Unity Through Community

The Importance of Social Support Networks in Combating Loneliness

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'Loneliness kills…'; a phrase not untrue that unfortunately is often posted without any tangible method to counteract its morbid self. In our modern Australia, especially during our Covid lockdowns and paradoxically isolating obsession with "social" media, one in three people report bothersome loneliness, with incidence higher in men compared to women.[1] The Australian Institute of Health and Welfare[2] defines loneliness as a 'subjective unpleasant or distressing feeling of a lack of connection to other people..', with its partner social isolation best described as 'having objectively few social relationships or roles and infrequent social contact', and although the two do not exist within one single circle on a Venn diagram, their interconnectedness is undeniable. Loneliness is not just an uncomfortable pitt in one's stomach that disappears after coffee with a friend, it is a health risk factor that "renders people more sensitive to pain, suppresses our immune system, diminishes brain function and disrupts sleep."[3] More obviously, loneliness is linked with mental illness, emotional distress, and suicide.[4] It is thus plain to see that measures to prevent or counteract loneliness and social isolation must be of the greatest importance, but where can we go and what can we do to find them?

A solution to sitting at home, wishing the days away, is seen exemplified in the efforts of the Thurgoona Community Centre (TCC),[9] a thriving hub for social connection and emotional support located in a beautiful Albury suburb. Truly embodying its motto 'UNITY through CommUNITY', the TCC brings together people of all ages, from all walks of life, with resounding success. As a student, I felt immensely privileged to be able to partake in a wide variety of the centre's services and activities, including lessons in English, children's playgroups, line-dancing classes, and my personal favourite; the 'Golden Oldies' morning tea. The TCC creates endless avenues from which social support can be found; a young mother given real-time advice on her children from the skilled team of Maternal and Child Health Nurses who support

the daily playgroups, a line-dancer being helped through the loss of a beloved pet by her dancing instructor, a group of women laughing over cognitive puzzles at a morning tea, and myself and a man born seventy years before me finding connection over our shared love of Sydney beaches. Headed by a brilliant coordinator and supported by numerous volunteers, the TCC epitomises the power of connection through community as an invaluable warrior against modern loneliness.

With comparable positive effect, but through a physical health-focussed lens, the Bright Medical Centre serves as the beating heart of its small mountain town. In a community of two and a half thousand people (that can swell to nearly ten times that at peak tourist season), 100 kilometres from Albury, the Bright Medical Centre's 10 General Practitioners provide outstanding support to their hospital and clinic patients. Amidst its provision of the management of acute and chronic illnesses, primary prevention and screening services, and minor surgical procedures, a particular experience here sticks with me. A home visit to an elderly couple that served a function so much greater than the simple medication review that was noted as its purpose. The Doctor and I were welcomed warmly into the couple's family home, poured hot cups of tea and invited to the dining table. It seemed as though the least important topic on the meeting's agenda was the patient's medication, and the group got along like old family friends as I watched in awe. I was shown which pieces of art had been handmade, and given a tour of the immaculately kept garden, where a very generous portion of homegrown basil and tomatoes were gifted to me to take home. Where a regular GP appointment often lasts for 15 minutes, this one went on for an hour, with every single minute providing invaluable social and emotional support and connection to the patients, Doctor, and myself.

From a student's point of view, the social benefits of these community services are undeniable, and better yet, are supported by the literature. The Harvard Study of Adult Development,[5] commenced in Boston, Massachusetts during the Great Depression, is a pilot exploration of which psychosocial elements of a man's life are most important for, and influential towards, healthy aging. In 1938 the study recruited two groups of men; 268 Harvard University graduates and 456 men from the inner-city neighborhoods of Boston, and began to track their progression through life. Details on the men's childhood, education, careers, marriages, health, and social relationships were recorded periodically until they reached the age of 55, and were used to

inform predictions of their health and wellbeing into their eighth and ninth decades. 80 years on, the study now includes the children of the original participants, in what is dubbed the 'G2' (Second Generation) Study. Ultimately, the Study has been instrumental in identifying the importance of social connection and strong interpersonal relationships. Amongst factors such as maintaining a healthy weight and the absence of alcohol and tobacco abuse, the Study identifies maintaining a stable marriage and a healthy demeanour to cope with life's ups and downs to be crucial in aging well.[6] In summation, the current Study Director Dr Robert Waldinger identifies that relationship satisfaction in middle age is a more important predictor of future health than cholesterol levels, stating "...The people who were the most satisfied in their relationships at age 50 were the healthiest at age 80."[7]

Interestingly, the study rebukes the age-old concept that 'people do not change'. Various case studies reveal persons who, at the time of their recruitment, possessed all the ingredients to become a happy, healthy, older person, yet turned out to be, in the words of the Harvard Scientists, 'train wrecks'.[8] The opposite is revealed as well. Gladly, the TCC and the Bright Medical Centre cater to people young and old, and thus align with this principle that even in the latest stages of life, there is room for social connectedness to better all elements of one's health.

Therefore, the benefits provided by both the Thurgoona Community Centre and the Bright Medical Centre are undeniably related to their provision of social support networks, vital to healthy human functioning. With the negative impacts of loneliness upon both physical and psychological health now well established, it is vital that services such as these continue to be supported for the wellbeing of all our communities. As a medical student, my time spent with these organisations has expanded my idea of the type of services I could refer my future patients onto- what a fantastic idea to have a choir for persons with communication difficulties post-stroke or other neurological impairment. Additionally highlighted to me is the importance of establishing and maintaining rapport with patients in all possible circumstances, as the opportunity to create social connection should never be missed. Ultimately, we all desire a healthy and enjoyable journey into older age, and "the key to healthy aging is relationships, relationships, relationships."[8]

Reference List

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