



“The question is, what will happen after life in confinement? Are we going to reconnect offline or remain in the digital space? To escape virtual reality and re-engage with our families, friends and fellow citizens, we’ll need a lot of collective effort.”

– Mihai TODER-PASTI, Young Global Changer

Image Source: Light and shadow in the world of Covid. A body only covered by a white shroud, supported by the cot and bathed by rays of light. Credit: Eduardo López Moreno, Mexico 2020.





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## **We are more connected than ever and feel lonelier than ever. Can COVID-19 be a wake-up call?**

Engaging the disengaged should be a top priority for us to build resilient communities. The drift started before COVID-19, but now is the time to start fixing it. We may still have time.

I was born in a small town of around 10.000 inhabitants before the smartphone and internet era. We used to play outside every night, go swimming in the nearby river, and run in the forest. Besides reading and rarely TV, everything was physical and collective. Everybody knew everybody; our parents met almost daily. It was a vibrant and strong community of kids, parents and neighbours. We felt safe, taken care of, and we supported ourselves in the face of adversity. This reality was around 2000, a long time ago.

More than a decade later, in 2015 The Independent talked about The loneliness epidemic,<sup>1</sup> citing various studies about

loneliness, showing how social pain is as real a sensation for us as physical pain.<sup>2</sup> Research has shown loneliness impacts on health in a greater way than smoking or obesity, but loneliness is still a taboo subject we are just starting to discuss. My birthplace, having around the same population, already seemed empty. As the job and school ended, everyone went home, to log out from this life and log in the e-social life. I've experienced this happening more and more wherever I travelled around the world. Phones and Laptops are replacing people, being an escape router that ends up disconnecting us from reality. Back then it was a choice, now is not one anymore.

Years later, while the COVID-19 took the world by storm, and evolved from an epidemic to a pandemic, we may see the effects of our long term loneliness, while still being able to appreciate the positive side of social media and digitalisation during this time. The question is, what will happen after the lockdown, are we going to reconnect offline, to remain in the digital space? To escape virtual reality and re-engage with our families and friends and neighbours, we'll need a lot of collective effort.

The way you feel affects the way you behave and exist in society. When you are disengaged you care less, you vote less, to become less of a proactive citizen. You start to lock yourself inside your home and after that inside yourself. We have a lot of work to put into creating and maintaining the social fabric in the big cities today, in this digitalised world

affected by a pandemic. This social aspect is, in my opinion, the only way to create long-lasting resilient communities, addressing our addiction to e-devices and fighting climate change.

For the last 10 years, I coordinated in total more than 900 young people, volunteers, future engineers and architects in designing and building two of the most sustainable homes in the world and trying to create better cities. With Global Shapers, we started a project to put PVs in a neighbourhood to bring people together, to create a small community. Linking people at city-level starts by connecting people in their immediate space.

The COVID19 pandemic is both a health and a societal problem. We could have been more resilient if we had addressed the epidemic of loneliness sooner. Luckily for us, it is not too late, and we can use this global event as a spotlight to address mental issues and loneliness, two problems existing long before the pandemic. We can change the story and we have to.

1. The Independent - 2015

2. Social pain and physical pain: shared paths to resilience - 2012, PMID: PMC4869967