

Schroeder TEDx Marin Talk (9/9/2023): Script with References

If you are anything like me, you've had moments in life when you feel incredibly lonely.

Imagine if you felt that crushing loneliness every single day.

Well, an estimated 44 million Americans this year reported exactly that (Witters, 2023), leading the U.S. Surgeon General to confirm what we already feel (Office of the Surgeon General, 2023): We're in a loneliness epidemic.

The paradox of loneliness is that people who are lonely don't want others to think something's wrong with them. So they further isolate themselves, creating a cycle of loneliness. Its invisibility is part of what makes it so insidious.

My own worst loneliness occurred, strangely, while I was surrounded by people. I had just started my first full-time job post-college, and it was sapping away all of my energy. Every morning, I'd wake up early while it was still dark, load up on coffee and dread, and ride the rush-hour commuter train, packed into my seat like a sardine with people on every side of my body. I felt detached from everyone surrounding me, as though I was floating just outside the train, looking through the window at myself.

Instead of alleviating my detachment by turning to the person sitting next to me and saying hi, I usually spent the commute scrolling through social media on my phone.

That painful commute led to one good thing: it motivated me to become a psychology researcher and spend my career studying the dynamics of social interaction.

I became fascinated with understanding my own irrational behavior... Why did I choose to perpetuate my loneliness day after day even though I was literally surrounded by opportunities to lessen it?

On that train, I faced the same fundamental social choice that all humans have faced since the dawn of time: should we connect with others or avoid them?

But unlike for our earlier ancestors, avoidance is easier for us than ever before in history, thanks to modern technological advances. Instead of commuting into work to chat with co-workers, we're sitting alone in home offices, begging for no-meeting Fridays. Instead of going to the grocery store and commiserating with our neighbors in the checkout line about the rising price of eggs, we're ordering delivery online.

Avoidance feels convenient but it carries an inconvenient consequence. Research suggests that sustained loneliness can be as bad for your health as smoking 15 cigarettes a day or rarely exercising (Holt-Lunstand, Smith & Layton, 2010, Figure 6). Our loneliness epidemic is a public health crisis.

Rather than engaging in the healthy social exercise of connecting with other people in real life, too often we're binging on internet junk food. Our hyper-connection in the virtual world is facilitating disconnection in the human world.

So, how can we fight the loneliness epidemic? I've discovered some simple ways in my research to not feel so alone.

Let's travel together to another commuter train just like the one where I felt disconnected from everybody around me. This time, I wasn't there to ride the train, I was there to run an experiment on it for my PhD in psychology with my brilliant advisor Nick Epley¹. We wanted to test whether avoiding others is really the choice that makes people happiest.

For the experiment (Epley & Schroeder, 2014, Experiment 1b), I asked one group of train-riders to sit in solitude on their ride and I asked another group to do something very different than usual – to try to connect with someone else on the train.

I also asked a separate group of train-riders to just imagine doing those things and predict what it would feel like (Epley & Schroeder, 2014, Experiment 1a).

Let's take a look at the results:

It may not surprise you that these predictors expected that having to connect with a stranger on the train would lead them to have the least pleasant and productive commute (Epley & Schroeder, 2014, Experiment 1a).

What actually happened to the people told to connect with strangers on the train? Something very unexpected. According to their survey data, those people reported the most pleasant commute. And it didn't meaningfully harm their productivity either. (Epley & Schroeder, 2014, Experiment 1b)

So why did the predictors get it wrong? Why do people choose to avoid each other when they'd be happier connecting?

One reason my research finds is that people tend to overestimate the social risk of connecting with others, especially strangers (Epley, Kardas, Zhao, Atir, & Schroeder, 2022). As just one example, our participants believed that fewer than half of other train-riders would be willing to engage in conversation with them (Epley & Schroeder, 2014, Experiment 3a).

Our data suggests that's wrong – in reality, almost everyone in our dataset who tried to talk reported that the other person did respond back. It's the rule of reciprocity in social interaction: people tend to give what they get. When someone says "hi..." to you, you typically say "hi..." back.

¹ <https://www.nicholasepley.com/>

This insight suggests a remedy for loneliness. Rather than retreating into our screens when surrounded by others, we can seize the almost-unlimited opportunities for genuine connection that exist in the real world. The data suggests it's probably not as risky as you think. If you choose to connect with someone, not only can they give you a much-needed mood boost, you can do the same for them.

Of course, combatting loneliness involves more than just forming new connections, it also requires deepening our existing connections with our colleagues, friends, and loved ones.

To establish a deeper connection, two people must openly share the contents of their minds with each other - their thoughts, feelings, beliefs, and desires. We scientists call this process a "conversation."

Unfortunately, our conversations are too often shallow and devoid of intimacy and understanding. Many of us go weeks without having meaningful conversation, instead subsisting on superficial small talk about what we ate for dinner last night.

My and other scientists' research points to another important factor that can affect the quality of our conversations: the medium of communication.

More than half of young people's social interactions today occur via text-based media like emailing, texting, and direct messaging (Lenhart, 2015). I get it – I also love to text! It feels so easy!

But, the problem with texting is it lacks the humanizing cues needed for *deeper* insight into another person's mind. Words heard via the human voice convey the language of mind more vividly than words read on a screen (Schroeder & Epley, 2016). Consider what you're learning about my mind as you're listening to my voice right now. My tone of voice, volume, and cadence all give you deeper insight into not just what I'm saying but what I'm meaning to say: the mind behind my words. And in conveying my mind, my voice is signaling my deeper humanity (Schroeder, Kardas, & Epley, 2017).

The humanizing power of voice has been illustrated in a series of experiments across a variety of domains: from recruiters perceiving job candidates as more mindful when they hear their elevator pitches than read their cover letters (Schroeder & Epley, 2015), to political opponents having more open and receptive conversations when they speak than when they write (Schroeder et al., 2017), to people being more successful at reconnecting with old friends when they call them on the phone than email with them (Kumar & Epley, 2020).

Across all of these situations, speaking appears to be a superior means of connecting. Why is that? We've identified at least three reasons. First, it changes how your words are understood. Even the exact same words are evaluated differently when they are heard through the sound of a person's voice than when they are read. Second, it changes which words you use. People tend to say different things, particularly more intimate and receptive things, when they speak to each other than when they write to each other. Finally, it changes how words are exchanged. Speaking

typically occurs more synchronously, which means one person's words come immediately before the other person's reactions. This close connection in time allows two people to share their mental content back-and-forth more effectively. Research suggests that as two people talk they quite literally sync both their brain waves (Denworth, 2023; for review Perez et al., 2017), the neural evidence of their psychological alignment, and their heart rates (Danyluck & Gould, 2019), the cardiovascular evidence of their connectedness.

According to these data, how you choose to connect with someone else matters. A live voice-to-voice conversation facilitates deeper human-to-human connection.

Knowing what I know now, I wish I could return to my old self on that lonely train ride years ago. It wouldn't be easy, but I would make a different choice. I'd turn to the person sitting next to me, make eye contact, and say something like: "Hi. I hope we can survive the hell of rush hour together."

Look-- even with an awkward opening line like that, the data suggest the other person is likely to say hi back.

In my own journey toward being less lonely, I've learned that there will always be moments when I just want to curl up in a ball and ghost everyone.

After all, solitude is wonderful sometimes but loneliness is a very different animal.

Combatting loneliness means making the deliberate choice to connect even when all you want to do is avoid, because we now know that living in the real social world is psychologically, and physically, a far healthier choice.

Whether it's simply saying hi to someone new on the train, at the grocery store, or on a hike, or talking to a loved one by actually picking up the phone rather than texting, these choices may feel small but they have the power to change us from feeling lonely to feeling connected.

In the words of philosopher Daisaku Ikeda (2021): "There is no true joy in a life lived closed up in the little shell of the self. When you take one step to reach out to people, your life can be transformed."

Thank you.

For more information and to read the research papers yourself, check out:

www.julianaschroeder.com

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