L O N E L I N E S S—PODCAST #6

Today I want to talk about loneliness.
For anyone who's been lonely, you know it's a painful feeling. It can be experienced as sad or as anxiety provoking or discouraging, or just plain depressing.
The fact is that we're facing an epidemic of loneliness in this country, and the suffering has taken a huge toll on us in many different ways.
So let me first paint a picture of what studies have shown us about the incidence and consequences of loneliness and social isolation in America today.—and, I'll warn you, it's pretty depressing picture, so prepare yourselves!

In a recent study of the relative importance of social relationships among adult Americans, respondents were asked how many close confidantes they had. In 1985, a majority said three. In 2004, that number went down to two—and 25% said that they had no

confidantes at all. And if you excluded family members, this percentage grows to 50%

Think about that. If true, a quarter of the population had no one in their lives with whom they were intimate. And since we're talking statistics here—we know that the average size of our households has steadily declined, with single parent families sharply increasing. According to a recent large-scale survey from the health care provider Cigna, nearly half of the more than 20,000 respondents said that they sometimes or always feel alone or "left out." The study goes on to say that one in four respondents rarely/never feel as though there are people who really understand them, or that they belong to a group of friends, or that they can find companionship when they want it, or feel as though they have a lot in common with others.

And, of great importance is that the study shows that each successive generation suffers from greater degrees of loneliness.

Children are increasingly put into structured activity, with the time spent playing with friends on the decline. The # of hours that kids spend playing outside in unstructured activities was cut in half between 1981 and 1997. Many schools no longer have recess. A huge number of households have the TV on all the time and, as well all know, kids increasingly use social media in addictive ways. The problem with TV and the Internet is that they cannot replace face-to-face touch and relatedness.

Continuing on this depressing sociological journey now: Sociologist Robert Putnam put a lot of this data together in his book, *Bowling Alone* in which he traced how our social ties and civic engagement has unraveled over the last 50 years, from voting rates to church-going, to time spent entertaining friends, to participation in social clubs—including, yes, bowling leagues--to the amount of money given to charity. All of this adds up to the inescapable conclusion that Americans have fewer and

lower quality interactions with one another than any other generation in our history.

Social isolation causes loneliness and loneliness makes us sick. Not only does it cause depression and—I will argue--addiction, but it has been shown to greatly increase stress. And the stress response syndrome wrecks havocs with our immune systems, disturbs our sleep, and causes cardiovascular disease. The Cigna study concludes that loneliness has the same impact on mortality as smoking 15 cigarettes a day, making it even more dangerous than obesity. In one interesting study that is suggestive if not definitive, researchers separated lab rats into two groups. Some were raised in groups, some in a cage, alone. The isolated rats developed 84x the number of breast cancer tumors as the rats who had a community.

But we can't speak of the causes and harmful effects of isolation and loneliness without discussing the ways

that these emotional and social states are reinforced by our culture of competitive individualism.

We live in a world, after all, which idealizes the "self-made man" and woman. The values of competitive capitalism involve raising yourself up by your own bootstraps is the ultimate virtue. People are too often seen as a means to an end, which further undermines our capacity to trust one another. One study showed that in 1960, 58% of people agreed with the statement, "Most people can be trusted." In 2008, that number went down to 32%. Meaning…

2/3 of people in our culture don't feel that they can trust others.

We privilege independence and the private self and, as a result, shape our world in ways that reinforce loneliness. This grim picture of social life today is what Albert Schweitzer was referring to when he said, "We are all so much together, but we are all dying of loneliness."

It's even been argued—and I think, persuasively-- that loneliness and social isolation drive people to do destructive things. So loneliness and social isolation is destructive, but they also lead people to compensate, to react, in ways that are also destructive. So, some people join cults as a way to feel connected. Some are drawn to nationalist movements that emphasize racial or ethnic purity as way of belonging to some real or imagined community.

Now, let's think about addiction: The social critic and journalist Johann Hari argues that addiction is primarily a response to feeling disconnected. In his critique of the "just say No" movement of the 80s, that put its emphasis on punishment, he says, " For **100 years now, we've been singing war songs about addicts. I think all along we should have been singing love songs to them, because the opposite of addiction is not sobriety. The opposite of addiction is connection."**

I think Hari is absolutely right.

However you slice it, loneliness is harmful and it's on the rise.

As a psychotherapist I see the pain and damage caused by loneliness every day. So many of my patients grew up in families in which they were neglected. But the type of neglect that is most toxic is found in families that lack empathy, families in which the parents cannot and do not accurately understand the internal lives of their children. This failure of empathy hurts the child's brain, psyche, and social life. Further, if we aren't on the receiving end of empathy, we can't grow up and give it very readily.

In 1978, the psychologist Edward Tronick did a fascinating experiment that showed the destructive effects of failures of empathy. A mother was asked to play naturally with her 6-month-old infant. The way mothers – well adults in general—do this is by mirroring the child's facial expressions and gestures, mirroring being the earliest form of empathy.

The mother in this experiment was then instructed to suddenly make her facial expression flat and neutral—completely "still," in other words--and to do so for three minutes, regardless of her baby's activity. And then they were told to resume normal play.

When mothers stopped their facial responses to their babies, when their faces were "still," babies first anxiously tried to reconnect with their mothers. When the mothers' faces remained neutral and still, the babies quickly showed ever-greater signs of confusion and distress, followed by a turning away from the mother, finally appearing sad and hopeless. This is the pain, the small little trauma that results from failures of empathy. Multiply this interaction by 10,000, then you begin to see what happens in families where parents just can't—or don't want to try to—understand their children as separate people.

In the experiment, when the mothers were then permitted to re-engage normally, their babies, after

some initial protest, their relational and imitative playfulness.

If we're not understood, we grow up feeling that we're not supposed to be understood, and that there is something wrong with our wish to be seen, or to be special—which are, after all, perfectly normal needs in the developing child.

When someone grows up with the belief—and it's usually an unconscious belief—that he or she isn't supposed to be understood, that person's self-esteem takes a real "hit"-- and they often go on to make bad choices in jobs, friends, and love partners. They set the bar way too low when it comes to other people. They don't expect much – and make choices that guarantee that they don't get much.

Further, if a child isn't really seen for who the child really is, then that child ends up developing what we call a "false self," --a personality that can win attention and approval, but that isn't authentic.

Love is always experienced as conditional;
And social life becomes a performance and real authentic relationships drop away.

So what do we do about loneliness? Well, on an individual level, psychotherapy is enormously helpful for the simple reason that the therapist's empathy counteracts the patient's tendency to be cynical and to withdraw.

On a social level, we have to make loneliness a public health issue, like vaccinations or clean water. Interestingly, Great Britain recently attempted to do just that when it saw the appointment of Tracey Crouch as the Minister for Loneliness—a position created in response to a 2017 report that showed that more than nine million people in that country ***often*** or ***always*** felt lonely. Starting a national conversation about the subject is one place to start—one in which we bring this problem out of the closet, stop blaming its victims, and begin problem solving about how to help each other feel

more connected in our families, communities, workplaces, and countries.