



Perspectives

Shifting from Individual Wellbeing to Social Wellbeing:

Implications for Dubai, United Arab Emirates

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Abstract: This paper focuses on the essential role of social support and connection in wellbeing. It provides an overview of the global prevalence of loneliness and social isolation and the individual, cultural, workplace, and environmental factors that contribute. More importantly, it explores the implications of these insights for Dubai, a culturally diverse global city in the United Arab Emirates that has experienced rapid urbanization in the years since its inception in 1971. Despite ongoing governmental efforts to promote mental wellbeing, I suggest that more efforts and programs are needed to focus on promoting social connection and social wellbeing rather than focusing exclusively on the individual and their wellbeing alone. Further research is needed to understand the status of social connection and supports in Dubai to inform policies, wellbeing programs and initiatives, as well as potential developments in urban development and public health.

المخلص: يركز هذا البحث على الدور الأساسي للدعم الاجتماعي والتواصل الاجتماعي في الرفاهية النفسية والبدنية. يقدم البحث نظرة عامة على انتشار الشعور بالوحدة والعزلة الاجتماعية عالمياً والعوامل الفردية، والثقافية، والمهنية، والبيئية التي تساهم في ذلك. والأهم من ذلك، يستكشف البحث عن مدى تطبيق هذه الملاحظات على إمارة دبي، المدينة العالمية المتنوعة ثقافياً في دولة الإمارات العربية المتحدة التي شهدت التمدن السريع منذ تأسيسها في عام 1971 ميلادي. على الرغم من الجهود الحكومية المستمرة لتعزيز الرفاهية النفسية، أقترح أن هناك حاجة لمزيد من الجهود والبرامج للتركيز على تعزيز التواصل الاجتماعي والرفاهية الاجتماعية بدلاً من التركيز حصراً على الفرد ورفاهيته وحدها. ويجب إجراء المزيد من البحوث لفهم حالة التواصل الاجتماعي والدعم الاجتماعي في دبي لتوجيه السياسات وبرامج الرفاهية والمبادرات، بالإضافة إلى التطورات المحتملة في التنمية العمرانية والصحة العامة.

Keywords: social connection, wellbeing, social support, rapid urbanization, Dubai

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Research has consistently demonstrated the role that social support plays in physical and mental wellbeing. The subjective sense of being cared for, valued, or helped by others in one's social network or larger community (Friedman & Taylor, 2011), social support would be difficult without social connection; that is, the experience of feeling close, and having positive experiences with others (Sepalla et al., 2013) or meaningful relationships (Hodge et al., 2021). At the same time, loneliness, feeling dissatisfied with either the quality or lack of relationships, as well as isolation, the physical lack of social contact or support (Veazie et al., 2019), are equally impactful. While the two can co-occur, individuals can be in the presence of others and feel lonely; conversely, they can be socially isolated without feeling lonely (Hue et al., 2021; Veazie et al., 2019). Connections, or lack thereof, are vital. Studies identify their importance and none more critically than the US Surgeon General's (2023) Advisory on loneliness and isolation, two factors identified as major public health concerns. So great is the need, the advisory outlines a national strategy to promote research funding, public awareness, training of healthcare providers, assessment, patient supports, and policy interventions to tackle loneliness and isolation across society. Many countries have since followed suit.

The UK Government delegated the world's first minister assigned to tackle loneliness in 2018 (HM Government, 2020) and published the world's first governmental loneliness strategy (HM Government, 2018). The goals of these initiatives are to improve evidence-based loneliness research, set policies that improve social connection and interventions for demographics most at risk for experiencing loneliness, as well as raise public awareness to reduce its stigma. Similarly, in response to the COVID19 pandemic and rising rates of suicide, Japan also appointed a minister to address loneliness and isolation and improve social supports (Prime Minister of Japan and His Cabinet, 2021). In parallel, the World Health Organization (WHO, 2023) also launched a new Commission on Social Connection to prioritize global efforts to urgently address loneliness and social connection.

Such issues are also topical in the United Arab Emirates (UAE); more specifically, in the emirate of Dubai. The city has rapidly grown in the last two decades (Awad & Jung, 2022), becoming market-oriented and hosting millions of working expatriates from over 200 nations, more than the number of national citizens (CIA Factbook, 2023; UAE Ministry of Foreign Affairs, n.d.) who do not always feel at home. A portion of these expatriates migrate for employment in white collar jobs and arrive with their families or earn enough to live alone. Others are low-income workers and their salaries preclude them from sponsoring their families or living alone; instead, they reside in workplace accommodations with others from a range of nations speaking different languages, practicing different faiths and sharing little mutual cultural understanding. Such dynamics make the UAE unique in this regard; however, studies in loneliness and social connection remain unexplored topics. Accordingly, as a practising clinician in Dubai, I review some of the literature in the area, raising considerations for the UAE generally and the city more specifically.

Who is Lonely and Disconnected... and Where?

Researchers suggest that the COVID-19 pandemic increased social isolation and loneliness (Killgore et al., 2020; Trad et al., 2020), although the number of people living alone was rising globally even before it (Ortiz-Ospina, 2019). According to Gallup, about a quarter of people aged 15 and above in 142 countries experience moderate to high levels of loneliness (Maese, 2023). Analyzing data from the British Broadcasting Channel (BBC) Loneliness Experiment from 46,054



participants aged 16 to 99 across 237 countries, Barretto et al. (2021) found that loneliness was highest among young people and decreased with age. Men reported feeling slightly lonelier than women across all age groups and cultures although this too, decreased with age. The BBC data was further used to explore the connection between loneliness and degrees of collectivism and individualism. Higher levels of individualism correlated with more frequent loneliness for males and females, but young men in highly individualistic cultures were the loneliest of all.

Individualistic and collectivistic cultures both risk loneliness; yet individual perceptions and the degree to which cultural expectations are internalized appear to matter. Individualistic cultures prioritize independence even at the expense of poorer quantity, variety, and quality of relationships. In collectivistic cultures, individuals may be lonely if their relational preferences or realities differ from those expected by the larger culture. Across five European countries, Heu et al. (2019) found that loneliness was lower when individuals perceived their communities to be collectivistic. Further, the more socially embedded a community, the lower the risk of loneliness arising from the gap between cultural expectations and the reality of one's relationships. Hue et al. (2021) concluded that while cultures with restrictive relational expectations can protect individuals from isolation, they can still increase loneliness as individuals may be dissatisfied with present relationships or oppose relational norms. In contrast, lenient cultures can increase the risk of social isolation but decrease the risk of loneliness.

Still, a bias remains in the literature with how such cultural constructs are viewed and how individuals perceive their own cultures. Hue et al. (2021) for instance equates collectivism with restrictiveness and individualism with leniency which oversimplifies diversity and overlooks how participants view and describe themselves. Schermer et al. (2023) considers how egalitarianism and hierarchy can appear in both cultures when assessing how loneliness appears. Self-reports across 28 countries (n= 8345 participants) found that participants were less likely to report feeling lonely when they perceived their culture to be egalitarian and collectivistic and to a lesser degree, egalitarian and individualistic. In contrast, those who reported feeling lonely were more likely to experience community hierarchies irrespective of their culture being individualistic or collectivistic.

The Impacts of Social Connection

The US Center for Disease Control Prevention (CDC) conducted one of the largest joint studies with Kaiser Permanente, an integrated healthcare consortium, on the long-term physical and emotional impacts of childhood trauma and adversity, known as the adverse childhood experiences (ACE) studies (CDC, 2021). Factors that protect children and teenagers from undergoing the long-term effects of adverse events included positive friendships and peers, access to caring adults outside the family, and living in safe equitable communities with communally active members who feel connected to each other (CDC, 2023). Resilience through social support is not only relevant to children and teenagers. It is essential for community-level resilience in the face of collective-level trauma and adversity such as the COVID-19 pandemic, war, as well as natural and climate change related disasters expected to occur with greater frequency in the coming years (Saul, 2022).

Large-scale studies have also demonstrated the importance of connection. The Harvard Study of Adult Development tracked the physical, mental, and relational wellbeing of families across three generations since it began in 1938, making it one of the longest studies in adult development.



The original participants were 724 men, a mix of privileged Harvard College students and impoverished youth from the poorest parts of Boston. Their parents were also interviewed to understand their upbringing, as well as their children and grandchildren. Partners were included in 2006. Dr. Robert Waldinger leads the current phase where bi-annually participants are evaluated via surveys, interviews, medical records, blood tests, brain scans, and video recordings of family interactions. Results reveal that among all the socioeconomic, physical, historical, and lifestyle factors considered, the quality of one's relationships had the largest impact on wellbeing (Waldinger & Schulz, 2023).

The harms of social isolation are more pronounced when isolation is involuntary. Yet, voluntary alone time can be helpful for self-regulation and necessary to engage in personally meaningful (i.e., spiritual) activities and build a healthy relationship with oneself (Nguyen et al., 2018; Weinstein et al., 2023). For those who live in crowded homes, workplace accommodations or with extended family comprising several generations, finding time and space to be alone with one's thoughts may be a bigger challenge.

In parallel, research on loneliness and poor social connection is also growing. A metaanalysis (Holt-Lunstad et al., 2010) of 148 studies including 308,849 participants followed for 7 years concluded that lacking social connection is as detrimental to physical health as smoking 15 cigarettes a day, while having good enough relationships can raise life expectancy by 50%. Social isolation is also correlated with increased risk of mortality for adults below the age of 65, particularly for men (41% relative to women at 15%) (Zhao et al., 2022). Other studies show that loneliness and the quality of one's relationships predict mental health outcomes whereas the number of relationships and living alone instead predict physical and cognitive health outcomes (Beller & Wagner, 2017).

What Impacts Social Connection?

Factors impacting social connection range from mental and physical health issues, social activity levels, interpersonal problems, neuroticism, marital status, and the qualities of one's social circle (Barjakova et al., 2023). Systemic and internalized discrimination and stigma also contribute (Haslam et al., 2018; Wang et al., 2022). Factors like sleep have been implicated with a metaanalysis (Hom et al., 2020) finding that loneliness impacts sleep quality and poor sleep impacts perceptions of loneliness. Personality characteristics also play a role, such as excessive sensitivity to rejection (Gao et al., 2017) and shyness. Often associated with loneliness or social isolation, cultures that value conformity see shyness as a virtue versus a stigmatized trait as is often found in Western nations (Chen, 2018, 2019; Yiu et al., 2020). In the Chinese culture for instance, shyness was not associated with loneliness until societal norms became more competitive and market oriented (Chen, 2019). Shyness is also valued in the Arabic culture (Song, 2019), yet more research is needed to confirm whether it has any influence on loneliness or social connection.

Studies have also explored the impact of technology. The Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) (2018) conducts global surveys of 15-year-old students every three years.



Aside from academic and non-academic skills, PISA gathers data on family and school contexts, economic circumstances, and student wellbeing including loneliness. Using data from 1,049,784 students in 37 countries every three years since 2000, Twenge et al. (2021) found that school loneliness increased in the years when Internet and smartphone usage were high, especially in girls, and that loneliness was already rising before the pandemic.

Rapid urbanization also makes social connection difficult (Krausz et al., 2022; Okkels et al., 2018; Sakketa, 2023). The work of urban developers includes the need to assess the impact of building developments on resident's social connections; yet this assessment is not commonly done. A top-down approach is often favored in the absence of consultation with those for whom developments are for (Alawadi, 2017; Cruz & Forman, 2023; Cushing & Miller, 2020). This appears to be the case in cities that have rapidly urbanized and prioritized the market at the expense of the social context (Gere, 2018; Roy & Ghosh, 2022). A mix of private and inclusive common areas, green spaces, and communal activities (such as sports) inclusive of all ages, backgrounds, and abilities are most conducive to social connection (Astell-Burt et al., 2022; Cushing & Miller, 2020; Wang et al., 2021). Identifying with one's neighborhood and experiencing it as socially supportive is also known to mitigate loneliness (McNamara et al., 2021).

Addressing Loneliness and Social Disconnection in the UAE

In 2016, the UAE government launched the National Programme for Happiness and Wellbeing which proposed policies, programs, and services to support happiness and wellbeing for Emirati and expatriate residents (UAE Government Portal, n.d.). At that time, the shift in policy was intended to advance a less reactive approach to costly mental health issues and become more prevention-oriented and promotive of good health. According to a report on the status of mental health in the UAE from 1992 to 2019 by MOHAP (2019), the shift was warranted. Disability-adjusted life years due to mental illness per 100,000 people was 4,241 nationally and suicide rates in Dubai were seven times higher for expatriates than nationals between 2003 to 2009 as an example.

While the report noted the importance of having unified mental health policies, now a reality, as well as community mental health awareness programs, surveillance of mental distress, and additional funding and training to bolster healthcare systems, it did not directly mention the need to improve social supports and community connections. Studies like the Mercer Health on Demand 2023 Report suggest that attention to mental health and wellbeing need to be expanded beyond individuals alone. It surveyed 17,500 global employees which included 1,000 UAE-based employees and found that half of UAE employees experience daily stress, attributing most of it to job stress, poor leadership, and job insecurity (Mercer, 2023), implicating the need for organizations to focus more on wellbeing and mental health, as well as workplace social supports.

As individuals spend most of their time at work, employers must consider the protective role that social support can have against workplace stress and burnout (Hämmig & Vetsch, 2021; Hansson & Padyab, 2023; Ozcelik & Barsade, 2018). Long working hours and work stress reduce the time and energy employees have to spend with loved ones and build friendships (Chen et al., 2022). As workplace stress is at a record high globally (Gallup, 2023), supports must attend to social connection, especially as meta-analyses confirm that receiving social support reduces conflict



between work and family life, and more so when the support is organizational, experienced to be useful, and needed (French et al., 2018).

The National Programme for Happiness and Wellbeing further collaborated with the UAE University to launch the Emirates Center for Happiness Research (ECHR) in 2021 (UAE Government Portal, n.d.). The National Programme's website also does not mention social connection initiatives. Nonetheless, there is a growing interest in this area as shown, for example, in the 30 Minutes for Us project by the ECHR (2021) helping employees discuss ways to nurture wellbeing and meaningful social connections. It is unclear whether such initiatives are still ongoing, what impact they have had, and whether they can be scaled at large.

Peer support is mentioned in The National Policy for the Promotion of Mental Health (UAE Ministry of Health and Prevention, n.d.); yet few details exist. Since the pandemic, there has been a blossoming of locally and regionally based online mental health startups like Takalam and Fitci in the UAE, or Tuhoon and Labayh in Saudi Arabia. Some offer workplace and university student wellbeing programs and some recently added online support groups. I suggest that they could consider incorporating peer support and interactive psychoeducational webinars on the benefits of social connection, ways to offer and reach out for social support, and relational skill building. They could also encourage employers to assess how they can improve their office cultures and policies to promote positive relationships.

While a potential intervention, the uptake of mental health apps remains low, with consumers initially drawn to their novelty and quickly setting them aside; thus, online services may not be the best fit for everyone's social support needs. Conservative Emiratis may also not be comfortable seeking support from strangers, but perhaps extended family or other trusted community members can be recruited as peer supporters. Alternatively, social prescribing programs and government approved volunteering schemes could be viable options as part of mental health promotion, discharge planning post-hospitalization or post-incarceration, as well as suicide prevention safety planning. Examples of such programs and their uses globally can be found in Foster et al. (2021) and in a global database of peer supports called *Peers for Progress* (2023) led by Edwin Fisher and Patrick Tang from the University of North Carolina. Another organization called *Intentional Peer Supports* (2023) offers training and resources in becoming a peer supporter both online and in-person globally.

Many of the Western psychotherapy interventions that are widely utilized in Dubai tend to take an individualistic view of wellbeing and neglect the importance of social connection and support more commonly relied upon in collectivist cultures. Centers offering therapeutic services are often costly, have limited insurance coverage, and are geographically inaccessible for many, especially blue-collar workers. Research is needed to explore the applicability of alternative interventions that promote social support and connection across diverse cultural, linguistic and socioeconomic backgrounds.

Other features of the social landscape must be taken into consideration across the emirate of Dubai, demographics being one of them. A report by the World Bank (2020) on urbanization



and demographics mentions that while the population of the UAE and the larger Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) region consists largely of young men due to the influx of migrant workers from low-income countries, the ageing population is also expected to rapidly rise in the medium-term future. This highlights the importance of exploring the extent of loneliness with young men in the UAE given that globally, this age group is loneliest. It also highlighted the need to prepare for the demographic shift, ensuring that older adults will have the necessary social supports as their health status and social network size changes and the risk for cognitive decline also rises.

There have been media reports of low-income migrant workers, who form 70% of the UAE population (World Bank, 2020), experiencing high rates of suicide and mental distress due to being away from their families, experiencing financial stress, discrimination, and abusive workplaces. Some respond to social exclusion through bonding with each other across language, food, and national celebrations, however, others may not have access to such bonds (Reber, 2021). While the UAE government has introduced policies and laws to address the abuse of workers (UAE Government Portal, 2023), more can be done to ensure that low-income migrants have access to mental health and social supports, particularly by employers and accommodation services directly. Workplace, immigration, and accommodation policies further need to be assessed for their impacts on worker's mental and social wellbeing.

Culture is also a key element. While Emirati culture is described as family-oriented, hierarchical, and collectivistic (Alnajjar, 2017), other residents of Dubai represent a wide spectrum of cultural worldviews. Individual Emirati families may also differ by levels of conservatism and the extent to which members accept or deviate from expected family and cultural norms. This may be the case with those who have studied abroad or experienced different cultural values through local classmates and colleagues, or media exposure. Anecdotal evidence has shown that returnees from abroad often feel a disconnect with their social groups and struggle to be understood by them. Conversely, those who marry into another emirate or move to work or study also lose access to their network and may struggle to develop new ones, especially as these are often based on family lineage and existing community networks into which one is born. The alternative is even more difficult: finding points of commonality with transient multi-cultured expatriates.

The limited research also does not account for the fact that Emiratis may experience familial shame or cultural stigma in discussing family issues with strangers. While Dubai's rapid development has had economically positive outcomes, intergenerational tensions have grown in some Emirati households. Some younger Emiratis grew up more privileged than their parents or grandparents and adopt Western cultural ideas that clash with traditional family values. While some Emiratis work in the government sector with dominantly Emirati colleagues, others work in the private sector where the cultural values of colleagues may clash with their upbringing. More research will need to explore the emotional and social impact this may have and what helps Emiratis navigate these spaces.

An ethnographic study by Primecz (2023) showed that in Dubai, Emiratis, Eastern expats and Western expats rarely mix outside of professional contexts making efforts to integrate families and individuals a challenge. Many Emiratis are practicing Muslims who avoid drinking alcohol, with some avoiding being in its presence altogether. Connecting with expats from cultural backgrounds where alcohol plays a socialization function is a barrier. Some Emirati nationals may not be motivated to socialize with expats as they already have active family lives. Some expats avoid building



social ties and see little reason to develop roots during short working contracts. In contrast, other expats have been in the country for decades and call it a permanent home. In recent years, the UAE government introduced new visas to encourage expats to invest and stay in the country long-term (UAE Government Portal, n.d.). These changes open new dialogue around how best to integrate expats and construct a new narrative around a mutual interdependence with their Emirati hosts.

Finally, while social connection implicates people, the built environment is also a factor in how and whether individuals connect at all. Rapid population growth in the city has led to traffic congestion (Al Mamlook, 2023), with many parts of Dubai not designed for pedestrians, but cars. This has meant that more walkable parts of the city are overcrowded, while an excess of space that is either underutilized (i.e., empty plots) or not conducive to human connection (i.e., green spaces next to noisy eight lane freeways) exist in others. The government's vision of making Dubai a 15-20-minute city by 2040 is a welcome announcement (Ali et al., 2023).

Dubai's urban development has often privileged developers or certain classes of people. Alawadi's (2017) ethnographic study highlighted the need to consider the social needs of all community members when re-developing neighborhoods and not only those in high income areas or for long-standing elite families in established parts of the city, often on the beach and with years of tree growth lining wider streets bordered by walkable sidewalks and cycling paths. Many lower socioeconomic neighborhoods in some parts of the city, i.e., near the creek historically associated with trade and blue-collar work, or those in high-density housing areas with no tree cover, also do not have community rooms in which neighbors can socialize. Some residents find ways to adapt. For example, blue collar South Asian residents play Sunday cricket in empty plots, but this option may not be available everywhere. While Dubai's Community Development Authority (2016) set up community *majalis* (plural form of the word *majlis*), traditional indoor gathering spaces in Emirati culture, access is limited to Emirati citizens or decree holders who must reserve them ahead of time for social events. The initiative is a good one, but these remain difficult alternatives for spontaneous connection or for expats to use.

Many mosques have small playgrounds and football or basketball fields next to them and communal outdoor spaces in areas like Kite Beach and Dubai Design District have also appeared including beach and creek side multi-use recreation, entertainment, cycling/walking areas, as well as outdoor physical activity equipment and sports courts. However, the very hot and humid summer months preclude outdoor activities for half the year. In contrast, indoor social activities revolve around shopping malls, cafes, restaurants, bars and night clubs, the latter avoided by practicing Muslims, but also by lower socioeconomic individuals who cannot afford them. Indeed, systemic discrimination can show up in how public spaces and policies are designed that communicate whose needs are accounted for and thus, who is welcome (Cruz & Forman, 2023). Further, the quality of connections made possible in market-driven consumer contexts is also questioned. Relationships form with repeated interactions by the same people over time. Consumer oriented activity is not generally fit for this purpose. While some may experience meaningful interaction in them, consumer-based activity necessarily excludes others.

Introducing culturally inclusive activities in the neighborhood *majalis*, parks or broader community centers open to all and in which non-consumer activity is possible may be a way forward. These could be sponsored by larger companies as part of their CSR strategies and made available



across high, medium and low-income neighborhoods, prioritizing those where social needs are greatest versus those where status and image would be most impressive. As the city continues to develop, many neighborhoods have unused sandy plots of land that could be transformed into temporary pop-up spaces that promote socializing. Some have been standing empty for years. Municipal registries of which are currently empty and certified as safe and usable may facilitate their use as community gardens for example, promoting not only neighborly interaction but food provision as well. They can also be extended to include the co-creation of community art and consequent placemaking with a range of neighborhood stakeholders. Community centers may extend social activities (i.e., fairs, expos, health promotion, sports, language lessons, games night, etc.) into quieter and less frequented shopping malls, under-utilized buildings or offices.

Conclusion

While there has been a rising interest in mental wellbeing and physical health reflected in government initiatives, a greater focus must be placed on the protective and promotive role that social supports can have on the wellbeing of all residents, including national citizens and expatriates from all socioeconomic levels in the UAE. Given the multiple factors that contribute to social connection and support, I propose that a new governmental authority be set up to address them from individual and systemic lenses as it is currently done in the US, UK, and Japan for example. Second, as political instability grows (i.e., Gaza, Sudan, Ukraine, Brexit, etc.) and fuels continual population growth in Dubai, assessing the mental health needs of newcomers and ensuring they become part of the social fabric will also need careful efforts and examination. In parallel, preserving place attachment and a local sense of “home” for national Emiratis will remain a challenge where efforts to maintain national pride are not ‘crowded out’, nor act to ‘crowd out’ others.

In sum, an exclusively individual focus must give way to a broader, more inclusive social one for all individuals to flourish. Even positive psychology has grown to recognize the importance of human relationships. Its first iteration, Positive Psychology 1.0, was individual-focused. It was not until its second and third iteration that systemic issues like social and community relationships, including its enablers and derailers, became a focus of intervention and research (Lomas, 2015). It is time for all to join this same chorus and foster environments where social relationships indeed matter but are also made possible.

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