

The Price We Pay for Being Less Social

by Jeffrey A. Hall



Simple, everyday conversations are more valuable than they seem on the surface. That gets lost as people turn inward. ZOE WALDMAN FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

People are choosing to be less connected with each other, and focus more on their inner lives. They may not realize the consequences.

As we fall further and further away from one another, we might be thinking it's a good thing. But that is probably wrong. Zoe Waldman for The Wall Street Journal

It won't come as a surprise that many of us are spending less time with other people. And we probably think we can name the obvious culprits that keep us disconnected - forces such as social media or pandemic restrictions.

But while those have played a role, there is something much bigger going on: All over the world, and for decades, people have been embracing their interior lives more and interacting less, and they are doing this by choice.

I [analyzed](#) time-diary data from three countries and found that time spent talking to other people—both inside the home and outside of it—has been in decline for nearly 30 years. Telephone and video calls haven't made up for that loss.

In effect, we are falling further and further away from one another. And not only are we not thinking about the broader price we may be paying. We probably think it's actually a *good* thing.

Competing forces

It might seem odd to say that people choose to retreat from one other. After all, didn't we evolve to be social? Ancestral humans needed to be accepted and included in a group to survive and procreate. Therefore, we adapted mechanisms to keep us that way.

But there is another way to look at this, to see that this social trait is only part of the equation. In short, people are exhausting. Humans have an innate desire to conserve our energy in social interactions, and interacting with others takes work. It's tiring to act in a certain way for the benefit of others. Sometimes people have disagreeable opinions or talk about uninteresting things.

When given a choice, people often prefer to just not deal with all that.

At the same time, introversion seems to be having a moment. For [World Introvert Day](#), we learn how to celebrate the introverts in our lives and cultivate our own introverted self. Self-care regimes focus on cultivation of a mindful, inwardly focused life. There are increasing efforts to cut out other people in the name of removing toxicity. And all these tendencies are pushed forward by frictionless technologies that remove social obligations to leave home, talk to others and engage in our community.

These two forces—interiority and sociability—have always had their champions. Two hundred years ago, for instance, monastic life was celebrated for its purity. At that time, the cultivation of an interior life was a necessary counterweight to the lack of physical space and privacy. Interiority was thought to be necessary to make society tolerable.

The contemporary shift toward interiority has very different consequences than in the past. Removing the routine obligations of social life drains presence, conversational practice, relational effort and friendship from all of us.

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What's lost

What do we stand to lose in this climate of interiority? I've [written](#) about how in-person routines at work facilitate conversation and friendship. Many companies also warn of lost innovation and creativity without the trust forged by face-to-face interactions.

Simply being around other people has benefits. Classic studies of the power of proximity show how just living near people increases the chances of friendship. Such familiarity lowers individuals' perceptions of risk and increases our effort toward interacting in more responsive and attentive ways to one another.

A shared space, especially when complemented by a shared task, requires conversation. Simple, everyday conversations are more valuable than they seem on the surface. Exciting new [research](#) shows that talking with responsive communication partners softens our viewpoints, reduces our need to be right, and helps us become less self-focused.

With fewer people around and fewer opportunities for conversation, we may have become less willing to see one another's point of view. Sara Konrath, from the Lilly Family School of Philanthropy at Indiana University, has found marked declines in empathy since 2000, and she [believes](#) that goes hand in hand with rising interiority among young adults in the form of increased self-focus and decreased concern for others.

A societal shift toward interiority also may justify putting less effort into caring for each other. Consider the conversation about cutting out people from our lives in the name of removing toxicity. This way of thinking suggests people are a barrier to our self-preservation and happiness. It makes sense, then, that people would look to themselves for solace when they feel disconnected. But such behavior is self-defeating, only exacerbating the underlying discomfort of isolation.

Greater emphasis on our interior lives may lead to less effort in caring for each other.

Fewer friends

It also makes sense that the loss of social time has likely reduced the number of friends or significant relationships people have. The countries that have seen declines of time socializing are also countries where people report having fewer friends overall. These two trends are intuitively linked. If we need time to make and enjoy friends, then a downward shift in social time for all of us means there is simply less time to go around. After all, your time given to me is my time gained. Neither of us profit from having no time together at all.

None of this is to say that we should abandon our alone time, our self-care, our mindfulness practice or our self-examination. All those can be good things.

But it's a question of balance, and I fear that the balance has been lost—and in doing so, we all suffer.

What can any of us do? As the societal norm moves away from sociality toward interiority, it puts more onus on the individual to do something about it. We must react with intention and purpose. In my research, I [found](#) that people who build social routines that balance choice and familiarity find it easier to maintain their relationships and social health. Routines are gardens where relationships grow.

We all need a social regimen that trains our atrophied muscles, even if there is some short-term discomfort, and even if it means encountering people with disagreeable or uninteresting opinions.

It isn't dissimilar to building good nutritional habits in an environment of unhealthy food, or building healthy exercise habits within a sedentary lifestyle. A social regimen nourishes our social health in the short term, and improves our life satisfaction, well-being and longevity in the long run.

That seems worth a little discomfort.

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