



LONELINESS KILLS

rediscovering the healing nature of relationship

The overwhelming acclaim and success of this year's movie about Mr Rogers might just tell us something about the current state of our collective mental health.

Mr Rogers' Neighborhood had universal appeal not because of thrilling plot lines or gripping dialogue. Instead, the show was about being a good neighbor. In a slow, methodical fashion, Mr Rogers demonstrated the most important factors of friendship—listening, encouraging, trusting. People 50

years later will recall that they felt "seen" and "understood" by the TV character simply because of the way he interacted with the viewer and with guests on his show.

Today, we are facing a crisis of loneliness. Study after study finds that roughly 40% of all Americans say they feel lonely or isolated. How is this possible, you may ask? Look around. People are connected to one another now more than ever. New ways to connect are being created each day. With the

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touch of a screen, we can connect with thousands of people instantly, knowing their most intimate thoughts and what they just ate for lunch.

But, as it turns out, connection is not the same as relationship.

We know from Scripture that humans are made in the image and likeness of God, the *imago Dei*. This means we have free will and reason. It also means that, like God who lives in the communion of persons known as the Trinity, we are created for relationship. In fact, we are created already in relationship.



When God creates a new human being, he doesn't do it remotely. He is so intimately involved in the creation of each new person that we call him "Father". His relationship to us is one of a parent to a child, and though sometimes our own earthly relationships with

our parents are not great, God loves us unconditionally every instant of our lives. There is nothing we can ever do that will remove us from God's love. Though we may forget him or turn our backs on our faith, God loves us the way a shepherd loves his sheep, going in search of the one that has wandered off. God pursues us throughout our lives, inviting us into relationship with him at every opportunity.

This initial relationship with God is meant to be the foundation for our interactions with all other people—each created in God's image and a brother or a sister to us in Christ. But, somewhere along the way, we can get distracted and fail to recognize the significance of relationship and community.

And, this is having disastrous effects, not only on individuals but on entire societies. People seem to be getting lonelier. Members of Generation Z, those born between the mid-1990s and the early 2000s are the loneliest of all, with close to 50% claiming loneliness, far in excess of people who are two generations older. There is a close connection between mental and physical health, and there is growing evidence that loneliness diminishes the body's ability to fight off disease, including heart disease and Alzheimer's, and can result in increased risk of premature mortality—quite literally, loneliness can kill you.

In Japan, the crisis has reached such proportions that an entire industry has been created of people whose job it is to clean apartments after people have died alone and decomposed in their homes. There was one man who was found only after his landlord tried to evict him. He had been paying his rent automatically from his bank account, and he'd run out of money. When his landlord's knocks went unanswered, authorities busted in only to find the man had been dead in his apartment for three years. Can you imagine? In three years' time, not a single person had called him or been to visit him or wondered why he had not been out of his apartment to get food or take a walk.

Loneliness is taking a significant toll on our mental health. It inhibits our ability to process stress and to prioritize emotional responses. The more isolated we become, the more personally we take negativity and the more we internalize emotional pain and suffering. This can result in disproportionate responses to commonplace situations. Examples of this can be seen in the soaring suicide rate, the opioid addiction epidemic, and the rise in violence in our communities.

In the wake of school shootings, such as the tragedy at Marjorie Stoneman Douglas High School, a natural first response is often to turn to questions of stricter gun control laws and stronger safety measures at schools. These factors must be part of the conversation, but it is the deeper, more difficult questions that lead us to conversations about why people resort to gun violence and what could have been done to prevent people from feeling that this was their only course of action.

As Christians, we are invited to look more deeply at these issues in the light of our faith. We know that people are composites—we are made body and soul. What effects us emotionally and spiritually also effects us physically. Stricter gun laws may be a very good

idea, but as Christians, our goal is not just to keep someone from harming another. We are tasked with helping all of our brothers and sisters (and ourselves!) to become saints. To do that, we look to what can heal people and help them understand their true dignity, far before any violent situation.



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Mental health is complex, and the intent of this discussion is neither to diagnose mental disorders nor to belittle them. Instead, we can look beneath diagnoses to what is common to all of us. We can comprehend that the need for relationship is part of our human condition. Our social bonds are weakening. While it is true that we have access to more people than ever before through social media, it is also true that family structures are fracturing, people have fewer friends, and face-to-face interactions occur less than ever.

When human relationships break down, our society suffers.

Research shows us that school shooters tend to come from single parent homes, often with addiction or abuse present. School shooters are much more likely to abuse substances, experience depression, suicidal thoughts and violence.

There is a sharp rise in deaths of despair—deaths due to drug or alcohol overdoses or suicides. The second leading cause of death among adolescents and young adults is now suicide—second only to motor vehicle accidents.

Not only is the larger population longing for relationship, those with mental illness tend to be the most ignored and stigmatized in our society. Often, instead of the friendship they desperately need, they are mistreated or rejected. This can make a difficult situation turn volatile.



Does that mean that we are responsible for someone else's bad behavior, should that person choose to act out negatively? No. It is simplistic to believe that we can stop all shootings and suicides by sitting next to a lonely student in the cafeteria. Still, we know that small acts of kindness

can change someone's day or even someone's life. And, acts of kindness performed repeatedly, and started young, are most effective.

When we intentionally look up from our devices to observe and participate in the lives of the people around us, we are far better able to notice people in pain or who may need extra help, and to bring that to the attention of adults and professionals, if necessary, before loneliness leads to despair.

Think of the songs we learned as kids on Mr Roger's Neighborhood (or the spin-off show, Daniel Tiger). What was so compelling as children can seem small and insignificant now, but the values are the same. People want to be loved. They want to be noticed and respected and treated as though they matter.



The despair and emotional suffering that we encounter on a daily basis is growing. Some of it is attributable to mental illness, but the majority of people facing these existential crises are simply unable to find the meaning and connection they desperately need. Our culture tends toward

what is quick and easy, what looks good on the outside. That sustains us for only so long.

We know that the restlessness in our hearts will only find permanent fulfillment in a relationship with Jesus Christ. We have been made, body and soul, to love and be loved by our Creator. At the same time, we are created to be in relationship with those around us and with the created world. The meaning we crave is already within us. It comes from being loved and being invited to love others. It comes from knowing that we are infinitely valuable sons and daughters of God. It comes when we see the people around us, especially those in need, as Christ in our midst—a person with whom we can build relationship and share part of ourselves.

There is no quick fix to end suicide or overdose or violence or shootings. There will always be sin in the world. But, when we understand that much of the problem is aloneness, then we can see how each one of us can be part of a solution.

People find solace from their loneliness in social media, but also in more detrimental habits such as alcohol and drugs, violent video games or porn. All of these activities reinforce feelings of loneliness and fill our time with meaningless, even dangerous, distraction. They mask our underlying needs and leave us further from relationship and meaning than before.

A mom writes, "Think about when we were in school – we didn't know every time that there was a get-together that we weren't invited to and we didn't see pictures of each

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outing, game, or party.

“We didn’t care what we looked like when we were hanging out with friends, because we were the only ones that were there. I can remember sitting around with my best friends in our sweatpants, just laughing. I didn’t wear makeup or care if I had my hair fixed just right, because the worry of a phone or camera wasn’t there.

“Think about bullies. When we left the school, we left them. If teasing happened, it didn’t happen at home. It didn’t happen so publicly. Everyone couldn’t see it or know what they were teasing other kids about since they weren’t there. Now, it’s all public knowledge, and anyone can join in or watch. It’s horrifying.”

Pope Francis believes that the answer to many of today’s social problems lies in building a “culture of encounter”. He says that we must go out—out of our way to help those in need, out of our comfort zones to meet people we would ordinarily walk right by, outside the doors of our schools, homes and churches to share his love with a hurting world.

And, he believes that young people are the hope for the future. That you can share your joy with the world to transform it with the love of Christ.

“Dear young people, the joy that Jesus awakens in you is a source of anger and irritation to some, since a joyful young person is hard to manipulate. But today, a third kind of shouting is possible: ‘And some of the Pharisees in the crowd said to him, “Teacher, rebuke your disciples.” He replied, ‘I tell you, if these were silent, the very stones would cry out’ (Lk 19: 39-40). The temptation to silence young people has always existed. The Pharisees themselves rebuke Jesus and ask him to silence them.

“There are many ways to silence young people and make them invisible. Many ways to anesthetize them, to make them keep quiet, ask nothing, question nothing. There are many ways to sedate them, to keep them from getting involved, to make their dreams flat and dreary, petty and plaintive. Dear young people, you have it in you to shout. It is up to you not to keep quiet. Even if others keep quiet, if we older people and leaders keep quiet, if the whole world keeps quiet and loses its joy, I ask you: Will you cry out? Please, make that choice, before the stones themselves cry out.”

Questions for Discussion:

- What are symptoms of loneliness? Is it possible to be lonely while simultaneously connected electronically?
- As Christians, how do we approach solutions to suicide or violence differently than the rest of the culture? Is our approach effective? What would make it more effective?
- Practically speaking, befriending someone may not reverse mental illness or deter them from making poor choices. So, what is the use of friendship?
- Name three small steps and three larger (structural or procedural) steps that could be taken at your school to decrease loneliness and increase intentional relationship-building?

