

# Loneliness: a 'substitution fantasy' gone wrong

BY SARAH BERRY



Connection craving ... superficial interactions leave us lonelier, say experts.

It's possible to walk down the street without making eye contact with anyone. Self-service at the supermarket means we can do our grocery shopping without speaking. It's even, sadly, possible to spend the majority of our days (and lives) working alongside people without ever having any kind of meaningful conversation or connection.

This all seems counterintuitive. After all humans crave connection. In this talk author Brene Brown says: "Connection is why we're here - it gives purpose and meaning to our lives. This is what it's all about.

"It doesn't matter whether you talk to people in social justice and mental health and abuse and neglect, what we know is that connection - the ability to feel connected - neuro-biologically that's how we're wired, it's why we're here."

Yet, with almost a quarter of Australians living alone it is all too easy to live a lonely life. This study last year found 35 per cent of Australian men and 29 per cent of Australian women report that loneliness is a serious problem for them. It is no surprise then that to assuage our feelings of disconnect more and more people are connecting to the internet.

As of February 2012, Tumblr reports having over 46 million blogs while Wordpress hosts over 72 million. The mission statement of Facebook is to give people the power to share and make the world more open and connected. As of December 2011 there were 845 million monthly active users. In the last three months of 2011, users generated an average of 2.7 billion "likes" and comments every day.

And Twitter now records over 200 million tweets per day. That's up from January 2009 when users sent two million tweets per day.

This is not to mention the figures for other platforms such as youtube, myspace, instagram, flickr, pinterest, posterous and foursquare. The list of course goes on.

Online, we never have to be alone. There is always someone, somewhere who is awake and can 'like' us. It also provides a platform from which we can share in a way we've never done before. Which is pertinent when you consider that the number of confidants we have is decreasing. A recent study found that 48 per cent of respondents only had one confidant compared to a similar study 25 years ago when people claimed to have around three people they could confide in.

Instead, we hire our confidants, in the form of counsellors, life coaches and the like. And, of course, we go online. In fact there are even websites where you can literally hire a 'friend' - for instance [www.afriendforyou.net](http://www.afriendforyou.net) says: "Some clients want to fight loneliness and they simply need company, while others need someone they can trust, to talk to."

But, has this ability to connect so constantly allowed us to feel more connected? Does it help us to feel less lonely or have we just turned into 'pancake people' spread wide and thin, making shallow connections that only enhance any separation we might feel in the real world?

A recent Australian study (close to half our population is active on Facebook), titled *Who Uses Facebook?*, found that lonely people tend to spend more time on Facebook. "[The] frequency of Facebook use ... [was] shown to vary as a result of certain characteristics, such as neuroticism, loneliness, shyness and narcissism," the authors wrote.

Why, if we feel lonely, not reach out and connect with people in person?

It's a complicated issue not least because we are, as noted in this article in *The Atlantic*, like the parable of the porcupines who huddle together for warmth but then shuffle away in pain. We want closeness and connection, but we don't want the pain or discomfort that often comes with it.

"What's wrong with 'real conversation' is you can't control what you're going to say," says author of *Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other*, Sherry Turkle. "Texting, email, posting: all of these present the self as we want to be. We get to edit and that means we get to delete and that means we get to retouch the voice, the face, the body. "Human relationships are rich and messy and demanding and we clean them up with technology." The problem with this is that we "shortchange ourselves" Turkle says. Yes, we connect. It's clean and often easier because we can hide behind whatever image we want to present. But, appearances as we all know can be deceiving, and clean connections don't make for deep or true ones.

One study, reported in The Guardian, set out to discover why so many young people in the UK felt lonely. They found that, in part, it was because nearly a third of young people said they spent too much time communicating online and not enough in person.

"Forming connections with pets or online friends or even God is a noble attempt by an obligatorily gregarious creature to satisfy a compelling need," The Atlantic quotes author John Cacioppo from his book Loneliness. "But surrogates can never make up completely for the absence of the real thing."

Indeed. An interesting study published in the Harvard Business Review found that for superficial communication, organisations tend to rely on email. However, for anything considered important, people tended to speak in person. It also found that performance of a team can be improved by more than 50 per cent, through socialising. This reinforces Cacioppo's notion that while online interaction has value, for nourishment and to thrive nothing beats the human.

And as Sherry Turkle points out, our humanity is revealed when we stumble or lose our words. When we are vulnerable. Technology, she says, tries to take something complicated and simplify it. Which isn't to say it isn't useful and a worthy tool with which we can connect, but we must shake the belief that perfection is the key to connection or that online is the panacea to our frailty or sense of disconnection. "Fantasies of substitution have cost us," she says. "[We need to look at] how technology can lead us back to our real lives, our own bodies, our own communities....they need us...let's talk about how we can use digital technology... to make this life the life that we love."

Source: <http://www.smh.com.au/lifestyle/life/loneliness-a-substitution-fantasy-gone-wrong-20120501-1xwvh.html#ixzz1trEEf8LL>