

Hari's Connected Living



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“I am a part of all that I have met.” – Lord Tennyson

In the 1960's, well-known psychologist B.F. Skinner conducted a series of studies involving rats in what became known as **Skinner Boxes**. In these experiments the rats were frequently starved and isolated and were then able to get tiny pellets of food as long as they pushed a little lever on inside of the Skinner Box over and over. In ensuing addiction studies these rats would be tethered to the box's ceiling with a surgically implanted needle which extended to the rats' jugular vein and each time the rats pushed the lever, they would get a small morphine drip into their brain. The result of these rather barbaric and cruel studies was that the rats became hopelessly addicted which led Skinner and his colleagues to conclude that the power of the addiction was solely in the drug itself.

A decade later, a Canadian researcher, Dr. Bruce Alexander, became very skeptical of this research given that not all people who take a drug will become addicted to it. Being aware that rats in their natural habitat, like people, are powerfully social, Alexander wondered if the Skinner experiments were merely indicating that isolated rats are more likely to become addicted than non-isolated rats. With this premise in mind, Alexander and his research team developed an experiment with two groups of rats, each having free access to drug water; with one group being kept in isolation similar to the Skinner Box experiments and the other group consisting of several rats together in large open areas filled with fun things that rats love such as loads of food, platforms for climbing, running wheels, and tin cans to hide in. Happily, for the second group, it was co-ed and the rats were free to have sex, which they apparently enjoy similar to humans. The second group setting eventually came to be affectionately known as the **Rat Park**. The results were stunning; the isolated rats in the Skinner Boxes became total addicts and the rats in the open and enjoyable spaces of the Rat Park never became addicted, in fact, most of them never even touched the morphine water at all. Alexander eventually came to the conclusion that addiction was less about the pull of the drug but was more about the condition of the life of rat; specifically, without **connection** and **socialization** a rat is more susceptible to addiction. Moreover, he surmised, “People do not have to be put into cages to become addicted – but is there a sense in which

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people who become addicted actually feel ‘caged?’. The view from Rat Park is that today’s flood of addiction is occurring because our hyperindividualistic, hypercompetitive, frantic, crisis-ridden society make most people feel socially and culturally isolated...They find temporary relief in addiction to drugs or any of a thousand other habits (such as media – emphasis mine) and pursuits because addiction allows them to escape from their feelings, to deaden their senses, and to experience an addictive lifestyle as a substitute for a full life” (Alexander, 2010). Alexander later adds, “Addiction is not about your chemical hooks, it is about your cage, it is an adaptation to your environment.”

Hari (2015) in a TED talk on addiction in which he described a new way of looking at addiction that emphasizes the value of **connection** with references to the Rat Park research stated, “I’ve been talking about how disconnection is the major driver of addiction, and it’s weird to say (addiction has) grown, because we’re the most disconnected society that’s ever been, surely.” He adds, “Addiction is about bonding. If you can’t do it with people, you will do it with a substance. Now that might be gambling, that might be media, that might be cocaine, that might be cannabis; you will bond to something because that is our nature. That’s what we want as human beings.



Skinner Box



Rat Park

So, as we look toward solutions to getting our emotions and lives on track, we must have a **template for what healthy lifestyles looks like**. One of the most influential books that I have found to address this issue is the groundbreaking book, *Lost Connections* by Johann Hari (2018). In this book award-winning journalist and critical thinker, Johann Hari, who suffered from depression since he was a child, set out on a three-year journey around the world to seek answers to his own depression. He talked with psychiatrists, epidemiologists, neurologists, neuroscientists, social scientists, and many other experts in their fields of study around the globe and explored different cultures and how they fared with these issues. In addition, he conducted a comprehensive review of the literature. He concluded that much of what we have been led to believe about the genesis and treatment of depression and anxiety is off the mark in many ways. He determined that in many cases depression and anxiety are the result of crucial and growing problems with the way we are living our lives. He discovered that there are nine underlying causes of these problems which are summarized as follows (Hari, 2018):

Cause One - Disconnection from Meaningful Work:



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Hari (2018) noted that the polling company Gallup conducted the most comprehensive study to date on work satisfaction/dissatisfaction between 2011 and 2012 to determine how people across the world felt about their work. Of the millions of workers across 142 countries, Gallop determined that only 13 percent reported that they were “engaged” with their work (Davies, 2016). On the other hand, 63 percent were “not engaged” - meaning no passion in one’s work. Finally, 24 percent were “actively disengaged” - which translates to acting-out their unhappiness. In sum, twice as many people hate their jobs as love their jobs.

In an effort the better understand high rates of depression and suicide in civil servants, investigators determined that a **lack of control** and little connection between **effort** and **reward** were highly predictive of depression suicide (Marmot et al., 2002).

The above studies suggest that we need to develop a sense of empowerment, purpose, and accomplishment in what we do. If we are unhappy with our job, we can try to make changes to make it better. If that doesn’t work, we can consider looking elsewhere. I see far too many unfulfilled people in my practice come home from work and bathe themselves in unhealthy life patterns to include addictions to ease the pain. This is no more evident than in the military where the demands are particularly stressful.

Cause Two – Disconnection from Meaningful People:



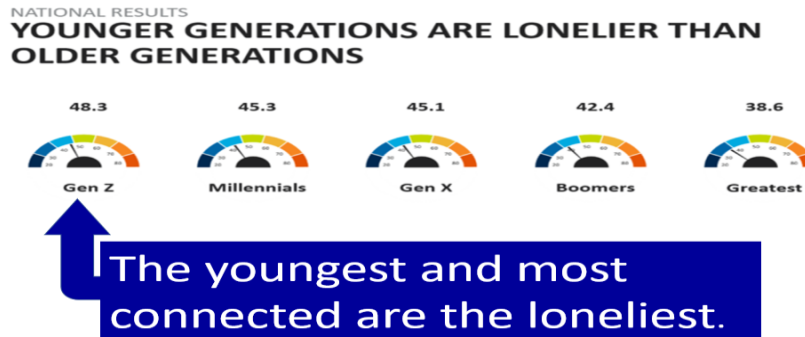
Dr. John Cacioppo (2006, 2008, 2010) studied the impact that loneliness has on health. He and his colleagues determined that loneliness causes **cortisol** levels to go through the roof – as much as that caused by some of the most disturbing things that can ever happen in your life. As Hari (2018) summarizes Cacioppo’s research, “Becoming acutely lonely, the experiment(s) found, was as stressful as experiencing a physical attack.” Another researcher, Lisa Bergman, followed both isolated and highly connected people over nine years and found that isolated people were two to three times more likely to die during lonely periods and that, specifically, almost everything during lonely periods becomes more fatal for lonely people to include heart disease, cancer, and respiratory problems (Pinker, 2015). In short, loneliness can be deadly (Monbiot, 2014). In addition, Cacioppo et al. (2010) conducted a five-year longitudinal study which showed that loneliness is not merely the result of depression but indeed leads to depression as well. In this study, he found that on a measure of 0 percent loneliness to 100 percent loneliness that moving from 50 percent lonely to just 65 percent lonely increases your chances of becoming depressed by eight times. He concluded that loneliness is causing a significant amount of depression and anxiety in our society.

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A 2018 study conducted by Cigna (see diagram below) revealed that compared to older generations, the youngest is the loneliest generation ever (Cigna, 2018).

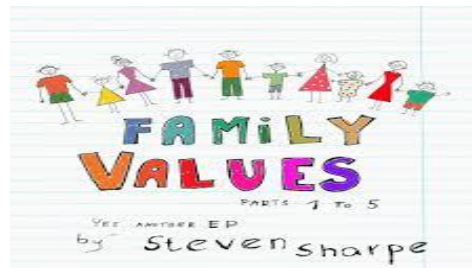
2018 CIGNA Study



Shared with permission – Peter Ryan, CAPT, USN (R)

The implications of this research are clear; specifically, it is to our benefit that we stop isolating ourselves and connect in positive and fulfilling family and social relationships.

Cause Three – Disconnection from Meaningful Values:



Hari (2018) notes that an American psychologist Tim Kasser has spent much of his professional career investigating the impact that values have on our emotional and physical health. He specifically researched what philosophers had been suggesting for thousands of years - that if you overvalue money and possessions or if you think about life mainly in terms of how you look to other people, you will be unhappy (Belk, 1983). Kasser's research specifically determined that the more materialistic we are, the more likely we are to score higher on measures of depression. In his studies, materialistic people were having a tougher time with life in general. They tended to be sicker and angrier. "Something about a strong desire for materialistic pursuits," Kasser wrote, "actually affected the participants' day-to-day-lives" (Kasser, 2002). Hari (2018) notes that materialistic values which tell us to spend our way to happiness look like real values, yet they don't give us what we need from values, namely, a path toward a satisfying and fulfilled life and instead fill us with "**psychological toxins**" which can distort our minds.

In my family therapy sessions with media and porn addicted teens and young adults, I ask the family to define, evaluate, and clarify their family values and determine what their family name stands for. In addition, I sometimes give them the assignment of developing a family **Coat of Arms**. Sadly, there is far

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too little discussion about family and personal values these days. Good values are like a compass that helps keep us on a “true north” path toward healthy living.

Cause Four – Disconnection from Childhood Trauma:



As noted earlier in this paper, childhood trauma is a leading reason why many turn to unhealthy life patterns to include addictions to quell that pain. As such, unless that trauma is adequately addressed and resolved, efforts to stop our addictions can be much more difficult if not impossible. Moreover, many individuals with unresolved trauma may be successful in stopping one addiction but will only end up switching it out for another. As Johann Hari (2018) put it, “There’s a house fire inside many of us.”

Cause Five – Disconnection from Status and Respect:



Robert Sapolsky’s baboon research revealed that baboons with the lowest status must compulsively show that they know that they are defeated, and they do this by making subordinate gestures – lowering their heads, crawling on their bellies, etc. Moreover, when a baboon is looking and acting this way and when no one is showing him any respect, he will look a lot like a depressed person in that he will keep his head down, he will not want to move, he will lose his appetite and all energy, and when someone comes near him, he will pull away (Sapolsky, 2002). Sapolsky subsequently determined that depressed humans are flooded with the same stress hormone, namely cortisol, that low-ranking baboons experience and that the same constellation of changes in the brain and pituitary and adrenal glands also occur (Sapolsky, 1992).

When we lead emotionally dysregulated lives, our sense of competence and security plummet. We need to develop competence in a world that will ask much of us and when we do, we will most assuredly grow in “status and respect,” not only from others but from within ourselves.

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Cause Six: Disconnection from the Natural World:



Our children no longer learn how to read
the great Book of Nature
From their own direct experience or how to interact creatively
with the seasonal transformations of the planet.
They seldom learn where their water comes from or where it goes.
We no longer coordinate our human celebration with
the great liturgy of the heavens.

--Wendell Berry

Chilean primatologist, Isabel Behncke, has spent much of her professional career studying the behavior of chimpanzees and Bonobos in both the wild and in captivity. She noted that Bonobos in the wild can become sad or depressed but there is a limit to how far they will go. However, in captivity Bonobos often become so deeply depressed to the point that they will scratch themselves until they bleed and can develop tics or start to rock obsessively whereas in their natural habitat, these behaviors are never observed (interview with Isabel Behncke cited in Hari, 2018). Elephants in captivity will often grind their tusks- which is a source of pride – against the walls to the point that they become stumps and some elephants in captivity are so traumatized that they will actually sleep upright for years; all behaviors that are never seen in the wild (Sutherland, 2014). Isabel Behncke postulated that, similar to the animal world, we too, are more prone toward depression when we starve ourselves from connection to the natural world (interview with Isabel Behncke cited in Hari, 2018). Berman (2012) conducted a study that asked city dwellers to simply take walks in nature and then tested their mood and concentration and predictably found that everyone reported feeling better and noted improved concentration and, most interesting, previously depressed people reported five times greater improvement than non-depressed people. The scientific evidence is very clear that exercise indeed improves depression and anxiety (Strohle, 2009); however, getting out and exercising out-of-doors has even better rewards. For example, Gilbert (2009) reported that both people who run on treadmills in the gym and people who run in nature show a reduction in depression; however, this is significantly higher for people who run in nature.

Richard Louv who coined the term **Nature Deficit Disorder** wrote that humans are hard-wired for a genuine nature connection. Louv believes that the exponential increase in emotional and psychological problems in kids today are all related to an erosion of their connection with nature and immersion into the digital world (Louv, 2005). We need to ensure that we are unplugging from unhealthy lifestyles and

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going outside to bond with nature, play, and reap the benefits of exercise. Doing this in a social context is even better.

Cause Seven – Disconnection from a Hopeful and Secure Future:



Hari (2018) notes that as Native Americans were stripped of their identities, they lost their connection to the future, they became increasingly depressed, and then often resorted to alcohol abuse which resulted in addiction. I would conjecture that as we lose connection with our true identities, not only within our families, but within our culture, we will further retreat to media in hopes of cultivating an identity. Sadly, the cyber-world cannot fill this need and only perpetuates a sense of disconnection, loneliness, and feelings of despair about a probable insecure future. We need to ensure that we have hope for what lies ahead, and that life has purpose and meaning. This can only happen when living a connected life.

Cause Eight – Disconnection from Faith (Not included by Hari and inserted by me):



“Man is not destroyed by suffering; he is destroyed by suffering without meaning”
--Victor Frankl

Although not specifically mentioned by Hari (2018), I believe that faith can be fundamentally important. Observational studies suggest that people who have regular spiritual practices tend to live longer (Strawbridge et al., 1997). Another research study investigated 1700 older adults and found that those who attended church were half as likely to have elevated levels of IL-6interleukin (IL)-6 which has been associated with an increased incidence of disease. These authors concluded that religious commitment may improve stress control by affording better coping mechanisms, richer social support, and the strength of personal values and worldview (Koenig et al., 1997). Spirituality is an essential part of the “existential domain” as measured in quality-of-life scores. Positive reports on those measures, i.e., a meaningful personal existence, fulfillment of life goals, and a feeling that life to that point had been worthwhile, correlate with a good quality of life for patients with advanced disease (Cohen et al., 1995).

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It has been my observation in almost 35 years of practice that individuals who have some type of meaningful faith tend to be more resilient as well as more able to see the big picture when facing struggles or crises.

In conclusion, connection is a very powerful force for healthy development, emotional healing, and life satisfaction. Johann Hari offers a roadmap for connection to all good things and I encourage us to stay on the course he recommends. We cannot go wrong.

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