Living in Isolation - A Modern Challenge

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Guests: David Lowry, Don Drew

Resources:

David Lowry: 0:29
Hello everyone and welcome to Peaceful Life Radio. This is David Lowry and with me today is my good buddy, Don Drew. Don, how's it going?

Don Drew: 0:38
Hey David, doing really well.

David Lowry: 0:39
So, Don, what are we talking about today?

Don Drew: 0:42
Today, David, we're talking about an epidemic of social isolation that is impeding our search for a peaceful life and what to do to enhance our social circle in positive ways that combat isolation. So let's start with why it is important to have a broad social circle.

David Lowry: 0:59
That sounds like a very important thing to talk about. But before we do, we want to invite our listeners to like, download, tell your friends about our program. All those things really help us. Don, on the surface, you would think the answer is fairly straightforward. Having a broad social circle provides a wider network of people who can offer emotional support, and there's encouragement and a sense of belonging, which is especially helpful during difficult times. With a broader range of people in your life, you're exposed to a wider variety of experiences, ideas, and viewpoints that can help you grow as a person and challenge your thinking. And being part of a large social circle can be a great source of practical help as well. For instance, if you want to find a new job, or a reliable babysitter, or simply to have someone to lend a hand when you need it. I think you should always have a person with a pickup truck in your life myself. So, while having a broad social circle is beneficial, strong, close relationships are also important for our overall well being. When we talk about having a strong or broad social circle, we're really talking about a combination of a close circle of friends and family for deep emotional support and a broader social circle that provides a wider range of connections and experiences.

Don Drew: 2:20

David, I started off today's podcast saying we exist in a world where social isolation has become quote epidemic. But there are plenty of examples where individuals sought growth by isolating themselves to positive effect. For instance, Gautama Buddha, the founder of Buddhism, famously left his royal life to pursue enlightenment, spending years in solitude, meditating, and contemplating the nature of suffering. Ultimately, his isolation led to his awakening and the founding of Buddhism, a philosophy that emphasizes inner peace and detachment from worldly concerns. Throughout Christian history, hermits and monastics have incorporated periods of isolation and solitude as a path to spiritual growth. While their experiences may vary, the goal is often to achieve a state of inner peace and a deeper connection with the divine. There are more modern examples not related to any religious experience. Explorers like John Muir spent months alone in the Sierra Nevada wilderness. And naturalists like Charles Darwin spent years traveling and observing nature on the HMS Beagle. There he experienced a profound sense of connection with the natural world. This connection brought a sense of peace and purpose. But these examples often involved a specific purpose or goal for the isolation. For most of us, social connection is an important aspect of well being, and prolonged isolation can have negative consequences. What happens when we close ourselves off from others, David?

David Lowry: 3:42

The evidence says that there can be a number of negative consequences for our well being. For instance, the Surgeon General of the United States in 2023 indicates that roughly half of all adults report feeling lonely at some time. And the National Institute of Mental Health estimated that in 2020, a major depressive episode affected some 21 million adults in the United States, and that's 8.4% of the adult population. A lack of social connection is a major risk factor for loneliness and depression because as humans, we're social creatures. We thrive on interaction and emotional connection. So it's true that personality traits, such as introversion, may account for some differences between our individual needs, but they exist nonetheless. Most of us have the tendency to bottle up our emotions. Having a social circle allows us more opportunity to share our feelings and receive support when going through rough times. Various studies have also shown that social isolation can have a negative impact on physical and mental health. It can potentially weaken our immune system, increasing risk of chronic diseases, and even contributing to cognitive decline. On a less threatening note, a limited social circle can mean missing out on new experiences and opportunities for personal growth. So Don, I know you were recently in Japan for an extended period, and I was reading the other day about people dying alone.

Don Drew: 5:10

Yes, David, it's a problem related to overall cultural concerns regarding social isolation in general. You're right that Japan's aging population leads to a concern about social isolation and deaths of elderly people dying alone. Japan has the oldest population globally with a high percentage living alone. This can make it harder for them to get help in an emergency. Traditional social structures are changing and some elderly people may have outlived close family or lack strong social connections. The past standard of generations living together in a single dwelling has largely disappeared. This is contributing to loneliness and a higher risk of dying alone. The Japanese have instituted a number of countermeasures, such as community programs to check on the elderly who live alone, using technology to help elderly people stay connected with family and friends, as well as to monitor their well being remotely. All right and good steps from an institutional point of view, but the individual's own social efforts can make the most difference. Obviously, there are cases in which an older person is unable to manage their own social interaction. In cases like these, a combination of family intervention and institutional efforts can help but this phenomenon is not unique to Japan. And there are some real differences between how men and women address their social needs as they age right here at home.

David Lowry: 6:28
We are becoming more of an elderly population. And it's very important to resist the temptation stay home all the time and not get out. It's much easier to shut the doors and watch TV or talk to your friends and live this very secluded life. But it's really important to put yourself out there, meet people, go to the store, be friendly. It's good for us to meet other people.

Don Drew: 6:54
Yeah, Christy noted that as we age, we're becoming more introverted. And it's going to require active movement against that. That tendency to try and isolate. The problem that they're having in Japan is exacerbated by the fact that their culture is changing dramatically and they are moving from a community based type of culture to a more individualistic culture. And that is surprising, I think, to them.

David Lowry: 7:18
You're absolutely right. Men often build close relationships around shared activities rather than emotional vulnerability, and it makes it more difficult to open up and form deeper connections as they age, especially when activities become less central. Traditional masculinity often discourages men from expressing emotions or seeking help, which makes it difficult to reach out and build new friendships. As men age, they lose touch with friends due to retirement, relocation, or life changes. Women on the other hand tend to

build social connections around shared experiences and emotional vulnerability, and they're prone to having strong support, networks of friends and family. Society often encourages women to nurture relationships and seek help to make it easier for them to reach out and build new connections. And women may be more comfortable expressing their feelings of loneliness and isolation which can help them seek support. However, women do sometimes experience a steeper increase in social isolation after becoming widowed or children leaving home, which disrupts their social networks. Both men and women can experience social isolations and its negative effects. But, there's a growing awareness of the challenges that men face regarding social connection, encouraging them to build stronger bonds.

Don Drew: 8:37
We've been talking about social isolation among the elderly and differences between men and women. But this problem isn't unique to these groups. As you pointed out, David, loneliness and depression is having a significant impact on society as a whole. Robert Putnam released his book, Bowling alone in 2001, with the newest edition released in 2020, in which he made a compelling argument for the importance of social capital in a healthy civil society and highlighting the potential consequences of a society that is increasingly isolated and fragmented. Putnam concludes by offering hope, suggesting it is possible to rebuild social capital through a number of means. So, let's get down to it. How does social isolation hinder finding peace?

David Lowry: 9:21
We've addressed some of the reasons, but there's a few more. First of all, we humans are social creatures and we crave connection. When isolated, we lack a support system to share burdens, celebrate successes and gain a sense of belonging. The absence of social support can make it harder to navigate life's challenges and find peace within ourselves. And isolation also breeds loneliness, depression, and anxiety. These negative emotions create a constant internal conflict, making it difficult to find inner peace and a sense of calm. Social interaction, especially across a broad social network that includes friends and family, but even people we don't know well, exposes us to different viewpoints and experiences. Without this, our perspective narrows, potentially leading to negative self talk or a skewed view of the world. This lack of perspective makes it harder to find peace with ourselves and our circumstances. Social connection also provides validation and a sense of belonging. Without it, self esteem can suffer, making it harder to find peace with who you are and where you are in life. So, social interaction helps us understand ourselves better. We learn about our strengths, our weaknesses, how we connect with others, while isolation limits these opportunities and hinders our understanding of ourselves and our

path to peace. So, peace isn't just the absence of conflict, it's a state of inner calm and acceptance. And social connection plays a role, but of course it's not the only factor.

Don Drew: 10:53
But some of our listeners might be saying to themselves, I get what David's saying, but right now I need some time to figure out things for myself. I need to isolate myself and they may not be wrong. Introverts gain energy from spending time alone and they need this quiet time to process experiences and thoughts, which helps them function better in social situations. Solitude can also provide a space for self reflection, critical thinking, and introspection. This quiet time can be fertile ground for creativity and problem solving. And then sometimes we need time alone to process difficult emotions or navigate challenging situations. Solitude can provide a space to work through these issues without external pressure. What's important here is to find balance, just like almost every other area that we talk about.

David Lowry: 11:39
There are times in our life where we need to sort of huddle, regroup, get away from the mainstream. Some people need more isolation and seclusion than others and solitude. Totally, totally get that. I found that as I get older, I need more time to myself than I did before. In fact, sometimes I can feel almost overwhelmed if there's too much stimulation going on. And at the same time, it's really important to be a presence in other people's lives. So if you're in a church, show up to church. If you can volunteer in the community to help children learn how to read put yourself out there.

Don Drew: 12:15
Social media is one way of expanding our social involvement, and it's a useful tool. But when social media becomes the core of our social interaction, we can miss out on the rich personal interaction with others.

David Lowry: 12:27
We can use social media to create social circles. I live in Edmond, Oklahoma. And there's a Facebook group for Edmond, Oklahoma. There's always people saying, Hey, I'm going to be moving here from Florida or Iowa or Indiana, tell me what I need to know. And I'm always amazed at how people will reach out and say, I'll take you to a restaurant. I'd love to meet you. I'd love to make new friends. There are so many easy ways of making social connections if you're open to it.

Don Drew: 12:55

Then there are some other very proactive approaches you can take. One might be trying to introduce yourself to neighbors in your local area. I've made friends with the neighbors on either side of my house and we kinda look after each other's house when we're away and all that sort of thing. So, that's very helpful.

David Lowry: 13:08
Some people think, there's nothing going on in my community. And if you were just to look on Facebook, or go on meetup. com you might discover there's all kinds of small groups meeting across the town, and they're on there because they're looking to expand their membership and want to invite people of like mind to be there. For instance, I've found people who like to eat at restaurants. I've found people who like to take hiking trips and the whole point isn't just to hike around the lake. It's to make friends as you hike around the lake and meet new people.

Don Drew: 13:38
That's a great point, because I know you and I have made it a point to tell our listeners we do this podcast because we personally know how challenging it can be to connect with people in a meaningful way.

David Lowry: 13:49
That's true. And social media can lead to prioritizing the number of followers and connections over the quality of relationships themselves. And this can lead people feeling like they have a large social circle, but lack true relationships. And we've all likely seen others, or maybe even ourselves, spending a lot of time on social media replacing time with people face-to-face. This leads to social withdrawal and weakens our relationships. Then again, social media can help you stay connected with friends and family who live far away and you don't see regularly. It can be a tool for maintaining important relationships. Social media can allow you to connect with people who share your interest, even if you live in a small town there are social media platforms that host online support groups for people with similar interests, challenges, or experiences. It's our hope that Peaceful Life Radio serves some of these functions in your life.

Don Drew: 14:41
And use social media to connect with people in a meaningful way. Share your experience authentically and build genuine relationships. Social media can be a tool for connection, but it's important to be aware of its potential downsides and use it strategically to combat rather than contribute to social isolation.

David Lowry: 14:59

Use social media platforms thoughtfully to connect with people who share your interest or join online support groups. I have a few thoughts on how to combat social isolation in our lives and enhance our search for personal peace. First, if you feel you've been isolating yourself or just need to expand your social circle, start small. Don't overwhelm yourself by trying to build a huge social circle overnight. Start by joining a club or group focused on an interest that you have. This is a very low pressure way to meet like minded people.

Don Drew: 15:30

I have used Meetup. com to discover local events and groups I might be interested in learning about. To meet new people, take a class, learn a new skill, or revisit an old interest. This is a fun way to meet people who are curious about the same subject. If you feel ready, chat with people you meet in everyday situations, like at the coffee shop, or a dog park, or waiting in line. A simple hello can lead to an interesting conversation and potential friendship. And then look for local events, festivals, or workshops that interest you. Stepping outside your comfort zone. comfort zone and attending new events can lead to an unexpected social connection. But what I think is most important is to be approachable. Smile, make eye contact and project a friendly demeanor. This makes you seem more open to conversation and can encourage people to approach.

David Lowry: 16:19

When you're meeting people and expanding your social circle, stop trying to be impressive. Be who you are. Be your own fine self. Don't talk about all the work you do, how much money you have, what kind of car you drive or how important you are, just be a regular human being who's interested in another human being. Be open and vulnerable, don't try to impress people with your wisdom or lack of it, just be authentically yourself.

Don Drew: 16:46

Some of the best advice I ever heard was to ask questions. People love to be asked questions about themselves because it makes it easy for them and then they can open up to you. And if you're a good listener, then you can take that in and have a lot of material to work with. So, you go to an event, you meet people. You overtly try and talk to them and the best approach in many circumstances is just to ask questions.

David Lowry: 17:11

I like that. When you meet somebody for the first time, ask more questions than you answer. Ask questions like, what's one of your favorite things to do here? Or, what do you do when you're not working here? Ask questions that don't have yes or no answers. Don, I have a question for you. Let's just assume that you've moved to a new town and you

don't know anybody there. How might you began joining a social circle there? How might you bring that into your life?

Don Drew: 17:37
That's a really great question. So there's a couple of natural ways we typically do that. One is through work. When I would travel or change jobs when I was young, I'd automatically have a new group of friends that were internal to the workplace. And whether or not we had an outside of work social relationship or not wasn't as important. It was just the idea that I had people around me and people I could talk to and so forth. Then some people would affiliate themselves with some church or religious group or something like that, and find they have a ready made family so to speak.

David Lowry: 18:10
Don, I know that you have several social groups you belong to. Probably too many to mention, but one of the favorite ones is you meet every so often with a couple of work buddies and go to different restaurants.

Don Drew: 18:21
I've been doing that for, gosh, I think about three years ago, we call it around the world club. It's a couple of people who have moved on from my university and so we don't see each other so regularly. One of the individuals I mentored quite a bit when she was a just starting her professional career and she's done extremely well. The other one is a really great colleague of mine. Once a month we will go to a different international restaurant of some kind. And we've tried, oh my gosh, any kind you can imagine. We're open to trying anything. And we catch up on news with each other. It is wonderful to sit with them once a month, have a meal, a catch up on news, find out what's going on in other parts of the world I don't necessarily have access to. I get to share things from my life and We actually started a hugging policy. We hug when we first get to the restaurant and we hug when we leave. It means so much to me.

David Lowry: 19:13
I have an interest in meditation. Recently I joined a group that is dedicated to that. I took an online course. There's people you meet in the course, and you write on bulletin boards and read each other's post and respond to them. And I find that even though I don't know these people in the way that I know you, in some ways I know them even better because we're focusing on this one area of inner growth, right? In that sense, I know them very well, maybe better than some of their best friends know them.

Don Drew: 19:44

One of the real values of that kind of thing is you don't have a history with that person so there's no judgment they feel freer to share who they are because they don't have to guard anything. And groups like that whether social media or live can really give you a chance to open up and to be opened up to.

David Lowry: 20:01
Another thing that we could mention about social circles, Don, is they create safe places. One of the most important parts of a social group is a place where you can be yourself, say what you think about things and be okay.

Don Drew: 20:16
Not too many years after we met, you created a group at your house and we used to all meet together. And it was a great experience, I think, for everybody that stayed. And we had people come and go. But we probably had about 12 or 16, somewhere in that range, regulars that stayed for years. And we would meet every Sunday night. And we were all very different from each other. But for many of us it was the only place we had to express what we were thinking, ask questions and express ideas without judgment. And it was just a great experience. It brings something new and different to my life and I really appreciate all of them.

David Lowry: 20:50
That's a good one, and you might even consider reaching out to people you've lost touch with, or volunteering for a cause you care about, which allows you to give back, while meeting people who share your same values. Thank you everyone for listening to our program, Peaceful Life Radio, and we encourage you to tell your friends about our program, let people know about this episode if you know someone who's been a little lonely or depressed, and may be needing those social connections. Remember, finding peace is a journey and not a destination. You have to be patient with yourself and celebrate small victories. As you build social connections and develop healthy coping mechanisms, you'll find a greater sense of inner peace and belonging. We look forward to joining you next week on Peaceful Life Radio.