

**Widening Our Circle of Compassion:  
Human Nature and the Need for Social Connection  
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Our senses are our user interface to a largely invisible world. There is light beyond the visible spectrum, sound at wavelengths that we can't hear, etc. Our brain is constantly interpreting reality for us, both filtering and making sense of what we perceive and attempting to fit perception into known constructs. It is our collective (not our individual) might which makes us formidable as a species, as we have no fangs, claws, poison or other tools to defend ourselves.

Isolation is associated with higher morbidity and mortality. This is true of all social species, including fruit flies, which die earlier if they are kept in isolation. Perceived isolation, however, has a greater negative impact than objective isolation. College freshman in their first few weeks on campus are constantly surrounded by other classmates but tend to feel very isolated. Conversely, a person may work alone and not feel isolated at all. Furthermore, it is the *quality*, not the *quantity*, of our friendships that is important. A single good friendship may be sufficient to keep someone from feeling isolated.

### **Evolutionary Biological Perspective**

- Genes that promote behavior which increases the odds of the genes surviving are perpetuated.
- When offspring have longer periods of abject dependency, selfish genes favor the evolution of social brains. Humans have the longest period of dependency as children, ergo humans are the most social species.
- The pain of loneliness evolved as an aversive biological signal to promote vigilance. We are safer in groups and loneliness signals us to be wary of strangers.

Loneliness is predictive of subsequent depression, but depression is not predictive of loneliness. Our brains are constantly surveying for threats even when we are unaware of it. If we are feeling lonely, we are more likely to perceive an approaching person as a threat.

### **Biological Impacts of Loneliness**

- Loneliness increases blood pressure, which can, in turn, trigger cardiovascular problems.
- Loneliness increases the production of glucocorticoid, a hormone that controls inflammation and depresses the immune system. We are more vulnerable to disease when lonely.
- Conversely, "connected" (non-lonely) people have better sleep efficiency, and have fewer and shorter periods of wakefulness after falling asleep.

### **What Makes You Happy?**

A feeling of purpose is the best predictor of happiness. Happiness predicts income, not the reverse. Income does not affect happiness. In general, the older you are the happier you become. If you become lonely, you will lose friends, exacerbating the problem.

### **How to Become More Socially Connected? Think *EASES***

**Extend yourself** – volunteer to help others

**Awareness and action** – realize when your brain is sending false signals

**Selection and synergies** – turn "me" into "we"

**Expect the best** – forgive, whether or not you "forget"

**Synchrony** – widening our circle of compassion

For more info: <http://psychology.uchicago.edu/people/faculty/cacioppo/index.shtml>