

Mitchell Hicks, PhD
Independent Practice
Lisle, Illinois

Assistant Professor of Counseling and Human Services
Roosevelt University

In the June 23rd edition of the *New York Times*, a headline proclaimed that a new study demonstrated that social isolation is a growing phenomenon in the United States. Duke University sociologist Lynn Smith-Lovin, a contributor to the study recently published in the *American Sociological Review*, noted that our safety net in times of trouble such as the events surrounding Hurricane Katrina have continued to shrink since the 1960's.

Findings from this study, a 20-year follow-up to previous work, showed a very sharp decline in the quality and quantity of social support. Here are just a few of the most salient findings that are discussed in the article. First, they learned that about a quarter of the population has absolutely no one to whom they can turn in times of crisis. Second, about half of all Americans surveyed reported that the only person upon whom they could rely was a spouse, leaving only about half who could identify a readily-available supportive friend. Third, only about eight percent of us believe we can turn to a neighbor in times of distress.

The conclusion of the article is not surprising: we are far more socially isolated than we were just twenty years ago. If we face trials and tribulations, we are much more likely to suffer alone. Such a conclusion is sobering given that we as psychologists are acutely aware of the vital role that social support plays in our ability to cope with both the daily hassles of life as well as more serious crises. Reading through this article left me wondering what a division of the American Psychological Association that is devoted to the study of men and masculinity might have to offer toward understanding this continuing trend. I would like to share with you a few of my thoughts.

Feminism. One of the major sociopolitical changes in the 1960's was that feminist ideology gained significant ground. Now, I am in no way blaming feminism for our current state of social isolation. But, with its focus on liberating women from the socially constructed roles of housewife and mother there was no counterforce to encourage men to step forward and take on more responsibility for the social and emotional well-being of the family. With a wife who was spending her time at home with preverbal children, she naturally reached out to other women in her community that were in similar situations. This had important implications for the family system. A husband need only show up for dinner and make "man talk" with the husband of his wife's new friend. Men were more likely to invite business associates to dinner, and so there was a need to maintain his work persona. As women have felt more and more empowered to enter the paid workforce, this vital role has been lost. The mistake was *not* that we as a society empowered women. The mistake is that men have neither been equipped nor prompted to make these non-work-related social connections. Instead, two adults come home exhausted with no time or energy to develop these sorts of social networks.

The current situation appears to be that both partners have been sucked into the false hopes of rugged individualism and emotional overcontrol. Though it is quite adaptive to not let those with whom you negotiate know your true emotional state, such a stance is anathema to developing strong social connections. It has only been within the last twenty years or so that we have begun to question the social and emotional straightjacket that men have worn in their many life roles, and that women in the corporate world now share with their male counterparts.

Those of us who have been practicing and researching in the area of men and masculinity are quite familiar with those mandates of manhood that insist that we eschew dependency, vulnerable and tender emotions, and caretaking responsibilities. Perhaps we should be advocating for a more flexible social and emotional repertoire for *both* genders. There is a time to hide our vulnerabilities, and there is a time to reveal them. There are occasions to stand alone, but usually we should be open to our need for relationship. There are times to isolate emotions, and there are times to allow ourselves to be flooded with them. Any defense that has been labeled as typical of one gender or other (regardless of its accuracy) that is used rigidly can be quite detrimental. On this point, I am reminded of a recent list discussion regarding the virtues of stereotypically “masculine” defenses of shutting off or denying emotional experience in times of danger and crisis (e.g., police, firefighters, military personnel). Though quite adaptive in those situations, near exclusive reliance on this can have very high costs to our social, emotional, and physical health.

Technology. Perhaps even more dramatic changes have come in the form of technological advances. Many of these allegedly must-have tools with which we live have now usurped our lives. The *New York Times* article makes reference to this through a discussion of television’s impact on social relatedness. Since the 1985 version of this study, we have seen tremendous additions that allow for a seemingly infinite flow of entertainment through several hundred channels of cable television (and there is STILL nothing on TV!!!), all sorts of movies on demand via the internet or local store, billions of hypertext pages, and all sorts of video games. When I was a kid, I went outside with friends and played basketball. Our kids turn on the Xbox 360 and play basketball videogames – maybe even with friends over the internet with the advent of Xbox Live. Children are not read to, but have toys that will read to them. No social interaction required!

Those of us in clinical practice with men have probably noticed another major problem that has come with technology: very easy and [nearly] anonymous access pornography. As we have no doubt encountered at least in our inboxes, there is a seemingly endless supply of whatever fantasy one wishes to indulge available 24/7 in the privacy of our own homes. Each new advance in technology brings an advance in how pornography is delivered. Recently, a parent told me that she found that her son had downloaded pornographic images onto his Video iPod. Our deepest needs for intimacy and connection can seem to be met in complete solitude with a few clicks of a mouse and a credit card number. However, such decisions come at a severe cost. In addition the

obvious financial charges and dangers of identity theft, such fantasies can only lead us to disillusionment. Our needs for true relational connection, to know and be known, can never be met under such conditions. Moreover, it seems to provide a very unlikely if not completely false possibility. Great sexual intimacy requires work and communication, while pornography (and Hollywood sex for that matter) show us two beautiful nearly or complete strangers jumping into bed and knowing exactly what to do to bring each other to roaring climax with little or no effort. Real people are not like that, and if this is our vision we can only be disappointed when presented with the promise of true relationship.

Technology offers still another false hope for social connection. In the *New York Times* article, it was noted that one might have many connections on various networking websites, chat rooms, and email lists. But this also provides us with a false solution to the problem of true intimacy and social connection. It is true that one may be able to mitigate the effects of rejection through this virtually anonymous medium. One need not put the true self out there; it is the mask that is rejected, not the self.

Just like defenses and relational patterns stereotypically assigned to one gender or another, these technological advances have potential to enrich or devastate our lives. Computers and the internet afford us the opportunity to perform complex statistical calculations, communicate with friends, relatives, and business contacts over email or internet telephonic services such as Skype for little or no money, and air conditioning sure makes hot summers more pleasant.

As an organization devoted to the study of men and masculinity with the hope of improving the lives of men as they relate to themselves, other men, their children, and the women in their lives, we have much to contribute to a society that badly needs to face its increasing problem with social isolation. Our membership has written many scholarly texts and journal articles deconstructing male gender roles and articulating their negative impact. Yet, are we talking to the general public about our findings? Are we telling fathers and mothers about the dangers of social isolation? As we know, Ron Levant made it one of his APA presidential priorities to make psychology a household word. Perhaps it is time to make the psychology of men a household word as well.