

## Made for sharing

Humans thrive best in the company of others, says **John Cacioppo**, so why are we leading increasingly isolated lives?



**Jennifer Dixon** calls for radical NHS reforms in the face of falling quality and rising costs

**Robert Whitaker** reveals the risks inherent in using drugs to treat mental illness

# LONELY PLANET

*The combination of rising life expectancy and declining social capital means that more people experience isolation than ever before. What can we do to restore a sense of connection between individuals and generations?*

*By John T Cacioppo FRSA, Louise C Hawkey and William Patrick*

Aristotle suggested that the only critical ingredient in the recipe for supreme happiness is other people. We may revere the rugged individualists, but we are fundamentally social organisms. We are born into the most prolonged period of abject dependency of any mammal. For the species to survive, human infants must instantly engage their parents in protective behaviour, and the parents must care enough about their offspring to nurture and protect them. Even once grown, we are not particularly splendid physical specimens. Other animals can run faster, see and smell better, and fight more effectively than we can. Our major evolutionary advantages are our brain and our ability to communicate, remember, plan and work together. Our survival depends on our collective abilities, not our individual might. Although this need, sculpted across evolutionary time, is strong, it is not self-evident today how best we can achieve genuine and lasting social connections with others.

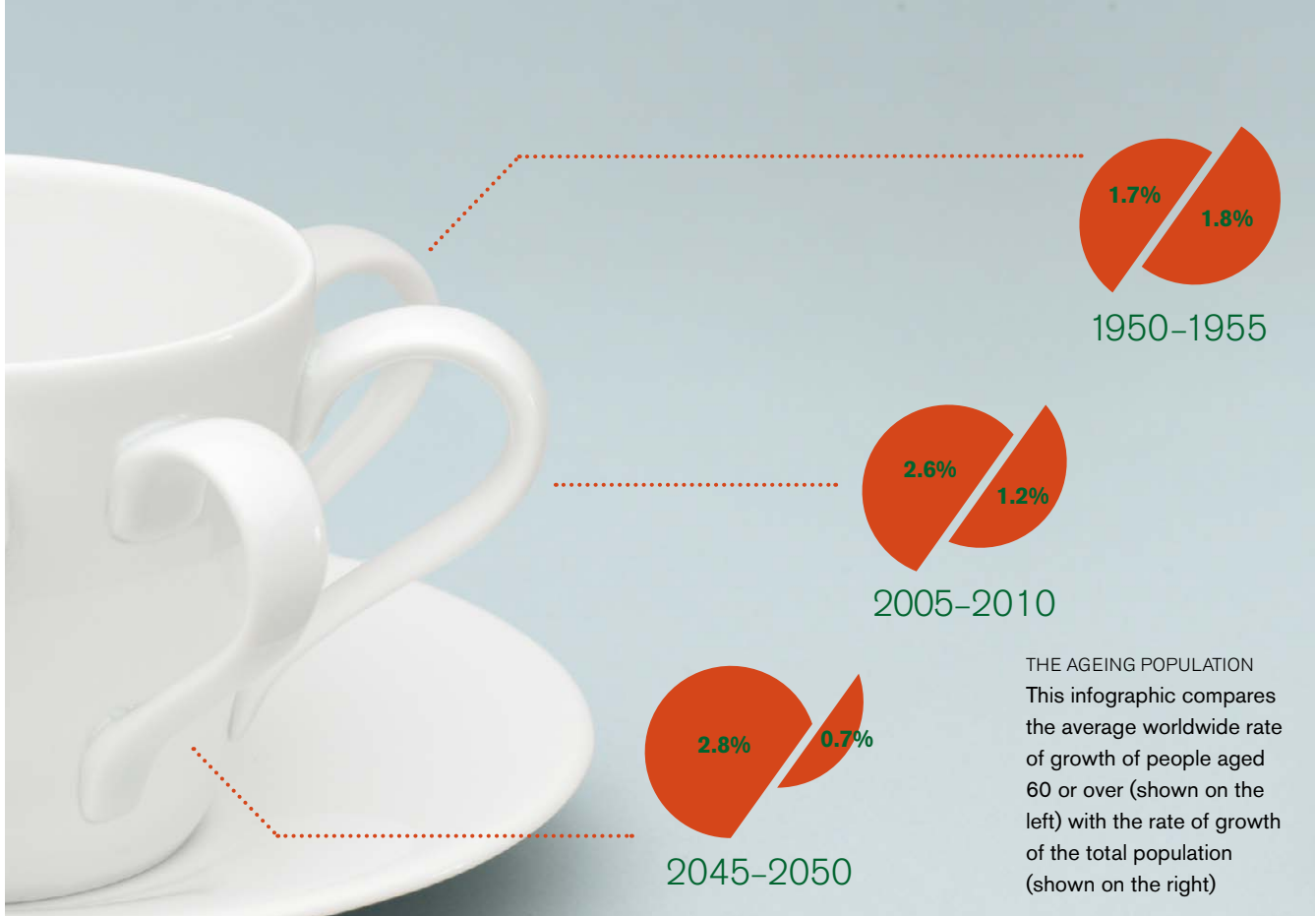
Through most of human history, life was defined by reciprocal obligations to parents, children, other relatives, the honour of the family and, perhaps, the village. During the 20th century, the importance of social bonds was supplanted by an individualistic ethos that, at its extreme, has led to rootlessness, anomie and the amoral pursuit of self-interest. By the middle of the century, executive transfers had become a staple of corporate life, turning the upwardly mobile into a new species of migrant worker. In the US, the triumph of the interstate highway system, tract housing, strip development and the car encouraged interchangeable landscapes, with entire communities mass-produced as marketable commodities.

In the 21st century, we are facing profound demographic changes that are expected to transform communities and societies worldwide, for better or for worse. According to the UN, in 1950, there were 205 million individuals in the world aged 60 or over; by 2009, the number had grown to more than 735 million. Older adults represent the >>

JOHN T CACIOPPO FRSA IS THE TIFFANY & MARGARET BLAKE DISTINGUISHED SERVICE PROFESSOR AND DIRECTOR OF THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO'S CENTRE FOR COGNITIVE AND SOCIAL NEUROSCIENCE; LOUISE C HAWKEY IS THE DIRECTOR OF THE SOCIAL NEUROSCIENCE LABORATORY AT THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO; AND WILLIAM PATRICK IS THE CO-AUTHOR (WITH CACIOPPO) OF *LONELINESS: HUMAN NATURE AND THE NEED FOR SOCIAL CONNECTION*

IMAGERY: CONCEPT BASED ON CLINICODES' 90 DAYS, 90 CUPS' PROJECT





>> fastest-growing segment of the world population. In Europe and the UK, approximately one in five of the current residents is 60 years of age or older; by 2050, it is projected to be one in three. Worldwide, in 1950, there were 12 individuals aged 15 to 64 for every person aged 65 or older. UN projections indicate that, by 2050, there will be only four individuals aged 15 to 64 for every person aged 65 or older.

If these demographic trends continue, a much larger proportion of our population will soon be over 65 years of age and will therefore need to draw upon entitlement programmes. These individuals – women in particular – are likely to lead more isolated lives. On average, women live longer than men: worldwide, approximately one in five women aged 60 or over lives alone, compared with one in 11 men.

As modern societies assumed their current shape, no one factored in the cost of transience and interchangeability in economic, social or health terms. In observing new ways of organising daily existence, sociologist Robert Weiss noted four decades ago how the loss of natural social gatherings on the porch, the street or the pharmacy on the corner made sharing experiences and insulating problems more difficult. Residents of transient communities lacked not only long-term relationships with friends and neighbours, but also the benefits of having older generations of family members close by.

Weiss's colleague, Mark Fried, referred to the working-class residents of Boston's West End as "grieving for a lost home" after their neighbourhood was razed for what was then called urban renewal. This was a community of people who were rich in attachments, both to the place and to one another. If you

have ever visited Boston's North End, a chaotic jumble that still exists and that seems to operate as an extended family, you will know what such a community is like. Weiss speculated that the lowered wellbeing of the West End's dispossessed would not be alleviated easily by larger or newer apartments.

In *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*, political scientist Robert Putnam explores the implications of our atomised culture in terms of lost social capital: the reciprocity, cooperation and collective goodwill derived from connection with the larger community. He observes that participation in all forms of community activity has sharply declined, from voter turnout to bridge clubs, from volunteer fire departments to marching bands and from alumni organisations to bowling leagues. Civic virtue is most powerful when embedded in a dense network of reciprocal social relations. "A society of many virtuous but isolated individuals is not necessarily rich in social capital," he writes.

The human drive for social connection is strong, however. Anthropologist Mark Fleisher has found that, in tougher urban neighbourhoods, disaffected members of dysfunctional families try to fight alienation by joining gangs. Television and films have brought celebrities into our homes, and viewers have responded by forming parasocial relationships with the characters they emulate, in some cases creating the kind of surrogate families they see on *Friends*, *Lost* or *Harry Potter*. As exemplified by Tom Hanks' attitude towards his volleyball, Wilson, in the film *Castaway*, the absence of personal connections leads people to anthropomorphise objects, pets and even celestial bodies to achieve some semblance of social connection.

Technology has made it possible for people to connect in ways never imagined, and people worldwide have jumped at the opportunity. Social networking, once the domain of family influence, college fraternities and local business groups, has gone global and online. The dramatic rise of the mobile phone and broadband connectivity has made it possible to follow what others are doing 24 hours a day and to maintain friendships across time and distance. Although meeting new friends online remains the exception rather than the rule, online social networking is associated with an increase in number of friends, though what it means to be a friend is also changing.

The world is becoming less welcoming of fully embodied social connections in the traditional sense, with committed, enduring social identities being replaced by shorter-term, more instrumental collaborations. The valuation of mobility and personal freedom, the individual search for satisfaction, the vicarious participation in the lives of others and the fluidity of social identity results in a weakening of social bonds. Densely interconnected, all-encompassing local groups are becoming less common, whereas fragmented, sparsely interconnected and less stable specialised networks are becoming more so.

Weak ties have an important role to play in our globalised societies, but it remains the case that the number of such ties and the density of our social networks are poor predictors of whether people feel socially connected or isolated; instead, it is the quality of one's close relationships that matters. Celebrities and billionaires may have countless people clamouring to be their friends, but may rightly suspect that these individuals are primarily seeking to benefit from reflected glory rather than to form authentic reciprocal connections.

People who have more face-to-face confidants also tend to have more online ones, with the number of online confidants generally being the consequence, not the cause, of the number of face-to-face ones. The number of confidants one has, however, is not as important as the nature of the interactions with these individuals. People whose interactions are primarily online often experience greater social isolation and lower wellbeing than people whose interactions are primarily face to face.

When nuclear families are constantly relocating in and out of faceless suburbs, they are under more pressure to be 'all' for one another. Stephanie Coontz, sociologist and author of *Marriage: A History*, recently decried the extent to which growing numbers of individuals now depend on their spouse as their one and only source of companionship.

We are dependent as children and our culture encourages us to become independent by the time we reach adulthood. But the opposite of being dependent in a social species is not so much being independent as being someone on whom others can depend. Research in social neuroscience indicates that a feeling of social isolation is reflected in different neural pathways in the brain that affect social cognition and executive function, and can contribute to rises in stress hormones and blood pressure, and even genetic expression that promotes inflammation and impairs immunity. Feelings of social isolation engender hostility, impair sleep and, over time, seriously accelerate age-related decline in health and wellbeing.


Humans are not the only species that is adversely affected by social isolation. By definition, social species create organisations and structures that extend beyond the individual. Experimental studies in nonhuman social species, from fruit flies to primates, confirm that social isolation has many of the same direct, deleterious biological effects as we see in humans. Specifically, social isolation increases chronic sympathetic tonus, oxidative stress and the activation of certain hormones, while decreasing inflammatory control, immunity and the expression of genes regulating glucocorticoid responses.

### **IGNORING THE WARNING SIGNS**

Given the negative effects of damaged social connections, we might be expected to try to change the kind of relationships we form, communities we promote and social institutions we build. But this is not typically the case. Instead, most politicians and laypeople assume that human connection is such a part of our nature that it takes care of itself. The pain of loneliness is an aversive state that has evolved as a signal to change behaviour, much like hunger, thirst or physical pain. Among its effects is an increased motivation to renew the connections we need to survive and prosper. Rather than attending to this biological signal, however, most treat it as a personal weakness. As a result, approximately one-fifth of the population is beset by feelings of social isolation even when in the company of others.

National and international organisations now employ wellbeing as an indicator of societal progress, and the spate of popular books on the topic reflects people's interest in pursuing their own personal happiness. Personality factors appear to be important, but they are insufficient as an explanation for individual differences in wellbeing. Extroversion, for instance, is associated with heightened wellbeing, but this is because extroverted individuals experience a lower degree of social isolation. Indeed, cross-sectional and longitudinal studies have shown that a feeling of social connection, rather than the number of friends or the characteristics of social networks, best predicts a rise in wellbeing, whereas a feeling of social isolation predicts a fall.

Recent work by Iris Mauss and colleagues suggests that individuals who place a high value on their personal pursuit of happiness typically find that their efforts backfire. In one experimental study, people were randomly assigned to read either a news story about the importance of achieving happiness or one that was unrelated to happiness. Those who read about the value of achieving happiness were less, not more, happy when they were later exposed to a pleasant film. Why this paradoxical effect? People who place a high value on their personal happiness set standards that are difficult to obtain, decreasing their happiness the more they pursue it. The pursuit of happiness may also lead to an emphasis on personal preferences, as well as decreased social engagement and feelings of social connectedness, with an ultimate toll on wellbeing.

Our brains have evolved such that we enjoy the company of others. Newborns attend to and imitate others. Throwing a strike while bowling produces more smiling and higher levels of happiness when you can share the event with 

others. Celebrating the success of your favourite team is less joyful when the celebration is a party of one. It should not be surprising, then, that the solitary search for happiness leads to lower, rather than higher, levels of wellbeing. Fostering mutually beneficial interpersonal relationships, finding strength in the differences among us and valuing the happiness of others as well as our own offers a more certain road to personal and social wellbeing.

The recent emphasis on the value of personal happiness, coupled with demographic and technological changes in our societies, may make wellbeing more challenging to achieve. Throughout most of human history, life expectancy was short, fertility rates were high and children dominated the demographic. Most people did not have much time to pursue individual happiness. With the dramatic expansion of life expectancy during the 20th century and the decline in fertility rates in industrialised nations, retirees are becoming more common than children and opportunities for leisure are now available to many in the industrialised world.

The idea that one retires, moves to Golden Pond and lives a life of leisure and happiness is a myth being sold by the estate agents representing Golden Pond, however. Within the world of retirees, feelings of social isolation are lowest and wellbeing is highest among those who remain socially active and healthy and who continue to interact with friends and former co-workers. Those who cope with feelings of isolation by going out with friends, rather than engaging in sedentary activities such as watching television or going online, say that they feel

happier and less isolated. Other influential factors include whether they regard where they live as a safe neighbourhood and whether they use social networking to promote face-to-face interactions with friends and family.

In industrialised societies today, wars for minds and property are more likely to be waged on the battlefield of commerce. This economic battle has traditionally been for the affections of the young because it is they who strive the most to materially improve their lot in life. Diminishing the role of older adults to that of invisible retirees means wasting a valuable and growing resource for children, families, neighbourhoods, cities and societies. Tapping into this resource is better for the young and for the elderly, as the former have access to additional help and the latter have purpose and meaningful connections with others.

The MacArthur Foundation Research Network on an Ageing Society has identified a variety of prejudices and myths about elderly individuals, perhaps the most pernicious of which is the idea that older adults are ill and have limited capacity. The overwhelming body of research demonstrates that many elderly individuals remain fit and highly functioning, physically and cognitively, until late in life. Although an illness, once contracted, tends to last for longer among older adults, there is little difference in the number of days that young and older adults are ill because the latter tend to become ill less often than the former.

## INTERGENERATIONAL BONDS

Rather than constituting a societal burden, the higher proportion of older adults in our societies has the potential to become a unique and valuable resource on which to build mutually beneficial intergenerational connections. Family elders have traditionally been the individuals around whom extended families and friends could congregate and through whom they could network. Even today, older adults tend to have a more positive outlook, a greater sense of wellbeing, more patience and a broader temporal perspective. This can bring balance to children and young adults who are dealing with new hassles and time demands. Children may be more cuddly than the elderly, but the elderly have learned to appreciate caring, collaboration and authentic connection. As young adults, we are taught that rational individuals pursue options from which one materially benefits in the short term. As older adults, we learn the wisdom of pursuing options that are good for others as well as ourselves and that, through their sustainable nature, can benefit future generations.

The intergenerational battle for limited societal resources and the age segregation that characterises many industrialised societies are not our only options. If we are to realise more benefits than costs from longer lives, however, we may need to change 'business as usual'. At the moment, older adults are more likely to be the source than the recipient of intergenerational transfers, in terms of both money and assistance. Entitlement programmes not only ensure a minimal standard of living for the elderly, they also lighten the financial burden on family, friends and communities.

## FELLOWSHIP IN ACTION


### BRIDGING THE GAP

Joseph Coleman FRSA, a design student at Plymouth University, hopes to improve connections between generations by designing a device that prints emails and text messages as physical letters.

The product, which was selected as a winner in the Modern Age category of the RSA's 2010–11 Student Design Awards, enables younger and older people to stay in touch using the method of communication with which they are most familiar. Just as the text message has become the digital equivalent of a postcard, Coleman's design provides a simple way of sending images or messages to loved ones from anywhere in the world.

"The internet is amazing at connecting people, but if you don't have access to it, you can find yourself cut off," said Coleman, who is now working with BT to develop his design further. "This is a way of bridging that gap."

For details of the 2011–12 RSA Student Design Awards, turn to page 6.



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We as individuals have an important role to play. We need to recognise and address the prejudices against older adults; challenge selfish, divisive ways of thinking and problem solving; and look for the opportunities that long lifespans and intergenerational interdependencies offer families, communities, commerce and societies. Fifty years ago, in his inaugural address, John Kennedy said: “Ask not what your country can do for you – ask what you can do for your country.” Lives have lengthened and the world has shrunk since Kennedy uttered these words. Yet it is as important as ever that we work together to identify solutions that are good for others as well as for us, and that benefit future generations as well as our own.

Governments have an important role to play, too. The need for our political leaders to put aside ideological differences and self-interest for the benefit of society has been all too evident in the events of this year, from the crisis in the Middle East to the US Congress’s budget negotiations. The goal of political debates should be to form public policies that serve the greater good, rather than enabling politicians to position themselves for political gain. Public policies formulated to promote short-term selfish interests may suit the hypothetical species, *homo economicus* (the rational ones), but not the fundamental nature of *homo sapiens* (the wise ones).

Longer lives may be a medical miracle of the 20th century, but the rising cost of healthcare is becoming a major challenge. We need evidence-based government policies that promote not only longer, but also healthier and more productive lives. Research indicates that this outcome is more likely among individuals who are physically, cognitively and socially active for longer. Evidence-based public policies that promote these behaviours may richly benefit our economy, health and wellbeing. ■

## FELLOWSHIP IN ACTION

### WEAVE: A WOMEN’S ENTERPRISE PROJECT

Weave, an RSA Catalyst-funded project, offers women with sewing and textile skills the chance to become entrepreneurs.

Founder and Fellow Jane Shaw decided to set up the network after meeting women in the North East of England who had previously worked in the textile industry. Once the factories had closed down, the women had either become unemployed or moved into unfulfilling jobs that did not enable them to use the skills they had developed. Many were struggling financially and felt isolated.

When Shaw spoke to staff in the design departments of local higher-education institutions, she discovered that they often struggled to recruit people with the technical expertise to make up samples. “I realised that women with textile-making skills could benefit from building relationships with local designers,” she said.

Following an initial awareness-raising event, Shaw hopes to engage local designers in the project. As well as planning to bring together designers and textile makers, she is trying to secure funding for an electronic platform that will facilitate networking and extend the project’s reach beyond the local area, perhaps even internationally.

■ If you would like to apply for RSA Catalyst funding, visit [www.thersa.org/fellowship/catalyst-fund](http://www.thersa.org/fellowship/catalyst-fund)