

Loneliness and Covid-19

by Michael Curtis

All the lonely people, where do they all come from? All the lonely people where do they all belong? Eleanor Rigby wearing the face she keeps in a jar by the door.

The pandemic Covid-19 has affected our lives in so many different ways. Social distancing, lockdowns, and physical isolation have highlighted the absence of human need for intimate connection and good friends with others and the desire to be part of a shared community. Loneliness occurs when the connections we need are larger than the connections we have. The impact of Covid has drawn attention to the problem of loneliness, a phenomenon usually understated because it was associated with shame. Understandably, it was not often the subject of conversation. Loneliness is a subjective factor, indicating a feeling of lack of connection but it is different from aloneness or solitude, and also often hidden and not admitted even to family members. It can manifest itself in different ways.

Loneliness has also manifested itself historically. This is apparent from the *Epic of Gilgamesh*. The 4,000 year-old Sumerian epic is the tale of a hero who is arrogant, self-absorbed, and lonely, yearning for a true friend. "Part of me is missing, never before has loneliness oppressed me so, a friend is what I need to make these sorrows end."

In modern terms those sorrows can be felt by everyone to some extent on a wide scale. That would include lack of companionship and meaningful relations, loss of a close relationship, a feeling of being left out or not being cared for, the lack of a social network, lack of authenticity in relationships, lack of a human touch, an act which slows down

heart beat and blood pressure and triggers the release of oxytocin, a hormone associated with empathy and relationship building, among other matters. That touch will be absent by the rules concerning Covid being made in the U.S. and elsewhere for maintaining social distancing and hugging.

Even before the arrival of Covid, the existence of loneliness was attracting attention because of its social, medical, and economic costs. Loneliness has always been familiar at the top, where individuals have few friends in spite of wealth and power. A rare notable exception was the relationship between President Harry Truman and his friend Eddie Jacobson, shirt maker in Kansas City: "in all my years in Washington, Eddie never asked me for anything for himself."

However, surveys and research have indicated the ubiquity of loneliness thus providing opportunity for the elimination of shame, as well as the reality of the phenomenon with its adverse effects on physical and mental health, factors causing anger and depression, and lack of self-esteem. A number of works as well as official governmental action have addressed the issue. One of the more interesting books is *Together: The Healing Power of Human Connection in a Sometime Lonely World*, by Vivek Murthy, 19th Surgeon General of the U.S. A significant action was taken by then British Prime Minister Theresa May in January 2018.

In 2017, Vivek Murthy declared loneliness a public health crisis, a root cause and contributor to many epidemics in the world, alcohol and drug addiction, violence, depression, anxiety. In his study, about a third of Americans over 45 years old consider themselves to be lonely. There are high levels of loneliness among the elderly, partly because of physical problems and partly for cultural factors and an emphasis on youth. Loneliness affects not only our health but also the nature of our work, the sense of division in society, the educational process, the inability to connect,

which is affected by technology which can isolate as well as connect people.

A major governmental step in the UK results from the Jo Cox Commission on Loneliness which Cox, an MP, set up before she was murdered in summer 2016. It was a response to her own personal experience of deep loneliness and that of others in her constituency, and she recognized loneliness was a serious problem that could affect anyone. Her vision was to break down boundaries. After her murder a coalition formed of charities and businesses to reach into communities most affected by loneliness. They have helped people talk about their feelings of loneliness, and has stimulated debate about the role that government, business, and community groups can play to tackle loneliness.

Jo Cox was right to highlight the critical importance of loneliness. Prime Minister May created a government ministerial lead for loneliness, to ensure that the issue of loneliness remains a parliamentary priority. This strategy to reduce loneliness, does not mean the creation of a separate ministry, but means commitments by nine different government departments. It would involve a variety of activities: community health service, the practice known as social prescribing which will allow doctors to direct patients to local groups and community workers offering support to help people improve their health and well being, to activities such as cookery classes, walking clubs, art groups. High profile businesses, Sainsbury's, British Red Cross, civil service, support the health of their employees. The number of community spaces, with cafes, gardens art facilities is being increased. The issue of loneliness is being incorporated into political decisions. The government will also partner a scheme to see that postal workers check upon lonely people as part of their normal delivery rounds.

Feeling lonely is not the same as solitude, people can and do feel lonely even when surrounded by others because they lack

connection and community. It is a subjective feeling affecting, at some point, a significant number of people. Surveys differ on exact numbers affected, one British survey says that one in four adults had feelings of loneliness, but a useful indicator is that of the British Office for National Statistics. It indicates that loneliness has increased, that 7.2% of adults say they are often or always lonely, that it existed more among unemployed and young and single people, especially students. Countryside areas reported lower levels than urban. Women reported feeling lonely more often than men, renters more than home owners, people in poor health, single or widowed. At particular risk are widowed older homeowners living alone with long term health conditions, unmarried, middle aged with health problems, younger renters with little sense of belonging to their area. Loneliness can be triggered by actions; moving homes, changing schools, starting a career, becoming a parent, changing jobs, bereavement.

In the U.S., research at Harvard suggests that loneliness is on the rise, above all of older teens and young adults. Their survey indicated that 36% of 950 Americans reported feeling lonely frequently or almost all the time, compared with 25% before the pandemic. About 61% of those aged 18-25 had high levels.

From the surveys we find the following results of loneliness; it is likely to increase the risk of death; an increased risk of developing coronary heart disease and stroke; risk of high blood pressure; greater risk of cognitive decline and dementia. The number of those over 50 experiencing loneliness in Britain will probably reach two million by 2025. Two fifths of all older people say that television is their main company.

The pandemic and consequent lockdowns have made the issue worse. In addition to social distancing, official rules now ban hugs and handshakes, reducing opportunities for human touch and increasing physical separation. There is clearly a need, moral and social, to overcome that separation, a task in

which teachers, medical personnel, employers, and local and national officials can play a role showing that there is genuine concern about those who are lonely. Above all, the stigma of loneliness and of shame associated with it should be eliminated.