CHAPTER ONE

An Epidemic of Loneliness?

> I increasingly began to think that the connections we have or think we have, are like a kind of parody of human connection. If you have a crisis in your life, you'll notice something. It won't be your Twitter followers who come to sit with you. It won't be your Facebook friends who help you turn it round. It'll be your flesh and blood friends who you have deep and nuanced and textured, face-to-face relationships with.[1]
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> —Johann Hari (TED Global London 2015)

A Loneliness Epidemic: True or False?

Are we on the verge of an epidemic of loneliness or is the "loneliness crisis" just another manufactured fad that savvy people will leverage for new business opportunities? This is a complicated and highly important question to answer. An epidemic is "the occurrence of more cases of a disease than would be expected in a community or region during a given time period."[2] When applied to infectious diseases like meningitis or avian flu, there are epidemiological thresholds for determining when a disease reaches epidemic proportions.[3] But, there are no definitive medical metrics for labeling detrimental psychosocial behaviors as "epidemic."

Lacking agreed upon metrics makes the question of whether we are experiencing a "loneliness crisis" complex. But it's extremely important because of the correlations between social isolation and a host of medical health

risks associated with it. A phrase like "social isolation epidemic" can become a sticky social meme in the media, causing the general public to view it as the latest "hot topic." And we know what happens to a "hot topic." Even if it is significant, its importance is fleeting because it is soon displaced in the public's consciousness by the next "hot topic."

Donna Butts, executive director of Generations United, expressed another caution about well-intentioned efforts to decrease loneliness across the generations. While she is gratified at the growing public awareness of the issue of social isolation, Butts is concerned about, "people jumping into the intergenerational space poorly, because I think it can be as detrimental as it can be powerful if it's not well thought out, well prepared, or planned. I [am concerned about] people thinking that they're experts in how to connect generations or feeling like they should jump in and start a program, mixing old and young, and everything's [automatically] going to be great. It's kind of dangerous because if people have bad experiences, that becomes their lens and it can be more harmful if not done well."[4] Speaking to her concern about unqualified opportunists capitalizing on issues, the prestigious Harvard Business Review compiled a series of articles by distinguished scholars on loneliness in the workplace,[5] suggesting that there is a market for workplace solutions to the loneliness crisis.

I've spent some time on the complexities of labeling increased rates in social isolation as an "epidemic" because the stakes are so high. But, even lacking medical agreement, the weight of expert opinion from a variety of disciplines is that social isolation and loneliness are rampant and have been dramatically increasing, especially since the early-to-mid-2000s. Even more alarming, the reported rate of increase of these feelings is most pronounced in younger generations. In the past, self-perceptions and realities of social isolation were associated more with those who were elderly or infirm and lacked the ability to lead active lives that brought them into ongoing contact with others. Now, it's the post-Millennial generation—the youngest generation today—that seems to be the most vulnerable to feelings of social isolation and loneliness.[6] We possess multiple, independent sources of information on this topic, enabling us to 1) reasonably conclude that when it comes to having close relationships, we're in critical condition, 2) understand the origins of these issues, and 3) thoughtfully and responsibly begin to address them.

Let's briefly review some key data points about social isolation at a top level. Those who wish to delve more deeply into these studies and findings will find references to them in the endnotes. "Strikingly, in a recent Generations United/Eisner Foundation survey of adults nationwide, more than half of respondents—53 percent—said that aside from family members, few of the

people they regularly spend time with are much older or much younger than they are. Young adults between the ages of 18 and 34 appear to be the most isolated from other generations, with 61 percent reporting a limited number of much older or much younger acquaintances."[7] This finding about younger adults appearing to be the most socially isolated from other generations is consistent with a report recently issued by Search Institute. "We've known for decades that high-quality relationships are essential to young people's growth, learning, and thriving—including for those young people who face serious challenges in their lives and in the world around them. Yet, as many as 40 percent of young people feel lonely."[8]

And matters are no different at the other end of the generational spectrum. In 2012, researchers at the University of California, San Francisco's Division of Geriatrics analyzed data from a nationally representative study of older adults conducted by the National Institute on Aging. One of their findings was that 43 percent of Americans over the age of sixty reported feeling lonely.[9] That was lower than a study conducted more recently by linkAges, involving a much smaller sample of older adults involved in a pilot program to create generational connections, in which 55 percent of respondents reported feeling lonely.[10] Compare those statistics with some studies from the 1980s in which 20 percent of older adults reported feelings of loneliness and it's easy to understand why the word "epidemic" comes to mind so quickly.[11] Simply stated, in study after study conducted in different Western countries emanating from an array of disciplines, levels of loneliness are on the rise.[12]

Rounding out the picture, there is consensus among social scientists and respected health journalists that the number of individuals who we describe as "close confidantes"[13] has declined dramatically from three to only one (or in some studies, none) since the mid-1980s.[14] The number of close friends that people have today compared to a few decades ago has dropped, people generally don't have relationships with those born in other generations, and feelings of social isolation are more widespread than before. Not long ago, suicide was more common among the elderly population but, "suicide in the United States has surged to the highest levels in nearly 30 years, a federal data analysis has found, with increases in every age group except older adults."[15] With this large, diverse body of consistent findings from researchers and health practitioners, which include longitudinal data that enable us to track trends, it certainly feels like we're in "epidemic" territory.

Behind every one of these statistics is a human being who is in pain, and when you translate those statistics into the numbers of individuals who are suffering, there are real consequences for all communities. Mitch Prinstein, a professor of psychology and neuroscience at the University of North

Carolina at Chapel Hill, is an expert on topics including peer networks and popularity. In a recent New York Times Opinion piece,[16] he cited a remarkable study by another psychologist, Julianne Holt-Lunstad at Brigham Young University. This study caught his attention for several reasons. Most relevant among them is the finding that she "consolidated data from 148 investigations published over 28 years on the effects of social relationships, collectively including over 308,000 participants between the ages of 6 and 92 from all over the world. In each study, investigators measured the size of participants' networks, the number of their friends, whether they lived alone, and the extent to which they participated in social activities. Then they followed each participant for months, years and even decades to track his or her mortality rate."[17] Her conclusion, as reported by Prinstein, is that social isolation, feeling lonely and disconnected from others, predicts our lifespan.

We also know that loneliness can accelerate cognitive decline in older adults,[18] and isolated individuals are twice as likely to die prematurely as those with more robust social interactions.[19] These effects start early: Socially isolated children have significantly poorer health twenty years later, even after controlling for other factors.[20] All told, loneliness is as important a risk factor for early death as obesity and smoking.[21] In reviewing the effects of social isolation, even at first blush, we can understand the urgency of need to address this issue. As Jane E. Brody, long-time personal health columnist for the New York Times simply and powerfully stated, "Social interaction is a critically important contributor to good health and longevity."[22] Social isolation, loneliness, and a decline in the number of close friends have economic costs, and I can't even imagine how to calculate the magnitude of misery for individuals who are alone, and the emotional impact on their friends and families.

I've provided this background information about social isolation because it's tempting to pinpoint a singular change that has created this environment; for example, the rise of social media. But if there were only one cause, we would only look for one "solution." The fact that so many people of different generations are feeling these painful effects means that social isolation is more like a large river fed by many tributaries. There are many mutually interactive factors that have contributed to this retreat away from others and into the self, and that explain why we have tended to stop looking to those who are older than us for guidance in troubled times, as we used to in the recent past.