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## Loneliness, men and Saint John's

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## Quad 136

### Loneliness, Men and Saint John's

## Loneliness, Men and Saint John's

Loneliness seems to be in the news a lot recently, in both expected and unexpected places.

Cigna, the international insurance company, did a **recent study** that evaluated loneliness among Americans. National Public Radio **reported on the study**, noting that “Americans Are A Lonely Lot, and Young People Bear the Heaviest Burden.” *Business Insider* also **reported on the research**, emphasizing how widespread the problem is: “Loneliness may be a greater public health hazard than obesity — and experts say it has hit epidemic levels in the US.”

Using sociological data from interviews with women who work closely with men, *Men's Health magazine* specifically explored men's mental health and found, according to one interviewee, “If there's one thing I've learned from doing [this] work, it's that many men are extraordinarily lonely.”

The NPR podcast, *The Hidden Brain*, also explored loneliness among men using interviews and data from the ongoing eight decade long Harvard Study of Adult Development. The podcast, suggesting at least one cause of male loneliness, was **titled**, “Guys, We Have a Problem: How American Masculinity Creates Lonely Men.”

The reports on the Cigna study both made the link between emotional health and physical health. The NPR story noted this connection and how it can affect the young:

*Loneliness has health consequences. “There's a blurred line between mental and physical health,” says [Cigna CEO David] Cordani. “Oftentimes, medical*

*symptoms present themselves and they're correlated with mental, lifestyle, behavioral issues like loneliness."*

*Several studies in recent years, including ones by [BYU researcher Julianne] Holt-Lunstad, have documented the public health effect of loneliness. It has been linked with a higher risk of coronary heart disease and stroke. It has been shown to influence our genes and our immune systems, and even recovery from breast cancer.*

*And there is growing evidence that loneliness can kill. "We have robust evidence that it increases risk for premature mortality," says Holt-Lunstad. Studies have found that it is a predictor of premature death, not just for the elderly, but even more so for younger people.*

*The latest survey also found something surprising about loneliness in the younger generation. "Our survey found that actually the younger generation was lonelier than the older generations," says Dr. Douglas Nemecek, the chief medical officer for behavioral health at Cigna.*

*. . . .*

*"Too often people think that this [problem] is specific to older adults," says Holt-Lunstad. "This report helps with the recognition that this can affect those at younger ages."*

Both of the latter two media sources also went beyond loneliness and linked men's mental health to their physical health. The *Men's Health* article noted:

*Our country is steeped in a quiet mental health crisis: the suicide rate for men is much higher than it is for women, having risen nearly 50% between 1999 and 2010, and men tend not to seek help for depression, due to the cultural stigma associated with mental illness.*

*In her book *Deep Secrets: Boys' Friendship and the Crisis of Connection*,*

*Harvard researcher Niobe Way (not part of the Harvard study) attributes this in part to the absence of an emotional support system for men. Before becoming adults, Way theorizes, young men have extraordinarily intimate friendships with each other; but as they grow older, they are pressured into giving up these close ties and becoming stoic and independent, leaving them totally isolated and unable to speak with anyone about their struggles.*

*The Hidden Brain* podcast quotes Robert Waldinger, the current director of the Harvard Development study:

*[The Harvard Study has found] very strong connections [between mental health and physical health]. That was one of the surprising things that began to emerge in our data in the '80s. We found that people who had warmer, closer connections lived longer, developed the diseases of middle age, those chronic diseases, less soon and had better health longer on average than people who didn't have warm, close relationships.*

These data on loneliness and its health effects among men and the young are important and worrying on their own, but I was also thinking about these issues when I had two recent encounters with Johnnie alums that were at odds with this conventional wisdom about men.

The first was with a group of alums from the 1960s, all past their 50th reunion. They had come together to celebrate a classmate and friend, not at a funeral, which might be the usual reason for gathering at their age, but at a small town celebration honoring this friend. They came from some distance to be in his hometown, and they honored him for a life of successes and service. At the same time, they celebrated their almost 60 years of connection to each other that started at Saint John's. Even as their personal and professional lives had taken them far and wide and each had their own strong families, there is a tie that had remained important for them across both time and distance.

The second story was of a group of guys in their 40s who had all lived on 3rd Tommie short as freshmen. They are in the midst of their own time consuming professional successes—literally

from coast to coast. They are also in the prime of child rearing years, with more activities and scheduling to contend with than any of them had ever experienced as kids. Yet they are staying in touch, making a point to get together regularly, with supportive and loving spouses who encourage this little “cult of Saint John's.”

One of this band had a life threatening health scare a couple years ago. It was shocking for the young healthy man who had been an exceptional athlete, and it was an emotional jolt to his friends. Each of his friends sprang into action—supporting him and his family individually and as a group. The support has continued over the years and shows no sign of abating as the Johnnie's health continues to be a challenge. One of the group described how this event had made their bond even stronger and every one of these Johnnies fully expects the group to be part of his life until they shuffle off this mortal coil.

Those are but two examples of exceptional, yet completely typical, Saint John's friendships.



The Saint John's network is rightly famous for the professional connections it provides to graduates, but this network, or maybe more aptly, this brotherhood, is important to Johnnies in other ways that are not as often remarked upon. While I have no definitive empirical data to support this contention, my gut and experience tell me that the holistic experience at Saint John's provides most Johnnies with deep emotional connections that often last a lifetime; connections that are fundamentally different than those developed at most other colleges and universities. I have had the rare opportunity and gift to see these friendships in my role as President, and I have lived them with freshman friends from 3rd Mary (and a Tommie interloper!) over 40 years.

As I have reflected on Johnnie friendships and talked with others about their experiences, I think there are at least three unique aspects of the SJU experience that contribute to these lifelong bonds.

1. **In the woods.** Collegeville is beautifully isolated. We have woods, prairies, lakes and each other. We do not have the distractions of a big urban area, or a university like the “U” nearby or the easy temptation to head home for the weekend. We fully expect to live a residential experience on campus and know that our friends and classmates want that same kind of experience. From the first weeks of freshman year, we are making a literal commitment to be there for each other, and that provides the basis for building long and strong relationships.
2. **All men.** Of course we love the Bennies and most would not have chosen SJU without knowing they would be in our classes and part of our social lives, yet for most Johnnies, often within the first year, we also come to appreciate our single sex campus and dorms. We do not need to put on airs or show off for the women who live down the hall or upstairs. At its best, we live in a fraternity—“the state or feeling of friendship and mutual support within a group.” It is a brotherhood that provides the rare opportunity to develop deep emotional and spiritual ties.
3. **The monks.** Johnnies also have rare role models of male friendship living just down the hall or upstairs. We have faculty residents, most of whom are monks who have made an exceptional life choice to commit to a community of men for spiritual and emotional reasons. We observe them up close and at a distance as they enjoy the joys of deep male commitment to their community and to this place. Observing it becomes both completely normal and powerfully affecting.

Each individual Johnnie friendship and every tight SJU group will have their own unique history and dynamic, but I think in each story there is likely there are elements of the physical place, our single sex setting and the Monastic community that are foundational to these relationships.

The impact of Saint John's on our emotional lives starts in Collegeville as young men grow into adulthood. A preternaturally wise and thoughtful 2018 grad **put it this way**: “I think men in our society often have a problem socializing and getting past the issues



of masculinity and connecting emotionally with other males. I think Saint John's is this weird, strange, unique place in the middle of nowhere where you can

connect emotionally with other males, where you can develop emotional maturity, and you can become the best version of yourself. In the middle of nowhere, in the woods, you can form these friendships that last a lifetime, and you can become a true version of yourself, you don't have to put on a face, you can be friends with people and experience life in a very real way. Saint John's has transformed my life in more ways than I could have ever imagined."

Ideally, as graduates emotional lives grow and develop, those Saint John's friendship remain central, both in the day-to-day of life and at times of challenge or crisis. Johnnies see each other through, to the very end of life.

In exploring the emotional lives of men as they grow and age, the Harvard study asks participants a surprisingly simple question, "If you were alone, who would you call in the middle of the night if you were sick or afraid?"

I believe that for very many Johnnies, the answer would certainly be, "Another Johnnie."

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By [Michael Hemesath](#) | June 7th, 2018 | Categories: [Alumni](#) | [0 Comments](#)

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Michael Hemesath is the 13th president of Saint John's University. A 1981 SJU graduate, Hemesath is the first layperson appointed to a full presidential term at SJU. You can find him on Twitter [at] [PrezHemesath](#).