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Why do we feel so alone and unhappy?

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“The average person in the U.S. has only one close friend, according to a study published in the American Sociological Review.”

That’s something NBC News reported earlier this year.

“One in four people have no confidants at all,” they also reported, and some 75 percent of people say they’re unsatisfied with the friendships they do have.

Clay Routledge is a professor of psychology and behavioral science researcher at North Dakota State University. We discussed this topic on my podcast recently, ahead of a policy forum he’ll be participating in at the libertarian Cato Institute in Washington D.C.

According to him, *“20 percent of millennials say they are alone all or some of the time.”*

“More and more people are taking anti-depressants and buying self-help books,” he told me.

Curiously, this isn’t related to poverty. Countries with the highest levels of affluence are also reporting the most anxiety, and the most acute anxiety to boot.

Why is this happening? *“It’s not Trump,”* Routledge said.

Or, at least, it’s not just Trump. These trends toward feelings of anxiety and isolation pre-date the Trump administration. They’ve been coming for some time, tracking alongside declines in social activities like attending church or participating in civic or social clubs.

How can this be? Our ability to communicate, instantaneously, is nearly ubiquitous. Despite the negative headlines of the moment, our level of prosperity as a society is at or near record highs.

For some reason, we still feel worried and alone.

Routledge says we’ve lost purpose.

We may be victims of our success.

Humans need to feel like we belong. We need to feel like others are counting on us.

We need to be needed, in other words.

Routledge argues that the focus of liberal societies (his use of the word *“liberal”* is in the classical sense, which is distinct from the modern political usage) on protecting individual rights, and promoting personal achievement, may have overlooked our need for community.

Especially as our rising affluence has removed some of the pressure, we once felt to interact with one another. Where earlier in our nation’s history, most Americans were farmers or laborers; today, many people work jobs with far less social interaction. The number of people who work from home has risen 40 percent in the last five years alone.

We should be happier, but we're not.

How do we fix that?

I'm not sure I have the right answers, nor did Professor Routledge when we talked. I suspect part of the problem is how quickly our society has changed. I'm not that old, and my grandmother could remember her father farming with horses.

Her grandson can now connect a live video call with someone on the other side of the globe from a cell phone on the side of a highway.

Our society has changed in so many fantastic ways, but it's happened so fast I'm not sure we've adapted to those changes socially.

We'll figure it out. Until then, we could all probably try a little harder to connect.