**How Our Communities Can Help Us Through Times of Collective Hardship**

We are currently living through one of the most difficult times in recent history, with what seems like a constant stream of world events and social changes that can leave us feeling uncertain, anxious, or sometimes frustrated. In 2022 and 2023 our world has witnessed the most global conflicts since the end of the Cold War1, we are still recovering from the effects of an unprecedented global pandemic, and have been experiencing a cost-of-living crisis that is negatively impacting public health and wellbeing2, 3. On top of all this, we are consuming more media than ever before, which serves as a constant reminder of what is happening around us, with the bad often shadowing the good. This inevitably takes a major toll on our mental health4.

With so much that feels out of our control, there is a strong need to shift our focus back to our communities. As United States Surgeon General Dr. Vivek Murthy was preparing to end his recent term under President Joe Biden, he wrote in an essay: “As I finish my tenure as Surgeon General, this is my parting prescription, my final wish for all of us: Choose community.”4 Dr. Murthy noted how “relationships, service, and purpose” outperform “wealth, fame, and power” in making us feel fulfilled, connected, and healthy. He further evidences how building community creates fulfilment through gaining social connections, helping others, and having a sense of purpose in life, emphasising that these are motivated by love, rather than fear and hate. These principles contrast much of what is propagated in our society today, where eliciting feelings of shock and outrage are preferable to those looking for engagement on social media or news platforms.

A 2024 systematic review3 examined the multi-level resilience factors that allow us to respond to societal challenges and crises. This included those at the individual level, the social level, or those in our immediate social environment, and the societal level, or the structural resources in place at the local level and beyond. The researchers looked at evidence of resilience factors in response to a range of societal challenges, including COVID-19, natural disasters, terrorist attacks, and economic crises such as recession. What they found was that, as a surprise to no one, having low financial stress allowed for greater resilience to societal stress, as did psychological flexibility (i.e. strong coping skills, emotional regulation). However, quality of relationships at the social level, as well as quality of the built environment at the societal level, also had implications for resilience. This may be because social experiences are strongly correlated with mental health, which is more fragile when we are overwhelmed by negativity. Positive social connections make coping with negativity easier5.

This supports the idea that community is wholly important, especially during times of uncertainty, unrest, and distinct challenges of a global scale. Modern western society remains primarily focused on the individual as the creator of success and wellbeing. In the field of psychology, resilience has long been regarded as an individual trait. However, emerging research is starting to view resilience as an *interpersonal resource*6. In other words, the interaction between a person and their environment and wider social network may determine how well they cope when faced with stressful situations. This opposes the widely held notion that self-reliance is an indicator of success and strength, while leaning on others is one of weakness. In fact, supporting and being supported by the people around us is one of the strongest things we can do to confront the challenges that we as a collective are being faced with.

Humans are inherently social and, in the beginning, could only survive in groups. And although the conditions we live in have changed and allow us, technically, to survive primarily on our own, the fact remains that we need others to *thrive*. It has been found that those who are communally oriented, or give to others because they are in need and out of care for others (which contrasts the exchange orientation, where people pay for a service), report higher self-esteem, life satisfaction, relationship satisfaction, and a more positive regard for humanity as a whole7. Further, a comparison of the psychological wellbeing of young people from Western individualist cultures versus those from collectivist cultures found individualism to be associated with lower life satisfaction and a higher likelihood of depressive symptoms in young people8. What is particularly interesting is that when compared at a societal level, individualistic countries score higher on wellbeing factors than collectivist cultures. However, when analysed at the individual level, this switches, which a collectivist orientation becoming more strongly related to personal psychological wellbeing. What this suggests is, that along with the values of attaining personal goals and nurturing independence that defines individualistic cultures, comes a “darker” side, where people may hold traits of “extreme self-sufficiency”8 and competitiveness that may be harming us psychologically. From this, we can see the importance of balancing our autonomy and progress towards individual goals, with the need to also work towards collective goals in connection with our communities. This will then build up the personal as well as collective self-esteem that enhances our overall wellbeing8.

So, what can we do to reconnect with our sense of community? Engaging with your community, whatever that means to you, does not need to take a lot of time or a big commitment to be meaningful and give you a boost. It can be as small as having a conversation with a neighbour or someone at a bus stop. It can be interacting with a Facebook group for your local area, attending a free event, or volunteering at a one-off charity event. For some, fully devoting themselves to community-based efforts and activism can be deeply rewarding if they have the capacity to do so. While putting yourself out there into your local or chosen communities can feel uncomfortable at the start, especially given how accustomed a lot of us are to keeping to ourselves, by trying to get to know those around you and give something valuable to *them*, even if that is just your kindness and curiosity, you are giving someone the opportunity to do the same for *you*, as well.

Remember, communities do not only mean the ones in our local areas. In her Ted Talk on how we create community, author Kathy Coffey describes four types of connections that are present in what we can call “community.”9 The first type of connection she defines is *connection of minds*, or the process of having open dialogue and discussion with others, ensuring to approach this from a place of curiosity. There is also *connection of spirit*, or an involvement with others that gives you a sense of self and meaning; *connection of citizen*, or how we align with another individual; and *connection of people,* the type that reminds you that you are not alone and that others care for you. Some, or all, of these types of connection can come from our friends, coworkers, chosen groups, or online spaces that bring together those who want to engage meaningfully with others from diverse backgrounds and experiences within a certain space. Ultimately, the important part is that we make effort to give more of our energy to the people around us who can make us feel better about ourselves and the world we live in, while giving less energy to the sources that are trying to drain that from us.

With that, I ask you to think of one thing you can do this week to feel a greater sense of community, however big or small that action is. Take a moment to think about how that action might have shifted your perspective of what you have to offer to others, and what your community can provide to you in times of need.

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Other relevant sources:

<https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/explore-mental-health/articles/tips-look-after-your-mental-health-during-traumatic-world-events>

<https://www.apa.org/monitor/2022/11/strain-media-overload>

<https://time.com/7202834/third-life-america-loneliness-essay/>