

## Why are we isolating ourselves?

There's a mountain of data that shows mental and physical health are maintained or enhanced by social connection, and worsened by isolation. So why, given the choice, do we choose to put four walls, and maybe an acre or two, between ourselves and everyone else? Do we really think we and our kids will fare better that way?

Humans have an evolutionary history of living in extended family groups. That's what our physiology and psychology are accustomed to. A connected group provides vital help in raising children, finding food, and fending off danger. Could it be that the pandemic of anxiety and depression in the developed world has something to do with not living this way? Ethnic groups that emphasize extended family cohesiveness appear to be protected, to at least some extent, from these otherwise ubiquitous maladies.

I'm not arguing for going back to the savanna or the caves. But I am suggesting that more social connection of a deep and enduring variety, i.e., family gatherings, good friends, and concerned neighbors and coworkers, can go a long way toward redressing the feeling that nobody's there and nobody cares – and can have an enormous effect on our wellbeing.

But aren't we more connected than ever? We have so many digital friends, and spend so much of our time communicating. While this certainly shows how primary the need for connection is, I very much doubt that the way we're doing so will satisfy that need. As Sherry Turkle says in her TED talk "Connected, but alone?" we can be – and too often are – simultaneously connected and isolated. We crave connection and are almost never without it. But the way we're connecting somehow doesn't really meet our need, and instead leaves us emptier and wanting more of what we haven't got in a flesh-and-blood, truly satisfying way. So we unceasingly try to get it. In a manner that rarely or never works.

This is clearly addictive behavior. By employing an unsatisfactory strategy for meeting a need, we're instead feeling increasingly unfulfilled. And becoming increasingly addicted. Because the statistics change so quickly, and because they're dependent on the way they are gathered, which is too often imperfectly, I won't cite specific numbers. But what is entirely evident is that we're using our devices more and more. And our youth, especially, are becoming alarmingly less and less happy. Do you think there might be a causation implicit in this correlation? And if so, don't you think we might need to revisit the presumption that digital connection is by itself sufficient for our peace of mind?

I think we need to rethink the idea that the best life is one in which we can keep the world at arm's length. Or relate to it from a distance. Maybe health and happiness lie a little closer to home.