

Despair in Modern Life

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The social sequestering associated with the Covid pandemic has highlighted a serious problem in modern complex society: a generalized condition of despair throughout much of the citizenry. Despair is a newly defined condition that relates to a level of concern about conditions that are perceived as pervasive and as negatively impacting individuals and groups. It is not full blown clinical depression, but if it reaches a high level, over time it can evolve into depression. The condition of despair that has been identified in the literature has emerged and grown over the last 40 years in western countries. The initial research on despair has mainly identified the middle class – primarily among whites, as the core of the despair phenomenon, and this literature finds despair associated with a reduced life span, an increased suicide rate, and the escalating use of alcohol and drugs – especially opiates.

I suggest that when all social groups are examined in modern complex society, the condition of despair will be discovered to be virtually ubiquitous – just with different intensities and combinations of causes for different groups. I discuss here what I see as the primary sources for despair in modern life.

Underlying General Sources

Primary here is the failure by humans to adequately balance the input of individualistic and social values both in the overall worldview of societies and in the behavior of individuals and groups at all levels within complex society. In this regard, individualistic values prevail while social or community values are less influential. The basic condition that promotes this imbalance rests in the fact that as societies have grown in size, diversity and complexity, the vast majority of social relations are impersonal rather than personal in nature. When humans know one another personally, wholistically, and over the longer periods of time, they are much more inclined to cooperate with one another. When humans relate to one another impersonally, on a partial basis, and over the short term, they tend to engage one another more competitively. So, with 99.9% of the citizens in modern complex societies being all but strangers to one another, impersonal relations are the norm and personal relations are the exception. Only at the level of family, friends, colleagues, and some acquaintances do personal relations prevail with the overall orientation to cooperation exceeding competition in social relations.

The general consequence: dominant individualistic values in the context of prevailing impersonal relations result in inadequate social cooperation which

leads to greater tension, conflict, and competition at all social levels from neighborhoods, to communities, to cities, to states, to nations. And, as the need for humans across complex societies to cooperate has grown exponentially over the last century, the failure to become more cooperative becomes a major source of concern, which escalates into wide spread despair over time.

Global Scale Sources

Consider the many important global level concerns that are being left unattended due to the lack of organized international cooperation: excessive human population; unsustainable demand on natural resources; global pollution of air and water; the loss of species diversity with human caused extinction; economic, educational, judicial, and political inequality among nations and among groups within nations, the dire potential consequences of climate change, international conflict in general, cyber warfare, potential nuclear warfare, unregulated genetic and neurological engineering, and the negative impact of disinformation and false conspiracies promoted by unregulated sources of information – primarily on the internet.

Without a much heightened level of cooperation through the entire social system within and among complex societies, these issues of great concern are not and will not be adequately addressed and resolved. Without a commitment to this heightened level of cooperation, the truly empowered global scale government, which is required to deal adequately with this multitude of challenges, will not emerge. And that failure can spell the end of the civilized state of humanity. Among many educated citizens there is great concern internationally regarding this situation, and this escalating concern has led and is leading to increasing despair among these global citizens!

Individual Societal Scale Sources

Many, indeed most, of the underlying and global scale sources of despair are also fully present at the national societal level. And many societies share the following despair generating challenges.

1) Social Isolation.

a) Mobility. As individuals have been more and more encouraged to feel free to move in pursuit of their “best” job and career opportunities, extended family/band/tribe connections and support, long term friendships, involvement in and commitment to community, and identity tied to a locale/place have all waned significantly. The consequence is that there is increased freedom for individuals, but the strength of a great many important ecological and social relations have been weakened or lost. Fewer close and immediate personal relations increase the sense of isolation and over time contribute to despair for many citizens.

b) Elder Care. With longevity extending and most relatives and especially children living their own lives at distant locations, elders often live alone, and family is not available to assist as elders age and decline in health. The result is that more old people end up isolated in assisted living and long term care facilities. Many even die alone after being essentially warehoused in such “storage” facilities. No surprise, despair is prevalent among elders.

c) “Screen” Virtual Reality Culture. Especially in the last 20 years, a “Screen” Virtual Reality Culture has emerged. The personal computer, smart phone, and TV are now all consuming for the great majority of children as well as adults. This screen culture reduces full face to face social interaction to a 2 dimensional audio-visual experience. So much emphasis has come to be placed on this screen based culture that a full blown disability has now been identified – especially for children – where social interaction skills are severely under developed. Virtual social interaction is not an adequate substitute for full face to face interaction, and increased dependency on it in fact leads to increased social isolation and contributes to despair – a serious problem in modern societies!

d) Pet Substitution. Having lost a great many full social interactive opportunities for engagement and having become more and more individually isolated, a new compensatory epidemic has arisen for a great many modern humans: pets. Many citizens are now trying to substitute interaction with pet cats and small dogs for human interaction. Unfortunately, this substitution is far from sufficient, and it is more a symptom of the isolation/despair problem than it is any kind of real solution.

e) Security. Security in complex societies is provided by law enforcement at the local level and by the military at the state and national levels. But as citizens experience greater and greater isolation together with the following discomfort of despair, the false assumption arises that each individual must provide for his or her own security – as if “Wild West” conditions apply. Under the banner of individualistic rights, more and more individuals are drawn to accumulating weapons – especially guns – to provide for their self protection. Militias arise among these individuals to provide a sense of community that is otherwise lacking among these individuals. And these militias can evolve into active forces preparing to defend one group against other groups in their own communities, states and nations who are seen not as fellow citizens but as outsiders, even enemies. Beginning with the pervasive condition of impersonal relations, diversity in race, ethnicity, religion, class, immigrant status, and sexual orientation within complex societies make targeting other groups relatively easy.

Efforts to suppress these gun toting individuals and groups have focused on gun control, but the real cause is the underlying sense of social isolation and despair that so many citizens have come to experience as their lives have otherwise stagnated under modern conditions. Unfortunately, once in place,

these armed individuals and militias can themselves be drawn to accept the simplistic solutions for societal problems that are offered by predatory populists. These populists usually confirm the social targets within society that have already been identified by these individuals and groups, and they often consolidate these groups into social, economic and political movements that threaten the integrity of the society itself. All of this begins with citizens attempting to address their increasing experience of isolation and despair by simplistically and falsely attributing the causes to sources conveniently apart from themselves. Gun control may be needed in itself for other legitimate reasons, but it does not constitute the overall solution for the underlying condition of isolation and despair that is being experienced by many gun rights enthusiasts in modern complex societies – especially in the United States.

2) Instability.

a) With birth control, women have realized much greater marital freedom as well as increased opportunities to pursue employment and careers. In this context, divorce has become the norm rather than the exception. So, neither adults nor children can depend on the stability of the nuclear family – the minimal adult social unit. Children are raised in the midst of shifting among homes, the presence of “alter” parents, and frequently conflict over parental responsibilities. These stressors over time promote despair for all concerned.

b) With the ever escalating pace of technological change – especially due to robotics and artificial intelligence, jobs/occupations in all spheres and at all levels are less and less secure. Preparing for flexibility, continuing education within any occupation, retraining for an alternative job, and being prepared to move among jobs are now the norm. Job security is a thing of the past. And a college education is no guarantee of occupational success or an elevated standard of living. The world of employment has become very uncertain with employers and employees only committed to one another in the short term.

The world has already experienced the consequences of depressed employment as a result of the progressive implementation of computer based robotics and artificial intelligence in both manufacturing and the service industries. This trend is expected to expand much further in the relatively immediate future – fully into the professional occupations. As the number of jobs decreases while the global population continues to grow, the question arises as to how a great many modern humans in their productive years are going to earn a living. Economies may need to be extensively overhauled to include a guaranteed national income for all who work to benefit society, whether that benefit is commercial in nature or not.

The current instability in the employment sphere is concerning, but the future is looking to be much more challenging. The overall result: a lot of individual anxiety and social stress exists for a great many adults in their

productive years. Again, these stressors over time promote despair for a large part of the citizenry.

3) Inequality.

a) Economic. As the pace of technological change has constantly increased and as the economies of states and nations have evolved into the integrated global economy, business enterprises have off shored or outsourced their manufacturing and service needs to where their costs are reduced so they can remain competitive. This situation has put a lot of pressure on the standard of living in developed nations – especially for the middle class. And with the exclusive global economic interests of the WTO positioned to dominate national laws, the effort to define and implement a fairness doctrine to evaluate all of the real costs of different types of enterprises across nations has not emerged to protect jobs in the more developed countries.

While international corporations, shareholders, and the financial industry can thrive in this context – as indicated by the advancing stock market, the middle class has been economically hit hard by this advancing situation since the late 1970's. So, for many citizens, job instability is compounded by struggling to stay viable economically – even with two jobs and spouses working as well. No surprise that the middle class in developed countries is very frustrated and feeling that those in the economic and political domains are ignoring them. Over time this condition has led to despair, and this is despair in a core component of the citizenry – potentially quite dangerous for the survival of society as a whole.

b) Racial, Ethnic, Religious, Immigrant Bias. Diversity in large complex societies invites potential prejudice in the midst of what are otherwise dominant impersonal social relations. Just put any subgroup under stress or threat and other recognizably “different” groups can become the targets. When this occurs, all groups become more competitive and suffer increased separation and isolation, which can lead to despair. Groups that are long term targets [eg. Blacks, Natives] struggle long term with despair to the point where the condition becomes virtually normative. Very often these targeted groups also suffer other sources of inequality as well [eg. economic, educational, judicial, etc.]. Some of these groups are disadvantaged to the point of living in poverty and near total dependency. For them, despair can promote violent riots and revolutionary movements which can threaten the integrity of society itself.

4) Information Challenges.

a) Overload. Beyond the standard broadcast and print media, the internet has facilitated major new social media information sources. In this context, “news” is available instantaneously, everywhere, and all the time to every individual on their personal computers and smart phones. Since humans are

inherently attracted to attend to the unusual and the potentially problematic, sensational news dominates all of these sources of information. It is easy to get saturated with this mostly negatively charged news which details in graphic terms all the problems that are occurring around the globe. Humans are set up to deal with local issues – the good and the bad, and most of the time these local issues are ones the individual can do something to address. But, when the scale of the negative news information becomes global, individuals and most groups have no means to do anything about all the horrors that it reveals. It just accumulates to the point of saturation generating unresolvable stress which can easily become debilitating.

So, the first challenge posed by modern news sources is that they have the ability to engender much higher than normal unaddressable stress levels for vast numbers of citizens. Humans under such extreme conditions of stress are likely to become fearful, and fear promotes the biological survival response to behave competitively rather than cooperatively even in the zones of life where cooperation may be the norm. News overload is counter productive in modern society, but it has become the norm for a great many citizens. Prolonged stress and fear are major contributors to despair.

b) Unreliability. Insufficiently regulated sources of information can promote disinformation, propaganda, and false conspiracy theories. In recent years this has become the situation with regard to much of the information that is offered to the public through the internet on social media. Such false information feeds dissension and competitive behavior among groups which over time lead to despair among all citizens.

5. Government Inadequacy.

a) Gridlock. Political party extremes in representative democracies engender lack of cooperation and legislative gridlock resulting in the needs of the public not being met. When this condition persists, citizens become frustrated and either withdraw from involvement or commit to one extreme or the other. In either case, the result is negative for the health of municipalities, states, and nations, and over time despair rises.

b) Money in Politics. When the egalitarian basis for representative democracy can be overwhelmed by the competitive forces of the capitalistic economy, the political domain can be “bought” by the wealthy, corporations, and the financial industry. This is the condition that arises when money in politics is insufficiently regulated and restrained. In this context, candidates are selected and their campaigns are financed at high levels by special interest groups and PACs, and when these candidates are elected, they serve the interests of these special groups and not the general public. The results are that 1) the voting rights of citizens from the “opposition” can be curtailed, 2) political districts can be gerrymandered to favor the “moneyed” political party, 3) the judiciary can be

packed with judges who interpret the law to accommodate the concerns of the moneyed, and 4) legislation can be created and passed that supports moneyed interests. Many representative democracies have resolved these problems by implementing the needed regulations, but many countries have done little or nothing – as exemplified by the United States. When this “bought” condition in government at any political level persists for a significant period of time, despair elevates in a large portion of the public.

c) Unresolved Global Issues. The “Me” [competitive] rather than “We” [cooperative] perspective of most nations results in global issues being left unaddressed and unresolved. As significant global concerns have increased in number and intensity in the last fifty years, the need for cooperation at the global level and an empowered global scale governmental body to develop and implement the required actions has become greater and greater. The international community of nations has failed in this regard for a long time, and citizens in individual countries and globally are despairing. This is especially the case for younger adults who see their future negatively impacted.

6. Health Challenges.

a) Epidemics/Pandemics. While modern medicine has vastly improved the quality and longevity of life for most global citizens, health remains a significant concern. Epidemics and pandemics have become the primary challenges – as exemplified by the current Covid-19 pandemic which has isolated humans globally and resulted in the loss of millions of lives. Unfortunately, these pandemic threats have become more common in the context of globalization and increased movement of large numbers of people around the world. The negative economic and health effects of the current Covid crisis have contributed significantly to the level of despair throughout the national and international citizenry.

b) Resistant Diseases. As the arsenal of antibiotics has not increased in recent years and as the pathogens of some common diseases have become resistant to the antibiotics that are available, there is greater concern regarding the ability to sustain in the long term the health gains to which humans have become accustomed.

c) Medical Bankruptcy. While the view has manifested in most developed countries that health care is a right of citizens rather than a privilege, it is not universal by any means – just consider the ongoing effort to eliminate “Obama Care” – the health care program designed to assist lower income citizens with health care costs. Private health care insurance can be very expensive, and without it, many people are forced into declaring medical bankruptcy when they encounter the costs of major health problems that arise for their family members. Uncertainty over access to adequate health care looms as a significant concern for a great many citizens.

Collectively, issues related to health produce a lot of uncertainty for many citizens, while despair is common at the edges.

7. Inadequate Worldviews/Philosophies of Life: Religion, Materialism, Secular Humanism/Existentialism, etc.

In developed nations, mainstream religion has lost membership significantly since WWII. Science and technology have produced seemingly more “secure” lives, and citizens have pivoted in three directions: to religious fundamentalism, to secular humanism/existentialism, and to outright materialism. In this context, fundamentalism and materialism represent the extremes with secular humanism and existentialism existing in the social center.

The problem with fundamentalism is that it supports a worldview that has been crumbling since the 16th century, and science has continued to expose the failings of religious beliefs with each new confirmed discovery about the nature of micro and macro reality. The problem with materialism is that it recognizes only the things that celebrate life in the present and ignores the social and the subjective dimensions of both self and reality. While secular humanism/existentialism expands materialism to honor the mental function of reason and to support the value of social relations, it fails to recognize either the intuitive mental function in humans or the spiritual dimension of self and reality. Religion recognizes the subjective and supports social ethics within its membership, but it demeans the rational and material and casts a blanket of dogma over the spiritual to the point where groups with different such absolute “blankets” are willing to exterminate one another over their differences. All of these approaches leave humans committed to worldviews that are incomplete and ultimately more competitive and divisive than cooperative and unifying.

There are worldviews that overcome these problems [www.dynamic-humanism.com], but that is another discussion. What is important here is to identify the fact that the primary existing worldviews are not very satisfying for humanity at the global level. So, for those whose perspective is that humans need a worldview that works at a global scale to support an integrated, cooperative global condition for humanity, it is disappointing that such a unifying worldview is absent. Those who are aware of this situation despair that there is so little commitment to identifying and committing to such a worldview.

Conclusion

Clearly there are many sources of despair in modern life. Different individuals and groups are influenced by different ones and combinations of these sources. If humanity wants to thrive into the future under the umbrella of complex civilized society, it must truly come together and rather rapidly resolve the many challenges at all levels of society that lead to these conditions of despair.