

The Effect Of High Blood Pressure

[The pain of social disconnection, loneliness, is not to be confused with being alone.](#)[In a fabricated memory, tumbleweed sweeps across the playground.](#)[Out in this so desolate place, the poem begins, figuring the schoolyard as a desert and I a lonesome traveler far from home.](#)[Mercifully, I can't recall the rest.](#)[Though I may not have thought much of it then, this distinction matters.](#)[Some are more prone to loneliness than others.](#)[These days, even the least prone may be tested.](#)[At the height of the coronavirus pandemic, at the end of March 2020, an estimated 2.5 billion people, one third of the world's population, were in lockdown.](#)[Some were quarantined with family, others on their own.](#)[The virus was spreading and loneliness was epidemic, too.](#)[I started a podcast, Five Questions, in which I interview philosophers about themselves.](#)[But I had my wife and child at home, in any case, so little to complain of.](#)[The fallout will persist for years.](#)[Tis strange with how little notice, good, bad, or indifferent, a man may live and die in London.](#)[As a few lonely critics have complained, however, both the data and the history are more complex.](#)[Almost as soon as it was published, the 2006 study was challenged by the sociologist Claude Fischer, to substantially less acclaim.](#)[A perfect solitude is, perhaps, the greatest punishment we can suffer.](#)[He will still be miserable, till you give him some one person at least, with whom he may share his happiness, and whose esteem and friendship he may enjoy.](#)[Nor did the Romantic vision of that inward eye / Which is the bliss of solitude die with Wordsworth.](#)[A Return to the Self.](#)[There was indeed a connection between individualism, the rise of the market economy, and intimate friendship, but it was the reverse of what is commonly believed.](#)[In The Ends of Life, Oxford historian Keith Thomas analyzes friendship in early modern England, dividing friends into kinsfolk, strategic allies, and sources of mutual aid.](#)[In all these cases, he writes, friends were valued because they were useful.](#)[One did not necessarily have to like them.](#)[It was the disentanglement of economic and personal life facilitated by the market that made space for private friendships, less subordinate to social need.](#)[The great champions of association for pleasure, not utility, were the Scottish Enlightenment thinkers, including Hume's friend Adam Smith, who wrote The Wealth of Nations, the bible of industrial capitalism.](#)[The market's invisible hand was offered in friendship.](#)[None of this precludes more hostile relations between individualism and intimacy in the course of subsequent centuries.](#)[Perhaps we are lonelier now.](#)[But a responsible telling of the history of loneliness would acknowledge shifts that trend the other way.](#)[These are both respects in which, relatively speaking, people have more freedom, and are less lonely, now.](#)[Before the pandemic, then, the evidence for an upsurge of loneliness was inconclusive.](#)[Now it's beyond doubt.](#)[But even if loneliness were not rampant, it would be a serious problem.](#)[Social scientists have quantified the physical effects of being lonely, and the upshots are alarming.](#)[Social isolation has an impact on health comparable to the effect of high blood pressure, lack of exercise, obesity, or smoking .](#)[From the perspective of public policy, it is important to know these facts.](#)[But they point to side effects of being lonely, not the harm of loneliness itself.](#)[If you could take a pill that remedied the health impact of social isolation, I suspect that your desire for company would remain.](#)[We could look instead at how it feels to be isolated.](#)[But we don't understand why loneliness is bad for us if all we can say is that it hurts.](#)[And what does that pain tell us about how to live?](#)[Instead, it shows obliquely in their work.](#)[The problem is that Descartes's proof was not](#)

convincing. Subsequent philosophers went back to I think, therefore I am, contending that Descartes relied on others, even in that solitary stove room. If these philosophers are right, we have a metaphysical need for one another. It's a profound idea. But it says less about the harm of loneliness than might appear. But the inference is flawed. What is necessary for something good need not share its value, any more than the canvas of a beautiful painting, concealed behind the paint, is beautiful, too. In 1923-24, the artist Gwen John made a version of *The Convalescent* that is housed in Cambridge University's Fitzwilliam Museum. Its brittle oils depict a quiet woman in a blue dress seated, reading. I find it very moving. But while the portrait could not exist without its canvas, that doesn't make the stretched cloth moving beneath the paint. It's bad for us because we are social animals for whom society is not a given. The harm of loneliness springs from human nature, not the abstract nature of the self. I was embedded in a family all along. As an inveterate loner, I had little practice making friends. I hadn't learned how to get close to people or how to manage the ups and downs of friendship, how to respond to friction except by withdrawal. I am more at ease in conversations sustained by groups, where I feel less pressure to speak. Like many, I have a sense of being left out, excluded from some wider, smoother fabric of social connection, accessible to others. Human beings struggle with social needs. I'm not sure that we are by nature political, in that sense. We are definitely social. Human beings have always lived together in social groups, from families to tribes and nations. The story of human evolution, in which we developed these capacities, is one of mutual dependence and vulnerability. That our need for society goes deep is evident in extremes. He was inspired by studies in which rhesus monkey infants preferred a surrogate mother made of huggable cloth to one made of wire, even when the wire surrogate was the source of milk.