

EMOTIONAL HEALTH

# SOCIAL WEALTH — OUR MOST PRECIOUS COMMODITY

BY CECILIA M. FORD, PH.D.

August 2, 2018



There's an adage that says there are two ways of feeling rich: one is to pursue and accumulate wealth and the other is to appreciate what you have. This is an era that has seen rapid economic growth for only a small number of people while the rest of us are stagnant or even losing ground economically. At the same time, our culture seems more focused than ever on the things that money *can* buy, and thanks to technology, we have unprecedented opportunities to watch while the ultra-rich lives in luxury.

Much as we worship material goods, studies show that they have limited ability to make us happy. While poverty is clearly linked to unhappiness, once people reach a comfortable standard of living, having more money is not necessarily correlated with increased wellbeing. In the US, once an individual reaches an annual income of about \$75,000, having more doesn't make much of a difference. We have all heard stories about lottery winners whose lives were not improved, but instead were wrecked by their "good fortune."

There are other things more that contribute to overall happiness, wellbeing, and health. In a recent editorial, *The New York Times* columnist David Brooks examined our connections to others, what he calls "social wealth." Psychologists, physicians, sociologists and others have all emphasized that the strength and quality of our human relationships have a decisive impact on lives. People with social support in any form, including family, friends, community, religious groups, etc., consistently report higher levels of wellbeing on many measures.

Conversely, loneliness is literally deadly. Brooks [writes](#), “Weak social connections have health effects similar to smoking 15 cigarettes a day, and a greater negative effect than obesity. . .Over the past five years, such trends have abruptly gotten worse. In 2012, 5.9 percent of young people suffered from severe mental health issues. By 2015 it was 8.2 percent.”

Dr. Vivek Murthy, a former Surgeon General, said in a recent article in *The Harvard Business Review*: “During my years caring for patients, the most common pathology I saw was not heart disease or diabetes; it was loneliness.”

Even as we learn more and more about this deadly correlation, social isolation is getting worse. Some changes have been slow. Families having been getting smaller for decades, and they are less likely to live together. Often, they are separated by thousands of miles. Increasingly, too, people don't find a job and keep it for life. Many Americans change jobs frequently, others are now part of the “gig” economy. Meanwhile, neighborhoods have been changed into unrecognizable strings of national chain stores while some have been destroyed altogether.

I grew up in a New York neighborhood with small local shops whose owners and employees were well known. When the video store closed in the late 1980s, neighbors helped Ernesto, the talented young manager, get a job at the local bank known when I was a child as First National City Bank. It is now Citibank. Ernesto rose to be assistant manager, but he is no longer at this “branch.” The quirky clothing store is now a shop selling French children's clothes and every other shop is a cellphone store, a chain drugstore, or another bank.

The only constant in the neighborhood seems to be James, a local man who was homeless and who became so well known to residents that he made an appearance in two separate novels that are set in the neighborhood. As the wealth gap has grown, he too has more competition from other panhandlers.

Brooks cites the British anthropologist Robin Dunbar who “observes that human societies exist on three levels: the clan (your family and close friends), the village (your local community) and the tribe (your larger group). In today's America you would say that the clans have polarized, the villages have been decimated and the tribes have become weaponized.”

The most rapid agent of change, accompanying and perhaps overshadowing these others, is technology. New research suggests that this factor, while giving us the illusion of ultimate “connectedness,” is contributing to loneliness and depression. Brooks writes, “In the 1980s, 20 percent of Americans said they were often lonely. Now it's 40 percent. Suicide rates are now at a 30-year high. Depression rates have increased tenfold since 1960, which is not only a result of greater reporting.” The recent suicides within the same week of designer Kate Spade and chef Anthony Bourdain underscored the fact that no one is immune from depression. Reportedly, Spade worried that her brand would suffer if she were hospitalized for emotional problems. And technology has made it possible for any negative news to spread around the globe in minutes, if not seconds.

The younger generation may be suffering the worst from the tech threat to social wealth. Jean Twenge, writing in *The Atlantic*, asks “[Have Smartphones Destroyed a Generation?](#)” She writes,

“More comfortable in their bedrooms than in a car or at a party, today's teens are physically safer than teens have ever been. They're markedly less likely to get into a car accident and, having less of a taste for alcohol than their predecessors, are less susceptible to drinking's attendant ills.

Psychologically, however, they are more vulnerable than Millennials were: Rates of teen depression and suicide have skyrocketed since 2011. It's not an exaggeration to describe iGen as being on the brink of the worst mental-health crisis in decades. Much of this deterioration can be traced to their phones.”

Kids, obsessed with their phones, are spending almost 40% less time hanging out with friends than they did in 2000. They may think they are doing this because they want to, yet the more screen time a teen reports, the more symptoms of depression they report as well. Twenge says, "Eighth graders who are heavy users of social media are 27 percent more likely to be depressed." The converse is also true: the more time kids spend on non-screen activities, the happier they are. They are an average of 20% less unhappy than heavy users of social media.

On the plus side, the murder rate for teens has gone down. This may be because they are spending so much less time together. Unfortunately, the suicide rate has risen and has overtaken murder as a cause of death for teenagers for the first time in 24 years.

Evidence suggests that lonely people experience social media not in a spirit of connection, but isolation. They see how much fun everyone else is having, how many more friends they have on Facebook, or how many more "likes" others' Instagram posts get. Meanwhile, often, they are invisible to us, suffering alone at home, feeling left out and miserable.

If you have millennial children, chances are you already distressed by how much time they spend hunched over their screens. Don't make the mistake of thinking it is harmless. At the very least, it is not a substitute for face-to-face social interaction.

As adults, we need to lead the way, not follow them, the way so many of us do now with tech-savvy younger people. Do not allow cell phones to take the place of socializing, and when with others, put them away. Keep in mind how fragile social connections are—a brief email is not as good as a good long talk on the phone, or better, a cup of coffee with a friend. Just because you may be "in touch" with someone doesn't necessarily mean you are connected to them. Above all, let's remember to build and guard our social wealth as carefully as we would any precious commodity.

<https://womensvoicesforchange.org/social-wealth-our-most-precious-commodity.htm>