

Week 4: The Loneliness Economy

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We Have Never Been More Connected. So Why Do So Many People Feel Alone?

A hundred years ago, loneliness often came from distance.

Today, it exists despite constant connection.

We wake up to dozens of notifications.

We respond to messages throughout the day.

We scroll through hundreds of photographs, videos, and opinions before breakfast.

We can speak to someone on the other side of the world within seconds.

Yet many people end the day with a quiet feeling that is difficult to explain.

They have conversations.

But they miss connection.

They have followers.

But few close friends.

They are surrounded by people.

Yet they still feel alone.

Perhaps one of the greatest contradictions of our generation is this:

The more digitally connected we become, the more emotionally disconnected many people feel.

The New Price of Modern Living

In previous generations, communities were often built naturally.

Neighbours knew one another.

Children played together in the streets.

Families visited without scheduling appointments weeks in advance.

Conversations happened without screens.

Today, life moves differently.

Work demands more time.

Traffic steals hours.

Economic pressure leaves many exhausted before the day is over.

Instead of visiting a friend, we send an emoji.

Instead of sharing a meal, we react to a photograph.

Instead of asking, "How are you really doing?" we press the "like" button and keep scrolling.

Technology has made communication easier.
It has not always made relationships deeper.

The Business of Attention

Our attention has become one of the world's most valuable resources.

Every notification.

Every recommendation.

Every endless scroll.

Competes for one thing:

Our time.

Social media platforms were designed to help people connect.

But many now compete to keep people engaged for as long as possible.

Hours disappear unnoticed.

Meanwhile, genuine conversations become shorter.

Family dinners become quieter.

Friendships become increasingly digital.

Connection becomes measured in views, likes, and followers rather than trust, presence, and understanding.

The Hidden Cost of Comparison

Social media rarely shows ordinary life.

It shows celebrations.

Vacations.

Promotions.

Perfect smiles.

Beautiful homes.

Successful businesses.

Happy relationships.

The difficult days are often hidden behind carefully edited photographs.

As a result, many people begin comparing their everyday reality with someone else's highlight reel.

A young graduate questions their progress.

A parent wonders if they are doing enough.

A business owner begins to doubt years of hard work.

Comparison quietly steals contentment.

And over time, it can also steal hope.

When Loneliness Becomes a Public Health Challenge

Loneliness is more than an emotion.

Research increasingly shows that prolonged social isolation can affect mental and physical health, contributing to anxiety, depression, stress, and a lower quality of life.

The challenge is particularly significant among young people, older adults, and individuals living in rapidly urbanising communities where meaningful social interaction is becoming less frequent.

This is why the conversation about loneliness extends beyond individual experience.

It has become a societal concern.

Why This Matters for Sustainable Development

Sustainable development is often discussed in terms of infrastructure, economic growth, and environmental protection.

Yet none of these can fully succeed if human well-being continues to decline.

Healthy societies depend on healthy relationships.

Communities become stronger when people know and support one another.

Mental well-being enables learning, productivity, innovation, and resilience.

The Sustainable Development Goals recognise that development is ultimately about improving people's lives, not simply increasing economic output.

Progress cannot be measured only by income.

It must also be measured by belonging.

Five Years Left

As the countdown to 2030 continues, we often ask how to reduce poverty, hunger, and inequality.

Perhaps we should also ask another question.

How do we rebuild human connection?

How do we create communities where people feel seen rather than merely observed?

How do we ensure that technology continues to serve humanity instead of quietly replacing it?

The future we hope to build cannot depend only on faster internet, smarter devices, or stronger economies.

It must also make room for stronger friendships.

Healthier families.

More compassionate communities.

Because a sustainable future is not only one where people live longer.

It is one where they never have to face life completely alone.

The question is no longer whether we are connected.

The real question is:

In a world filled with billions of voices, who is truly listening?

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