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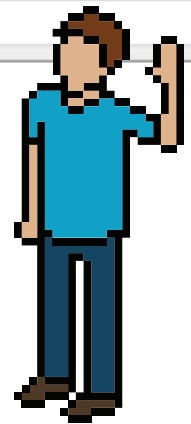
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Subject: ChangeThis Issue No. 32.06

Lonely Planet:
How Relationships Suffer and Why It Matters

By Elizabeth M. Johnson

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In looking at my work with clients on their self-esteem challenges, I discovered that a common thread often emerged: a lack of authentic relationships in their lives.

This manifesto was written with the intention of helping you understand how authentic relationships can impact, and consequently increase or decrease, satisfaction and success in your life.

I hope that you can identify a small piece of yourself here. Or, maybe a larger piece than you might have thought. With that glimpse, perhaps you might even be inspired to shut down your cell or computer, walk to the nearest coffee shop and start a conversation with a perfect stranger.

It starts here, with you.

50%.

That's how many Americans report that they have someone to confide in according to a study done by Duke University and the University of Arizona, released in June 2006. This number is down almost 25% from 1985, a substantial difference in twenty years.

How did this happen?

Never before in history have Americans' lives been as publicly visible as they are today. We have a page on a social networking site, email accounts for work and home, an online dating profile, regularly frequented chat rooms, websites for personal or business use, ditto for our blog(s), a cell phone that we eagerly use, etc. etc. Today, we reach out to others via texting and e-cards instead of hand-written letters or afternoon visits.

Modern technology gives us many ways to stay connected to friends and even to find new ones, if we desire. And yet, many of us still lack a genuine confidant, someone to turn to when we need support.

Do you?

Likely you are a friend to many. You have a MySpace page which allows you to meet and greet new friends all the time. Or perhaps you have engaged in a little tete-a-tete online dating, giving winks and roses to those who catch your eye. You most likely have an email account, or several, which you check on a regular basis. Even if none of these distractions apply to your life, it is likely that you are one of the 180 million Americans who own a cell phone¹. You are connected to many people most of the time.

Consider, for example, the connection that we make with someone in an online dating community. We graze over a farm of endlessly attractive faces and catchy descriptions until we find a few hopefuls that appeal to an inner, un-spoken (neglected?) need. We click and contact. Perhaps we send a saucy wink indicating our interest.

¹ This number is from 2005. In 1985, there were only about 340,000 cell phones. Hmm...

Perhaps the lucky guy or gal will return our interest. Perhaps not. If not, we return to our grazing. Moo.

We are used to rushing on to the-next-best-thing if a previous choice doesn't work out. All the while we continue to lose authentic connection in pursuit of the fairy tale myth (the happily-ever-after) that sustains and defines our culture.

Genuine, romantic discovery is lost while artificially-constructed pursuit runs amok. The online dating factory has constructed a simulated courtship formula that cannot support individualism. This formula—a successful one certainly—relies on conformity, repeat usage and human impatience.

Oh, you're not single?

Consider, then, the amount of time that you spend on average in front of your computer. Like you, perhaps, I spend many hours in my email program. We arrange a great deal of our life via email. Email allows us to stay connected to clients, friends, and family, even those who we would really rather not be in contact with.

Often, unfortunately, we over-access this convenient tool to the detriment of ourselves and others.

Important conversations are sent via email, which in turn are understood as directives rather than as discussions. Angry words or complaints are typed in distant, emotion-less fonts instead of being addressed verbally. Reflective silence cannot be heard in an email. Commonality and joint effort are harder to detect in a plain text email while dismissiveness and impatience are easier to infer.

As we continue to over-use email, we lose our ability to connect on an intimate level. We lose opportunities to offer support and, in turn, be supported. We are in a rush and so we dash off an email. The short time gained by sending an email instead of picking up the phone costs us much more in the long-run.

What is it costing you?

Cell phones are one of the most brilliant inventions ever.

We use them to call 911 and report accidents. They allow us to be accessible wherever we happen to be. Children have cell phones with them to make sure their mom and dad know where they are. Singles have them instead of a land line to save money. Parents have cells because who knows who might need them while they are away from their desk or in the bathroom. College kids have cells to look cool and to save money. Today, everyone has a cell phone. Cell phones allow us, like email, to stay in touch more easily than ever before.

The interesting Catch-22 of cell phones is that the spaces in which we find ourselves using our cells aren't exclusively our own. At first glance we appear to be speaking to one person (the one on the other end of the phone), but in reality, we are speaking to the world.

As we address the world in the grocery store, at the coffee bar, on the train or plane, in the bathroom, or up a creek, it becomes obvious that our words are not really our own. And since the space in which we are speaking isn't our own either, our personal conversation becomes public and lacks genuine meaning.

As we move faster and more furiously through our lives, we become sharply aware of the minor discrepancies that seem to require a lot of time. In reality, these discrepancies aren't demanding much at all. But any request for our time seems so aggregious because we have grown so accustomed to our daily connections taking (needing?) very little time.

Just as saying 'yes' to every request puts each aspect of your life (kids, family, work, community, pets) on the same level plane, engaging in high speed for all of life's connections connotes the same level of meaning for them also.

Should a check-in conversation with our partner be given the same amount of care as a follow-up call to the office? Should we devote the same amount of time to an email as we do a handwritten thank-you note?

Would you be disappointed if you learned that your online dating profile was given a wink because of your impressive cleavage? Yes? Okay. Now, how is that different than if you were asked out for a date at your morning coffee bar wearing your standard open-collared oxford?

Let me venture a guess: the difference is the connection.

The difference is the in-person, skin-to-skin, scented exchange. The unspoken subtleties that float like glitter in the air around two people who do the dance of attraction when meeting for the first time. This magic cannot be captured and transmitted via earpiece or mouse. This genuine magic (and, yes, it really is magic) takes place when we connect authentically in person.

Would you marry after your first date?

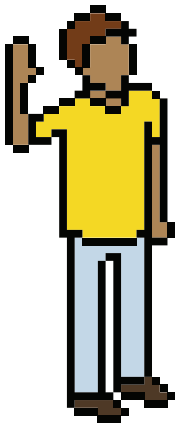
Likely not.

But when we engage in quickies—dashed off emails or cell phone calls sandwiched between appointments—we are in essence saying ‘yes’ to marriage after a first date. Because we are gradually losing our ability to sustain meaningful relationships by not taking the time to connect.

The real problem is not a shortage of opportunities to connect, it is that the connections that we make on a daily basis lack authenticity. They are missing an integral emotional piece that sustains and supports us.

Authentic connections become authentic relationships. The authentic relationships in our lives are essential to our happiness and success because they feed us in a diversity of ways.

How?



1. Authentic relationships grow your business.

Consider how many new ideal clients you have taken on this year. Is that number as high as you would like it to be? Or do you have more than a few clients who are less than ideal, ones that you would rather not work with?

One of the ways that you can attract and retain ideal clients is by connecting authentically with current ideal customers. Allow them to spread the word of your genius and ability to their friends and neighbors.

WHAT ARE YOU DOING TO CONNECT AUTHENTICALLY WITH YOUR CURRENT CUSTOMERS?

An email blast promoting your next offering doesn't quite cut it. Connecting authentically with customers means taking the extra step. Call them on your office phone to check-in. Let them know that you are thinking about them by sending a birthday card or handwritten thank-you note. Offer a free 30-minute call with you as an add-on to the program that they just purchased from you, just to say 'thanks'. Extend free shipping on large orders.

When your customers see you as a friendly resource instead of a salesperson, you have connected with them authentically. And, likely, in the interim, you have added a powerful voice of support and encouragement to your cadre of fans the next time you do have an event, introduce a new product or ask for feedback. With their voice championing your business, you can count on repeat customers, and yes, those often evasive ideal clients as well.

Your customers are powerful. Help them use the power of their collective voices by taking the time to connect with them in an authentic way. Everyone will benefit.

2. Authentic relationships boost your health.

Everyone knows one: someone who is perpetually sick. Ever wondered why? A lack of authentic relationships may be one reason.

John Robbins, in his remarkable book, [*Healthy at 100*](#), shares some of the secrets to long life that he found in his international travels. In his chapter called ‘What’s Love Got to Do With It?’, Robbins tells readers, “Your connections with the significant people in your life—if they are positive and loving—can prevent stress-induced illness, greatly contribute to your health and healing and add many years to your life.²”

Now, the word ‘stress’ has somewhat of a vague connotation. We know that it is bad, but really, doesn’t everyone have stress? And, how bad can it be? The degree of stress we feel is related to overall anxiety level, Dr. Mona Lisa Schulz tells readers in her book, [*The New Feminine Brain*](#).

² John Robbins. *Healthy at 100* (New York: Random House 2006) 226

The more prone you are to anxiety, the more sensitive you are to stress³. How you manage your anxiety, the stress that you are feeling, dictates the overall health of your life. Illnesses that can be exacerbated by stress include: Epstein-Barr, Lyme Disease, Candida, Graves' disease and other thyroid disorders, as well as insomnia and depression. Stress can also cause learning and memory problems as well as imitate the physical symptoms of menopause⁴. "Loving relationships have an extraordinary ability to defuse the negative medical effects of stress," Robbins tells us.⁵

Robbins' 'if' ("if they [relationships] are positive and loving") is a big one. Connection can be at best fruitless and at worst harmful when the people that you are connecting to aren't ones that are good for you. Authentic relationships can literally help save your life.

3 Dr. Mona Lisa Schulz. The New Feminine Brain (Free Press: New York 2006) 217

4 Schulz 312

5 Robbins 226

3. Authentic relationships feed your soul.

Robbins' notation that folks in our lives be "positive and loving" in order to be healthier is an essential one. The right people make all the difference in our lives. I call these people, 'a support team'.

You must seek out a support team for the different areas of your life. As a coach who works specifically with women, I often look to other professionals who also work only with women to exchange ideas, share opportunities and gain new insights. These professional folks may not be the same people that I go to when I need insight or encouragement around another area of my life. Your support team, like your life, isn't one-dimensional. A strong support team feeds your mental health.

1 or 30, the amount of people on your support team doesn't matter. What is essential about your support team is that they share certain must-have qualities.

The right support team will:

- Help you become better.
- Listen to you without judging.
- Offer you absolute love and support.
- Remind you of your strengths and talents.
- Never ask you to compromise your authentic self for them for any reason.
- Encourage your choices and chances.
- Remain close when you need them without running away.

In short, they are a confidant...that essential person that many Americans lack.

Connection with a support team nourishes us in a way that we need in order to grow.

Growth is a forward movement that is impossible if we are alone. But with a strong support team, we can grow stronger and more successful.

4. Authentic relationships affirm your place.

When was the last time that you felt truly out of your element? I hope that it was recently. Forgive me but you will soon see why... those who felt this way recently will really get this.

Whenever you undertake new challenges, there is usually a learning curve. That learning curve, although essential, can feel scarily alienating at first. Your routine is off its predictable kilter and as a result unanticipated challenges begin to surface. You begin to question the decision that led you to this foreign land.

When you are suddenly that proverbial fish out of water, you have temporarily lost something essential: the way that you fit into this world. You feel confused and adrift. One of the strongest desires that we have as humans is to just fit in, to be accepted and understood.

No matter how different you think you are, there are people like you in the world. People that you can connect with and feel understood by. Unfortunately, they might not be in your current circle. You may need to seek them out. They will likely be the ones that share your dream of _____ or have always wanted to _____, just like you...

The yellow brick road of connection is the path that will take you from that scary place to a warm place where you feel comfortable and accepted. It is your pursuit of connection and the development of those connections into an authentic relationship that expedites and justifies a potentially rough journey.

5. Authentic relationships support your dream.

WHAT IS YOUR DREAM?

If you are uncertain, begin to think about it. A personal dream (vision, life purpose, mission) is essential. If you don't have one, how can you expect to make any decision with confidence and clarity?

Authentic relationships support your dream. When you engage with the 'right' people, you increase your capacity to take risk, a necessity in the pursuit of your dream. The concept of risk becomes less scary while the potential reward associated with that risk grows more evident. This transition is due to the encouragement that you garner from your support team. Your dream is given the momentum, with their loving help, to begin its blossom.

Authentic relationships also allow you the space to discover your larger reason for being. Honest, in-person conversation with a support team is one of the ways that you come to understand how your reason for being relates to your dream. Your unique talents, passions and skills will help you understand this connection. Those pieces of your Authentic Self can then be used to make a difference in the lives of others and within your own life through your dream. But a dream will not survive if it get crowded by endless clutter, perfectionist tendencies or inauthentic relationships.

This is due to the fact that the pursuit of a dream isn't something you dabble in as you multi-task; it is a quest for the best in yourself.

The lack of a dream can also exacerbate life-threatening illnesses in our life. With a personal dream, you have a purpose. That purpose supports the good health of your mind and body by stimulating and sustaining personal growth.

Think of a ship.

Without a dream, the ship is adrift. It is uncaptured, with mutiny possible at any time, at the mercy of other's winds of priority.

With a dream the ship sails boldly forward. There is a clear port in mind. Its captain is confident and able to determine which route is the right one to take.

Which ship would you rather be on?

Authentic relationship is the element that differentiates human from beast. As humans, we crave connection and understanding. Communicating with other people in a meaningful, unhurried way quenches that craving. As a consequence, your level of satisfaction and happiness with yourself will increase. You will find yourself more confidently able to begin change and to move forward.

But when meaningful connections are missing from your life, your entire being is affected. Quite simply, you are less of the person that you have the capability to be.

My wish for you is a simple one:

Pick up the phone and arrange to meet with someone that you haven't seen in a while. Perhaps she doesn't use email or have a cell phone. And, perhaps, just perhaps she is just the confidant that you need, making the planet a little less lonely for both of you.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Elizabeth M. Johnson is a Confidence Coach who works exclusively with women on building self-esteem and living their Authentic Self. She has been called an “exceptional coach” whose programs “inspire fabulousness, daring and confidence”. Her card deck, [Confident Women Coaching Cards](#), has been praised as an important self-esteem building tool for all women. An expert in women’s self-esteem issues, Elizabeth is the founder of [E. Johnson & Company](#) and offers her highly acclaimed programs (including her revolutionary workshop, [Uncommon Confidence](#)) to women nationwide. She blogs about women, self-esteem and Authentic Living at: www.ejohnsonandcompany.com/blog. Her ezine, *In The Pink*, is published monthly and reaches audiences worldwide.

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