacy and confidentiality, and inappropriate, inaccurate or unsafe contacts.²¹⁻²⁴ Patterns of social media use are also relevant, as those who have high emotional connection, use multiple social media platforms, spend a lot of time on social media, and check social media frequently have an elevated risk for anxiety and depressive symptoms.²⁵

Technology cannot completely replace direct human contact and even though it allows for a greater number of connections, it has still been seen that over time there has been a drop in the number of confidants most people have.²⁶

Considering Maslow's hierarchy of needs, this is a troubling finding because people are not having their needs for social belonging met. Higher life satisfaction and lower levels of depression and anxiety are seen with greater feelings of social connectedness.²⁷ In addition, both quantity and quality of friends in early adulthood are associated with psychological wellbeing in later life and strong social ties increase longevity.^{28,29}

Re-engaging With Our Tribe

Individuals are encouraged to evaluate the time spent on technology, and to consider whether, for example, they are on their devices to the inclusion or exclusion of people who matter to them.

Other methods of encouraging social connection include multigenerational living, shared living spaces between university students and seniors, maintaining good health, attending events in an area of interest, interpersonal therapy and online social support.^{14,30-34}

Summary

Hunter gatherer groups thrived on social cooperation, which allowed them to offset the risks of environmental variables and to share information. Modern technology allows us to increase the number of our social connections, without necessarily having the quality that we need to provide these protective or information sharing benefits. In addition to this, we are, over recent years, losing the type of connections that can provide guidance during difficult times. Even though we don't have the same immediate threats (such as a wild animal) of being alone in our current environment as in the past, this lack of meaningful human connection leaves us painfully lonely, with negative effects on physical, emotional and psychological health.

When people consider how they spend their time, appreciate the connections they already have and make changes to improve their social connection, they will not only create positive change in their communities but also in their health and happiness.

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