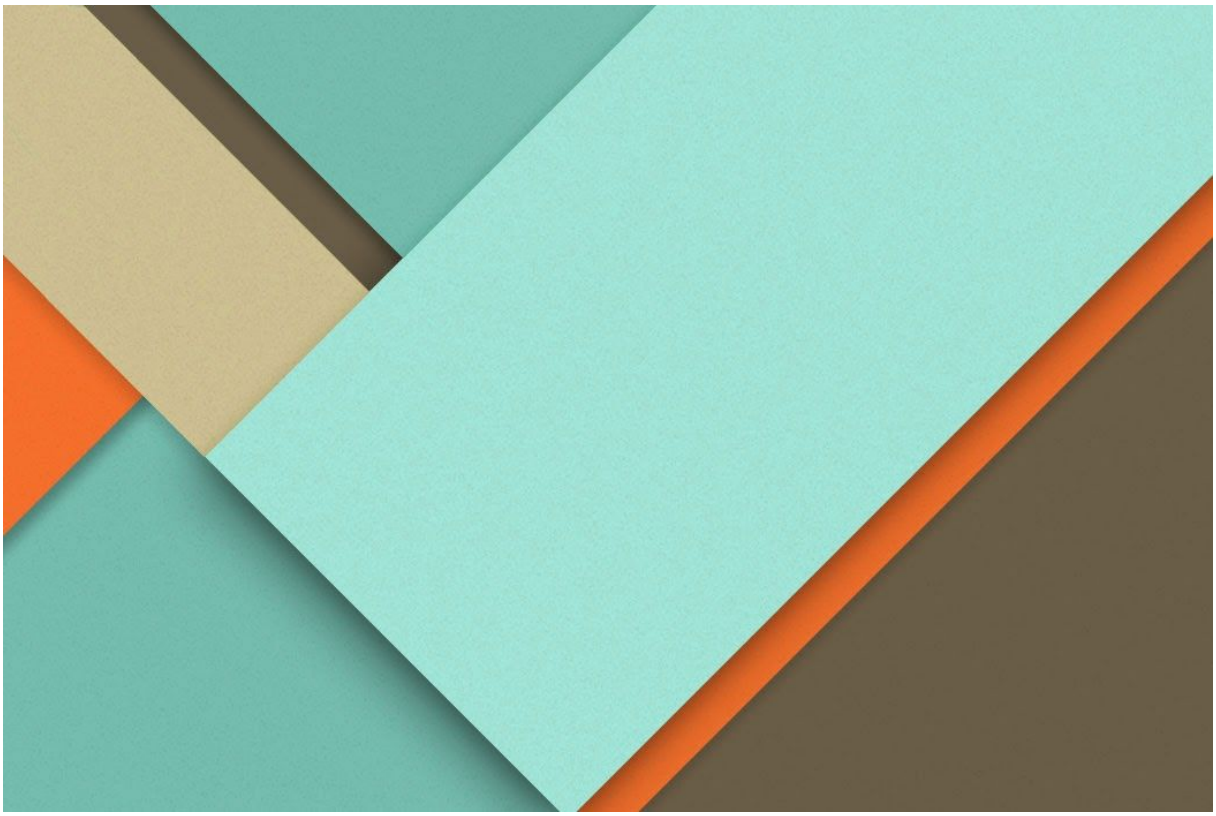

Roger Patulny

Transcript

Podcraft Productions

Varnya (intro):

So, how about that 2020?

It's a year none of us will forget in a hurry, that's for sure.

The enforced distance, the social isolation, the loneliness. But at the same time, this weird sense that the world is on this bizarre journey together.

So, how does a year like the one we've had affect our social relationships? And what might the lingering effects be, going forward?

Dr. Roger Patulny is an associate professor of sociology at the University of Wollongong. He specializes in looking at human connection and the ways in which we make this happen.

I spoke with him just as Melbourne was starting to see that second wave of cases crop up. The audio quality is a little different in this episode - you can think of it as the Zoom effect.

Varnya:

...we've all just been through, some of us are still going through, this really unusual period during which we haven't been able to see many of the people we're close to. How do you think this has affected the way we think about these connections?

Roger:

It's a very good question because it's a question about not just our immediate reaction to what's going on, but what we think about our reaction to what's going on. It gives us pause to reflect on our possible futures, and the way we behave in the future. I want to premise it, and answer it by saying that in Australia, COVID's almost been like a blip. We had a surge, and then the surge seemed to come under control. The narrative feels like, "Have we flattened the curve, have we fixed the problem?" For some, it has been a bit of a sense that it's just temporary. Very recently, we've had an upsurge of new cases in the state of Victoria. Suddenly, this is almost irritation, or new resurgence of frustration about, "Hang on. I thought we'd beat this thing and now it's come back again."

The second wave stuff is also happening in other countries as well. For one thing, it leads people to be much more reflective. It's one thing to be shut down for a little while, locked in your house for a little while, and you never have to do it again. Suddenly, people start to think about, "What if I do have to do it again and again?"

My answer to the question is, it's given people time to reflect on the quality of their friendships, and their connections to other people -- what they are getting, and can get out of those, friends and family, as well. Also, the quality of their everyday life. I say that latter part because I've never seen so many people in green spaces before as when I was in shutdown. [laughs] During the day, the streets are a ghost town. Suddenly, you hit after school time of 5:00 o'clock, and every park, every greenway, every space beside the river is filled with people desperate to get out of the house, interact and do exercise.

It has led us to reflect on how much we do value our connections with others, and how much we want that connection, including physical connections. It remains to be seen how it's going to play out, given the potential of going back into isolation or not. Is it just a blip, or will it not be a blip?

I think it will lead to some kind of longer-term change on at least a few levels, whereby people think a bit more about how they want to live their social life, what kind of stuff they want to do, and consider their options.

The other facet to all this as well, is video conferencing. People have learned that video conferencing is a thing. It can work quite well under certain circumstances, and it's not bad. I was saying to someone the other day that I just cannot escape my mom...

Varnya:

[laughs]

Roger:

...every Sunday now. She does a big roundup of my extended family to say, who's in and who's out. She's determined to rope us all into a regular Sunday Zoom catch-up. That's something new, and it works quite well for her. For most of us it works quite well.

It's a new potential way of interacting, and we've got to figure out how to integrate that into the older way of interacting. Underneath it all, people are probably a little bit more reflective of the quality of their relationships with others.

Varnya:

I felt that initially, especially in the early days, there was a more casual kind of friendliness than we're used to seeing, because we were all having this really bizarre experience together. There was this smiling and being in shared spaces, and this camaraderie, almost. Then I felt like that fell away once the fear set in.

Roger:

Oh, that's interesting. That, in some ways, shifts what we're talking about from somebody's individual feelings and perceptions as they sit on their own in their house, to a sense of what the broader community feels.

That is a very interesting space. We had, definitely, some early evidence of people bonding in new ways that they hadn't before. Anecdotally, some of the stuff which came out of the media here and a bit of the research indicated people were suddenly getting to know their neighbors for the first time, and introduce themselves, and getting to know people on their street.

My experience, for example, on my street, it was a pretty friendly street already. If anything, during COVID it became less friendly, because people were fearful for their kids getting sick.

Distanced connections with neighbors, for sure, and distanced connection with strangers, for sure.

I can also recall that great feeling you get when you've been locked in your home all day, and then you get out, and you meet somebody and it's like, "Hey, g'day," and you nod. A complete stranger, you almost want to connect with them because you're reaching for the human contact.

As you said, as time goes on, it seems to have given way to some negative feelings. Some of the stuff that I am aware of about disaster research suggests that disasters bring out the best and the worst in us, as humans. You can see this being played out many times and on many occasions.

When we had the Australian bush fires back in, [laughs] a million years ago, meaning January...

[laughter]

...during the bush fires, there was enormous camaraderie. You have whole towns banding together, and looking out for each other. The volunteer firefighters doing their bit. The community rises to the occasion. I can also remember reading about, in some abandoned communities that were looters. People riding their bikes into empty houses and stealing stuff.

Also, there are instances of communities who were grief-stricken by destruction, being very unfriendly to outsiders, particularly if that outsider was a prime minister.

[laughter]

Varnya:

[laughs] Sure.

Roger:

It brings out some of the best, and the worst in us. I think it's the same with COVID. I have a student doing her honors. She's doing interviews of people in urban and rural areas, about their experiences of the bush fires and COVID. What she's found so far is that the bush fires seem to engender a greater sense of community coming together, and COVID has not.

In some ways it makes sense really, because it's in-built into COVID to stay away from other people when you can't bond. There are different dynamics going on there, for sure.

Varnya:

For some of us, and especially, for people who live alone, or people who are usually isolated, this has been a particularly difficult time. I'm thinking especially of people with disability perhaps. For some people with disability, their carers are a really integral part of their day-to-day social context. And to have that taken away, or reduced, is a huge deal. This may be a bit Pollyannaish of me, but I'm wondering whether this shared experience might engender empathy for that experience of loneliness or social isolation, because we've all been feeling a bit isolated and a bit lonely. What do you think, am I being a Pollyanna?

Roger:

...No, I think that this whole experience would absolutely have the effect of de-stigmatizing loneliness. Loneliness is a stigmatized emotion. There are emotions that you're allowed to talk about.. you can tell people you're happy to till you're blue in the face, and they're red in the face. You can tell people about feeling a little bit awkward, a bit down, or a bit sad, or all sorts of stuff. But it's very difficult to tell people that you're feeling lonely, because sometimes people are given a hard time about it, or they might feel somehow it's their own fault. That they need to get up and fix it themselves.

What's really a useful side effect of all this, is it helps people realize that sometimes you can't fix stuff yourself. Sometimes external conditions force you into a situation where you have no contact with others, and it feels pretty bad, really awful. I do think that this does have the capacity to improve the empathy that people have for those who are lonely.

I also want to say, and I'm thinking about the research, there's an important distinction between what we call social loneliness, and emotional loneliness. Social loneliness is effectively the degree to which you have no actual contact with others. Usually means physical contact like meeting people. It can also mean virtual contact, like connecting online one-on-one.

Emotional loneliness is where you don't have the contacts that you actually want and need with other people, the quality of contact. It's the gap between the desired quality contact, and the actual meaning or quality of contact you have.

It's an important distinction, because the research suggests that this lack causes a lot of problems, as in physiological and mental health problems. There is a lot of research now showing us that's the case, mostly pertaining to the emotional loneliness. That's the more damaging form.

What it implies is, it's not enough just to simply have some random contact with people, and you're OK. You need to have meaningful, good contact with people to be OK. That puts us in an interesting space with COVID. When you're cut off from people, and not able to go out physically see them, then yes, you're more socially isolated.

You've got all these IT options, social media, and video conferencing. If those IT options can connect you to people that you already love, and improve those relationships, like myself with my regular Sunday mom catch-up, and family catch-up, then it's good. It helps with your emotional loneliness, but if all it does is connect you to a bunch of randoms online, you don't know very well and effectively as strangers, then no, it's not going to help. Does that make sense?

Varnya:

It does. It absolutely does. I'm thinking that it's a really important distinction for people working in the disability field. There's a lot of that in the disability sector, but it's not necessarily meaningful for that person.

Sometimes the disability sector, certainly old models of disability support, would look at those incidental contacts and say, "Well, that's enough," but what you're saying is that the research indicates that no, it's not.

Roger:

That's right. Meaningful contact is important. Of course, meaningful changes person by person. One point to make that you mentioned earlier was about people who live alone, like potentially people who have a disability.

I would also add though to that category, single people and single parents are a particularly important category. There was a study done by Relationships Australia in 2018, and they're in that report. They analyzed data from a big survey in Australia and looked at different types of people in Australia and their reported isolation and loneliness.

What was interesting is that whilst they found that certain groups of younger and older people reported feeling more lonely, one of the groups of people who reported much higher levels of loneliness than any others was single parents. It's not hard to realize why.

Single parents in general are cut off from a lot of networks and contacts with others by warrant of not having the time necessarily to go out and do stuff because they're spending all their time looking after kids on their own. They just don't have a partner in the house who can provide them with meaningful contact that they might like. COVID has probably had a very different and interesting impact on single parents and single people who live alone versus couples.

Anecdotally, I know plenty of couples who have told me they quite enjoyed the COVID time. That was because they got to bunker down with their partner who they like and spend some nice quality time at home with them, you know?

Varnya:

Yeah. [laughs]

Roger:

Feeling the pressure of fast-paced, late modern life toned right down. They could actually relax and spend the good quality time with their partner they weren't expected to get until they retired.

[laughter]

Varnya:

Like a mini retirement.

Roger:

It's like a mini retirement, exactly right. Some of them were sitting there wishing, God almost wishing it would go on for longer because it was just a pleasant, nice experience for them. I've known several people who have commented on this.

However, the much fewer number of people who I know who are single, who live on their own or they're a single parent -- of which I'm one, by the way -- couldn't stand COVID and couldn't wait for it to be over, of which I'm one.

I just got so sick of being at home. I just desperately wanted to get out of the house and meet people because it's not great to spend an enormous amount of your time on your own in your home alone.

Varnya:

For sure. All of my single friends were finding it particularly tough, not fun at all.

Roger:

The second point I wanted to make goes back to what you said earlier about people who have disabilities, and tricks and techniques, and strategies to help, not just about disabilities but also people in aged care facilities who would have been pretty heavily impacted by COVID as well.

Just to go to a little bit of the literature on interventions, something that's important to keep in mind is that some of the better interventions, from what I've been able to work out through looking at the literature, are oriented towards bringing people physically together as much as possible and giving them a project to do together.

Which is meaningful and which they can direct themselves and shape themselves and get on board with themselves in a longer-term sense. This is a useful approach for several reasons. One, they meet other people, not just one person as happens with befriending schemes.

The research from what I can see does not support befriending schemes as much because the one-on-one befriending schemes, whilst they're very well-intentioned and lovely people put their volunteer time into them, are just a blip in an ocean.

I have a friend involved in one. She says that the guy she goes to see, an older man, says, "You're the first person I've talked to a week." He is very, very deeply lonely and unhappy. She feels so sorry. She gives as much time she can. He doesn't see anyone else. That befriending scheme is problematic in terms of dealing with his long-term loneliness.

Varnya:

Yeah. It's a lot of pressure on both individuals.

Roger:

My friend is lovely. She tries as hard as she possibly can, but it's just the intervention doesn't seem to be working quite the way we would hope. Whereas interventions where you bring together a group of people who are lonely, particularly if they have shared experience, some shared identity, shared experience so they can relate to each other on some level.

If you can bring them together and get them to interact with each other and give them a project to work on, which means that they'll start to self-organize to work on that project not just once but multiple times, potentially would help if they have difficulty self-organizing.

Varnya:

Which is so interesting because that's exactly the model that Befriend uses in what they call their social network. They bring people together or different stripes, whatever, who have a common shared interest. That's the hub of the social activity.

Roger:

Yes, and that sounds fantastic. I was just going to say that the benefits are you bring a whole lot of together. You help multiple people at once. You get them to connect with each other. Then they start to become self-supporting of each other.

They start to develop meaningful connections because they can start to share their experiences with each other. They come together around the project. That's very helpful because it gives them something to do, something to think about, something to work together, to problem solve, and something to be interested in.

Also, the other factor that I've read about is if these things, particularly if they can be combined with some kind of basic cognitive training -- meaning, you can have people on hand who can help with getting people to process difficult cognitive issues or unhelpful cognitive thinking processes and rework at them in a different way -- that can be quite helpful as well.

Do you know what I mean? Someone might be there going, "I really like to get out and do stuff and interact, but it's no use. What's the use? No one wants to be friends with me," or, "It's too hard. I'm too tired all the time." There's aspects of depression involved. Some

degree of some cognitive retraining can be helpful to break that cycle, the project-based activity stuff as well.

Varnya:

We've touched on the digital communication thing. Many of us have leaned on these technologies during this weird period with good effect, as you've pointed out with your mum, or if there's an existing social connection there. Are there things that we get from face-to-face interactions that we can't replicate by digital means?

Roger:

Absolutely. Yes. I would never advocate that the digital is sufficient to replace physical, not unless we live in some Matrix world where we're directly plugged into the system, whatever, like in a fantasy land.

Varnya:

[laughs]

Roger:

I absolutely believe that physical connection is important for several reasons. First up, humans like to have actual physical contact like hugs, touch, holding hands, kisses, sex. These are all wonderful things. People miss it if they don't have it.

There's also the physical side of human interaction on a broader public level like playing an actual game of sports where you're at soccer, where you're interacting in a great, nice way, all that kind of stuff.

Leaving aside the touch -- even just those basic touch elements -- there's a whole massive of physical cues that are important in real life that you definitely don't get them in, say, social media text-based contact.

Varnya:

Yeah, right.

Roger:

Even in a Zoom face-to-face conversation, you don't get them either. The cues of smell, additional sounds, the cues of what's going on in the room, or the space around you. You know what I mean? For example, we've been talking now for a while, and a plane has gone overhead three times. Have you heard it or noticed it, by any chance?

Varnya:

No.

Roger:

If you're in the room with me right now, you would have noticed that. I would have said this is what life is like in Marrickville, a life under the planes. I would have told you the story of the Marrickville pause, which is where everyone stops whatever they are doing when the plane goes overhead, and then resumes it a seconds later. You know what I mean?

Varnya:

[laughs] You know what's funny as well. I'm just thinking about this now, is that during this conversation with you on Zoom, we can see each other, and that's great. We've got visual cues, facial expressions, and whatnot. But what I don't have any indication of is the way that you're sitting, or what you're doing with your hands? Even what you're doing with your feet, and all of that stuff. Apparently, I need that information as well to make me feel more connected with you.

Roger:

Absolutely. Also, if we were meeting inside a cafe to have this conversation, you'd see the type of coffee I'd get. You'd see what I've ordered to eat. The experiences, the interaction, would have smelled, I can remember the scent of the tea or, things along those lines.

I guess just finally, the physical allows for crowds, and crowd interaction, and big, large, wide spaces. You know what I mean, that of all perhaps a way to think about it is, would you rather look through a video screen at Bondi Beach, would you rather be on Bondi Beach?

Varnya:

[laughs]

Roger:

Most people would go for the latter.

Varnya:

It's so interesting, isn't it? I often say to my kids, imagine if this had happened, the virus, 30, or 40 years ago? There'd be no text, no email, no Zoom and no Skype. The sense of isolation would be so much more acute. Obviously, we're all grateful these digital conduits are there, but it's not the same.

Roger:

Absolutely.

Varnya:

Do you think there might be any lasting social impacts from the pandemic? Let's imagine, just for argument's sake, that there's a vaccine by the year's end. Do you wonder about a lingering social or emotional impact upon us, or maybe, especially, upon kids?

Roger:

Yes. I think that there will be some impact. It's very unlikely that we'll just go back to how we were before. The reasons for that are, this period will have left an impression on a whole generation of people of something really quite different, particularly to kids.

Every kid in 10, 20, 30 years' time will remember that year they had to be at home, learning from home on a computer. They'll either remember it because it was a one-off, but it stuck in their memory. Or they'll remember because it was the beginning of a total change.

Either way, it'll be important for them, and support for the rest of us as well, as a moment when a number of things have changed. It will lead to greater recognition of loneliness, and more discussion around it. Potentially, people will realize that it's around a lot more than they thought. People will also consider their relationships.

It'll lead to more anxiety, not just from the health implications but also the economic fallout. The recession effects are still yet to come properly, mostly around the world. That'll be filtering through for the next few years and that will not be good. There's a whole lot of anxiety that goes along with that.

In the future, we're now aware of what a pandemic can do. Another one could come and we don't know when, and that sort of stuff. There'll be a slightly heightened level of anxiety around that. We've also seen some really poor examples of how to manage the pandemic in various countries. I'm not going to name names.

Varnya:

[laughs] Yeah.

Roger:

But we've also seen some very good examples of how to manage it. We've seen some remarkable adaptation and ingenuity from humans. If you compare this one, to say, the Spanish flu, the containment is out of this world. We've done an amazing job of really quickly shutting it down.

We've been able to keep going because of this incredible technological world we've built -- continue to have businesses run and go to school -- because of the digital world that we've enabled. I think one should pause and reflect on that and go, "Geez, we're not that dumb."

[laughter]

That's pretty impressive really if you think about it. There is definitely some room for some optimism and hope that we can find ways through these issues.

Varnya (extro):

Dr. Roger Patulny talking with me about how the pandemic has affected our social worlds.

I'm Varnya Bromilow and you've been listening to the Stories of Connection podcast. You can find the rest of the series at the Befriend website...that's befriend-dot-org-au or wherever you find your favourite podcasts. Thanks so much for listening. Stay safe and see you next time.

Transcription by CastingWords