

Losing Our Social Support Networks

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Homesteaders in rural Maine, operated a small private elementary school there, 1977-1989

Skip only: Libretto for musical, That Emperor's Fool, with UK composer, based on the Emperor's New Clothes

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American culture places high value on wealth and material prosperity, and we easily ignore the quality of our social relationships. Over decades, even over centuries, we have been losing our social support networks, losing face-to-face contact with the same people around us for a significant length of time. The impact of this loss is silent. Something is missing, but we know not what.

To see how social support networks affect us, consider the homeless today. They are veterans after military service, ex-convicts out from prison, the mentally ill cast out by their families, recent immigrants with no roots in a new land. Often addicted, the homeless only have substance, not people, to turn to for satisfaction.

The lack of social support networks for the homeless is obvious. How do we solve it? In our material culture, the answer is all too often: give them housing. The homeless will take the free housing, but it does not change what gets them into trouble: addiction, mental illness, and (we will add) loss of their social support networks.

We who are not homeless suffer from a similar loss of social support networks, just to a lesser extent. For many households today, everyone leaves home for their individual destinations: daycare, school, jobs, stores, all of them bureaucratic organizations or factories where relationships are highly specialized, last only minutes, and are nearly anonymous. At day's end, they return home to freezer food or take-out and to their own digital screens. Exaggerated? Yes. But our social lives are moving in this direction. Call it the "scant family."

Consider the evolution from extended family to nuclear family to scant family. Starting early on, new arrivals in America (except slaves) came as extended families, a varied assortment of grandparents, parents, children, and relatives, with all the skills among them to survive in the New World. Three generations lived and worked together. The women not only cooked food but preserved it for future use. The elders were built-in babysitters and teachers for the children. The middle generation, the parents, were built-in caretakers of the elderly and managed the large household. The men often conducted business from home or in a nearby outbuilding. The younger men learned skills by watching and helping the older men. Altogether, a very local, highly self-sufficient arrangement with enduring relationships.

Over the 20th century, the extended family disappeared, and the nuclear family became dominant: two married parents, often with two or more children. The stay-at-home mom cooked and was a full-time caregiver for the children until school, which began not earlier than kindergarten. The go-to-work father left home for a bureaucratic or factory job. Most of the nuclear family's needs were supplied by standardized products produced outside the home, sometimes far away.

The nuclear family largely gave way to today's scant family: two-income families, children in daycare from an early age, with older children and adults interacting in large white-collar bureaucracies (including school and college) and large blue-collar factories.

What are we missing today? What do social support networks give us? They give us familiar people with whom we interact almost every day, who we respect, who care about us, who push us to behave

properly and admonish us for poor behavior, who have their own experience of success to help us out. At times they are people who we too can help. Strong social support networks usually occur with family members, close relatives, and in small, cohesive work groups, such as soldiers, firemen, policemen, and small-scale business partners and employees.

Apart from homelessness, what are the more widespread consequences of our weakened, disappearing social networks?

- Young adults, out of school, not in a stable job, searching for direction, searching for friends, lost in loneliness, prone to suicide.

- Declining test scores, when schools and universities become *in loco parentis*, filling the gap of uninvolved parents and indoctrinating values while they lag in teaching subjects and not training for practical, real-life jobs.

- The two-income family in which the goal of wealth requires daycare and ignores the hard, sad truth that putting a number of small children, even babies, with a few adult near-strangers slows their development. From the Institute for Family Studies: “By third grade, children [with] more cumulative hours of child care across their first 4.5 years of life were at increased risk for fewer social skills, poorer work habits, problem behaviors, and teacher conflict, especially if they had been in day care centers.”

- Crime and violence, when the lack of social support networks fails to channel a person’s energy/aggression into constructive activities and instead lets it loose against people who are anonymous to the aggressor.

- Radical ideologies, left and right, which unite large groups of people by ideology, not by enduring relationships. People are cast into abstract categories – progressives and conservatives, oppressors and oppressed, supremacists and minorities, homophobics and LGBTQ, and other relationships in which people do not know each other personally.

What to do? The primary place to have frequent contact with the same few people is in families, but we need to bring more relatives and/or others into the home every day. Local neighborhoods are also conducive to frequent contact with the same few people, but we need to encourage more relationships there, too. Good relationships, however, require an economic component. So, we need to bring more resources into our homes and into our local neighborhoods, resources such as food (gardens and local farms) and practical skills and tools (carpentry, home repair, crafts, home-based businesses, etc.).

This kind of change, however, likely only happens with ground-level changes in our minds, in our goals, in our hopes.

But the challenge remains: how to develop social support networks for those who have lost them, for the homeless? In general, the homeless need to be brought together in small groups that share experiences (veterans with veterans, ex-cons with ex-cons, etc.), tasked with setting group standards and individual goals, and given access to job skills training and addiction counseling.

<https://ifstudies.org/blog/another-perspective-on-the-latest-research-on-early-child-care> “By third grade, children who had experienced more cumulative hours of child care across their first 4.5 years of life were at increased risk for fewer social skills, poorer work habits, problem behaviors, and teacher conflict, especially if they had been in day care centers.”