

Isolation doesn't have to be a permanent state

By Christian E. Megrelis

Emotional isolation is a growing problem, with more than one out of three adults aged 45 and older describing themselves as chronically lonely, up from one out of five a decade earlier.

The contributing factors are easy to identify: high unemployment; marriage rate at a historic low; increased reliance on technology over face-to-face communication.

The main problem of tomorrow is that people are becoming inwardly focused and cut off from their neighbors.

The global crisis is not only economical but individual. Especially in the industrialized nations, we are pulling farther away from our human connections to our own detriment.

Emotional isolation, which is on the rise according to a 2010 AARP study, has been found to cause or exacerbate a number of diseases, from Alzheimer's to cancer, and is as high a risk factor for mortality as smoking.

There's quality of life to consider as well. Lonely people are not happy people, hence the increased stress that causes physical illness. But we can change, individually and collectively, if we heed the wisdom that has endured for 2,000 years.

Here are five time-tested steps anyone can take to reconnect and restore happiness:

- Work on loving everyone – from the stranger on the bus to your worst enemy. This is difficult, I admit, but you don't need to do it perfectly to see the benefits. How does one take this from intellectual concept to practice? With humanitarian

acts. Stop and help the person who has fallen down. Smile and say something kind to the harried store clerk. And give – not just what's easy to give, like the old clothes you no longer wear. Share your money, your time, your resources.

- Don't judge! Another that's deceptively simple but gets easier with practice. Passing judgment on others is actually a very selfish act; we do it in order to feel better about ourselves, but it really isn't effective in that regard. When you catch yourself commenting negatively about someone else, whether loud or in your mind, stop yourself and consider your own flaws. Honesty demands you focus on and correct those before your neighbor's.

- Forgive. Holding a grudge or seeking revenge for perceived wrongs is a primitive impulse response. Forgiveness is a cerebral sentiment that comes from the cortex of the brain – the source of reason. Reason is what allows us to resist dangerous primitive impulses in able to achieve more far-sighted objectives, such as social life, which is impossible without forgiveness.

- Do good that makes a difference. Feeling we have no purpose in life or being unsure what our purpose is can lead to despair or indifference often resulting in sterile ambition, delusion or conceit, all of which serve to isolate us from others. We all have a purpose, whether or not it's easily discernible. Whatever place is yours in society, bring your brick every day to the never-ending construction of a happier world and you will quickly recognize your purpose.

- Have faith. You don't have to subscribe to a particular religion or follow dogmatic rules to have faith. It's actually harder than that. Faith is the belief that there is something greater than us, the creator of the world in which we live, guiding all with an order and a purpose. Faith may be – and often is – marked by periods of doubt, but it should be the compass to which you return. Faith brings with it a connection

to all other living things.

Achieve, or at least work toward, these five steps and the result will be hope.

Hope is happiness – a state of mind that transcends ordinary happiness.

Christian E. Megrelis has master's degrees in engineering, business and political studies. He is the founder of Exa International, a multinational engineering company, and vice chairman of the International Union of Economists. He is also the former vice chair of the United Bible Societies, a major world publisher of the Bible.