'A silent epidemic': Why loneliness is on the rise in a hyperconnected world

Social media, smartphones and the internet have bridged connections between people, but why are there more lonely souls today?

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Channel NewsAsia, 18 October 2024

As eight kittens clambered all over Mr Christopher Choy, 39, while he tended to his pet store, there was a melancholic look in his eyes.

In a recent interview with CNA TODAY, the Singaporean admitted: He feels lonely.

This has been the case for five years, since Mr Choy founded and built his licensed cat-breeding business in Bukit Timah by himself.

Most of his daily tasks are solitary, and he often has lunch by himself. His friends are working and caring for their families, leaving little time to meet.

“There’s a void. I guess it feels like something’s missing and you need to have some sort of connection or direction.”

To escape his loneliness, he tried to make friends online on the messaging platform Discord. However, “the nature of these relationships is very ephemeral”, because after some time, they would simply go offline and disappear, never to be heard from again, he said.

The irony is that Mr Choy is far from alone in his isolation. Despite living in a hyperconnected society where people are just a text message away from one another, loneliness is a “silent epidemic”, as Mr Choy put it.

A survey by the Institute of Policy Studies earlier this year found that young people aged 21 to 34 experienced the highest levels of social isolation and loneliness.

Among respondents in this group, over half said that they felt anxious sometimes about talking to people in person and find it easier to communicate online.

The study also found that those aged 35 to 49 are less lonely, while respondents in the 50 to 64 age group are the least lonely.

Last year, the World Health Organization declared loneliness to be a global health threat. Current global estimates suggest that one in four older adults experience social isolation and between 5 per cent and 15 per cent of adolescents experience loneliness.

The reasons driving loneliness among people from Generation Z and the millennials, as well as the dangers of prolonged social isolation, were explored recently in CNA's Talking Point programme that first aired on Oct 10.

Pew Research Center, an American think tank, defines millennials as those born between 1981 and 1996, and Gen Zers as those born from 1997.

Dr Sanveen Kang, a lead clinical psychologist from specialist psychology clinic Psych Connect, told CNA TODAY that loneliness leads to "increased risks of depression, anxiety, and a sense of hopelessness".

"(It) can also negatively impact cognitive functioning, causing difficulties in focus, memory and decision-making," she added.

To find out why Singaporeans are feeling more isolated than ever, CNA TODAY spoke to nine people who are experiencing or have recently experienced significant periods of loneliness, as well as to mental health experts.

Most of the interviewees became lonely because of varying personal circumstances, but faced similar challenges when trying to leave their unwanted solitude and sought modern solutions such as seeking friends from messaging platforms and dating applications.

WHY THEY FEEL LONELY

Clinical psychologist Geraldine Tan, from mental well-being centre The Therapy Room, said that personal circumstances or situational factors that lead a person to feel lonely will not be the same for every case.

For example, traumatic experiences such as domestic abuse or losing a loved one can cause someone to feel alone in their journey because they might think that others do not understand what they are going through.

A "wall" is built when people believe that there is no one who can empathise with their experiences, which separates them from others who can, in reality, offer the support they seek, Dr Tan added.

Agreeing, product designer Toby Gail, 26, said that she became lonely after becoming a caregiver to her grandmother who is living with dementia.

"Being able to find other young people who relate to the experience of being a caregiver is rare," she added.

Ms Gail also said that her entire family lives apart due to strained ties, while most of those in her social circles "grew up in relatively stable family units", so she also feels alienated because she has a different background.

As for field service engineer Kieran De Souza, 42, he said that he felt lonely when he was at the lowest point of his life in 2021.

At the time, he was undergoing a divorce. His father had kicked him out of the home in order to sell the house and retire in Vietnam. On top of these, he was struggling to pay the bills while working odd jobs.

At that time, Mr De Souza felt scared and believed that there was little hope left for him.

He did not want to burden friends with his problems because he felt that they would already be preoccupied with their children and their own lives.

He tried his best to go about his daily life on autopilot, because when he thought about how alone he was, he would start crying.

Today, things are looking up – he has a girlfriend who makes him happy, though he still struggles with anxiety and depression, he said.

As for security guard Muhammad Arif Ong, 27, his gruelling 12-hour work shifts meant that he has little energy to socialise outside of work.

He has not met his friends for years and he spends small pockets of free time on video games.

“Most of the time, I go to work, go back home, be on the computer for a few hours, then sleep. Wake up and repeat five or six days every week,” he said.

He also finds it difficult to connect with his colleagues, who are either much older than him or from Malaysia. “There’s some sort of barrier due to the nationality differences. They don’t tend to mix because they have their own group."

He recalled that in a previous job role as an auxiliary police officer, he would encounter groups of happy families as he drove to various malls to replenish bank teller machines.

“Seeing people attend different events and enjoy themselves during the weekends makes me wish that I could be like them, that I could have time to go here, go there (for leisure),” he said.

FLEETING, IMPERSONAL ONLINE CONNECTIONS

Most interviewees who spoke to CNA TODAY tried forging new friendships through the internet, because it seemed like it was an easy solution to their loneliness.

After all, the proliferation of mobile devices, social media and "meetup" apps has made joining virtual communities easier than before.

Mr Ong the security guard said that although online video games have allowed him to meet players worldwide, these connections tend to "die very easily".

"The moment people get busy, they just stop playing. And when they stop playing, they don't talk anymore and it's just radio silence. They're not terminally online like me."

When asked why the digital connectedness in societies today has not eased loneliness among young adults, mental health experts said that these digital interactions on online platforms are often superficial, even though they are easily accessible.

Clinical psychologist Haikal Jamil who founded ImPossible Psychological Services said that many online friendships often lack the emotional depth that real-life interactions provide.

"Online connections tend to focus on brief, surface-level exchanges such as likes, comments and short messages, rather than supportive conversations.”

He added that people may accumulate numerous online friends or followers, but these relationships often fail to meet their deeper emotional needs, which can leave them feeling disconnected and unfulfilled.

Those who spoke to CNA TODAY about their feelings of loneliness opened up about how online connections are not the panacea to their lack of socialising opportunities.

Marketing executive Alex Chew, 26, said that some friends try to maintain their connection with her by sending her Instagram reels and videos on the internet.

“But is that real connection? Because I am not really being vulnerable and talking about the emotions plaguing me. It’s not building the relationship because it takes time to really know someone.

"Keeping brief contact on social media messaging does not necessarily add up and fulfil that criterion.”

When product support officer Li Mingxin encounters issues at work, the 39-year-old feels forced to bottle up his emotions because even if he writes on Facebook about his problem, not everyone welcomes it.

He also said that “a lot of people prefer reading positive things on social media and if you write about problems, nobody wants to read or care”.

Echoing his sentiment, Ms Isabel Han, 30, who is unemployed, said: “These days, social media is just a platform for people to show off and feel good about themselves as they curate their content heavily to show only the positive parts of their lives.

“In that sense, I feel more isolated because everyone is only thinking about themselves.”

The experts said that because the idea of working from home has become increasingly normal, such work trends lead to reduced engagement and community spirit among colleagues.

Dr Tan from The Therapy Room said: “To be able to look at a person, have a meal with the person, all these are not available. We may appear to be very engaged with another person online, but it’s very transactional. Your colleague is not in front of you, but on the phone. So it becomes very cold.”

Mr Haikal the clinical psychologist said that spontaneous interactions in office environments provide emotional connection and a sense of camaraderie among colleagues, which can be lacking in virtual meetings.

“As a result, this can lead to a sense of isolation and individuals may feel more disconnected from their colleagues, missing out on the social support networks that are more easily accessible in a traditional workplace.”

CULTURE OF SELF-RELIANCE A DOUBLE-EDGED SWORD

Some clinical psychologists also noted a rising trend of people believing that they need to be self-sufficient and manage their emotions independently.

While this is not in itself a bad thing, they warned that this overemphasis on self-care leads people to withdraw and avoid meaningful social interactions with others.

Dr Kang from Psych Connect said that being self-reliant and emotionally independent are healthy concepts because they reflect a person's trust in their own abilities, judgment and resilience in facing challenges.

However, Mr Haikal said that excessive self-reliance can also lead people to suppress their need for connection with others, viewing it as a mark of weakness.

This can result in fewer close-knit social relationships as people prioritise personal goals over shared experiences.

"The mindset creates a barrier to forming deep relationships where individuals are less likely to open up or lean on others for support when facing challenges," Mr Haikal added.

On top of this, Dr Kang said that the cultural norm of "saving face" in Singapore discourages people from openly expressing vulnerability or admitting to struggles. This refers to the act of preserving one's self-respect or reputation without exposing anything that would lead to embarrassment.

Concurring, Mr Haikal said that the pursuit of achievement in Singapore's high-pressure environment often comes at the expense of building meaningful social connections.

"The cultural preference to keep problems private can make it difficult for individuals to open up about personal struggles. This pressure is compounded by the stigma surrounding mental health, where seeking help may be seen as a sign of failure."

For instance, when Mr Choy the pet shop owner experienced a lull in sales, he found it difficult to admit to his friends that he was not doing so well because he did not want to receive negative judgment.

"Singapore enshrines competition as one of its driving spirits. I don't think the culture here is to fully engage with others or be vulnerable. It's not a culture that values personal connections, but rather what keeps the system going," Mr Choy said.

However, he has not given up on overcoming his feelings of loneliness. Mr Choy is cultivating "non-virtual" hobbies such as starting a vintage jazz band and playing tabletop games, which allow him to meet other people.

It takes time to forge long-lasting bonds with others through these sessions and he is taking things as they come.

"We meet in board game shops two or three times a week, and we play tabletop games like Blood Bowl and Vampire the Eternal Struggle. Being out and being social feels good, and I'm part of the community that plays the game, so there's a bit of chatting involved."