

Loneliness and path to Happiness

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The history of human civilization is the history of the continuous ways in which humans have evolved to stay connected for human connection is a key factor in people's physical and mental health. However this has been interrupted due to the recent impacts of COVID-19 and the need for physical distancing which has resulted in people experiencing loneliness. This phenomenon is now reaching an epidemic proportion seriously affecting just how we think of ourselves and others. Loneliness has demonstrated compromised physical health including studies showing a higher risk of dementia and diabetes. Two meta-analyses involving 100 studies claimed that loneliness was an important risk factor for early mortality, even more so than chronic conditions such as obesity. A recent study led by a group of international researchers, has found that loneliness is more damaging to our health than smoking. The team, which included scientists from Stanford University in California, measured the biological age of almost 4,500 participants by using a blood test which looked for 16 biomarkers of ageing, including cholesterol levels and hormones. Those who felt lonely were found to be 20 months older than their chronological age compared to regular smokers, whose bodies had aged by 15 months. The ramification of loneliness reaches even to the molecular level where the expression of a gene called *CtrA*, gets triggered which, in turn, alters the immune response in a way that renders the body more susceptible to illness. There is also the evidence of certain parts of the brain which lights up when hunger is experienced, also gets activated when loneliness is experienced, demonstrating that there is a human need for deeper psychological connection. Loneliness, has been proven to raise levels of inflammation in the body, acting as a warning light which comes on to remind the need for social contact. The body senses that by not interacting with people it is under the threat of stress and therefore trigger the immune system by producing harmful molecules in the body. The talk traces the consequences of loneliness and offers practical suggestions on how to experience happiness which is the birth right of every individual. This call for serious action is also in response to the WHO's report that almost one billion people living on this planet have mental health issues and the problems of loneliness and other related mental health issues have reached an alarming levels of global concern.

