

The Men's Shed Movement: Highlighting the importance of community and friendship for wellbeing

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Abstract

Emerging research has highlighted the risk and negative health impacts of social and emotional loneliness facing society today. Loneliness has been associated with all cause morbidity and mortality. This epidemic is compounded by fragmentation in modern society as a result of decentralisation, superficial modes of communication and individualistic culture.

Friendship and belongingness and feelings of social capital and cohesiveness are protective against loneliness. These are fostered within environments that promote a sense of community. The Men's Sheds movement act as an example of where sense of community is plentiful and highlights the benefits of friendship towards protecting our wellbeing.

This paper discusses the plight of modern society and its battle against loneliness, using the Men's Sheds as an example of initiatives that actively and positively protect society against the loneliness epidemic through the promotion of friendship and meaning.

Key words: Community; Isolation; Men's Sheds; Social Capital

Introduction

I am a PhD candidate involved in the evaluation, design and implementation of a community-based men's health and wellbeing programme "Sheds for Life" within the Men's Sheds in Ireland. The research uses an implementation science approach in order to promote the systematic uptake of the intervention across sheds in a pragmatic response that aims to evaluate and adapt the intervention from the outset to understand how the intervention can work under the variable contexts of the sheds. The aim is to directly translate the research findings into practice, limiting the usual translation issues that can occur when using gold standard randomised control trials. Understanding local context is therefore critical to the research and for this reason a participatory research approach is employed and the Men's Shed members (or "Shedders" as we fondly call them) are key stakeholders and partners in the research.

A mixed methods approach is used for this research with a strong qualitative focus. Quantitative methods such as questionnaires are also delivered one-to-one with the Shedders to build rapport, create feelings of trust and limit literacy issues. By virtue of this approach I have spent hundreds of hours within the sheds, allowing the research to take an ethnographical perspective and witness intimate moments within these typically private and close knit communities.

What quickly becomes apparent when immersing oneself in this unique and special environment is the importance of human connection and how vital it is to our wellbeing. Shedders themselves will testify to the importance of friendship and sense of community in protecting them in the darker moments of their lives, some even equating the social support of the sheds as being their lifeline.

In this paper, I discuss the importance of friendship and the risks of isolation and loneliness to our wellbeing and safety, using the Men's Shed as an exemplar of the positive impact community and friendship has on wellbeing.

Fragmented Societies

Modern society today boasts many benefits from the availability of services, resources, innovation, and access to healthcare, education, social protection and ease of accessibility to information and communication at our fingertips through our online devices. Yet many of us lament back to "simpler" times where we were less saturated with information, less exposed to heavily curated content that leaves one feeling envious and inadequate, and there was a value placed on social cohesiveness that appears to have been lost in the superficiality of instant gratification through social media platforms. In fact, modern societies through decentralisation and fragmentation and emphasis on looser more flexible networks, have perhaps forgotten the importance of meaningful human connection, regretfully reflected in the increased rates of anxiety and depression that we face today in an individualistic diffused society (Patalay & Gage, 2019).

Social Capital and sense of community are indeed largely recognised as having a positive impact on the wellbeing of the individual as well as society as whole. A sense of belongingness as highlighted by Maslow's hierarchy of needs can help the individual transcend towards realising their self-actualisation. Community can also invoke feelings of safety and worth and provide opportunities for individuals to enhance their wellbeing. Cohesive communities that report strong social capital are more likely to benefit from lower crime figures, higher

educational achievement and economic growth (Shiell, Hawe & Kavanagh, 2018). Yet today in society we struggle to maintain our sense of community when we become more “connected” online and less connected to our immediate reality. Many of us in fact no longer know our own neighbours, or indeed place importance on neighbour relationships (Hirvonen & Lilius, 2019). Shedders themselves often ponder if we have forgotten what is fundamental to our wellbeing, questioning if we have placed the importance of profit and success over people and community. Particularly with the generation that frequent the sheds, often consisting of retired men, they fear for this lack of social cohesiveness that can leave older adults feeling particularly isolated and vulnerable.

The loneliness epidemic

The aforementioned indiscriminately contributes to an epidemic of loneliness in our society today. The impact of this social isolation on our wellbeing is far reaching on multiple levels. We are creatures whose very DNA dictates that we need human connection to survive. Anthropologists have long argued that the need for social connection is innate, lack of which is evident in Bowlby’s long standing attachment theory (Nicolaisen & Thorsen, 2012).

Many of the Shedders in the Men’s Sheds have faced the stark reality of loneliness due to reasons such as; bereavement or retirement which encouraged them to join the Men’s Sheds movement and having been reminded of the benefits of belongingness and friendship found through solace in their shed, now act as advocates for grassroots community organisations to re-instil the sense of social cohesiveness and friendship lost among many. Loneliness whether social or emotional can contribute to all cause morbidity and mortality (O’Súilleabháin, Gallagher & Steptoe, 2019). It has been linked to reduced self-esteem, increased alcohol, smoking and drug consumption, increased risk of chronic stress, depression and anxiety, suicidal ideation, malnutrition, impaired immunity and has correlations with cardiovascular disease, diabetes, cancer and early onset dementia to name a few (Buchman et al., 2010; Eskelinen, Hartikainen & Nykänen ,2016; Holt-Lunstad et al., 2015)

It is important to distinguish the difference between loneliness and choosing to be alone. Loneliness is a negative, subjective feeling of disconnectedness or isolation due to perceived deficiency or lack of social relations, whereas choosing to be alone means there is choice in ones actions (Tiwari, 2013). It is poignant that this piece is written at a time of a global pandemic due to Covid-19 where the difference between loneliness and choosing to be alone has become a stark realisation for many, including the Shedders who safeguard the very essence

of community and have now been forced to close their sheds. Loneliness has been deemed the biggest killer of our time which is now compounded by the Coronavirus pandemic meaning that beacons of hope and important spaces that encourage friendship and sense of community such as the Men's Sheds will be needed more than ever. There are positive anecdotal stories throughout the pandemic that have shown signs that our sense of community is heightened in times of collective trauma, highlighting the importance of social connection when faced with challenging times. Wilkinson (1996) akin to this, has previously discussed how during World War one and two, the life expectancy of communities paradoxically improved, equating it to the sense of social capital and reduced inequalities resulting from social cohesiveness.

Friendship and the Men's Shed movement

There is no doubt that something special occurs within the Men's Sheds. Simple, modest spaces where men come together to work on shared interests and projects, tinker with ideas, play games, drink tea and eat biscuits, make jokes and fun of one other and support one another. All of these things have become ingredients that transform men's shed from being simple spaces where men congregate to spaces that almost feel sacred and remind anyone lucky enough to witness their magic, how important friendship and community are to all of us.

The exponential growth of the Men's Shed is a testament to the benefits that Shedders gain from attending them. The Men's Shed movement was first founded in Australia in the 1980's and has since expanded to other countries, first arriving in Ireland in 2011. A grassroots organisation ran independently by each individual shed and guided by the Irish Men's Sheds Association, the Men's Sheds have exploded in Ireland since the first shed opened only ten years ago with over 450 sheds now on the island of Ireland and up to 10,000 members. Ireland in fact has more sheds per head of capita than any other country in the world. All sheds are independent and self-autonomous, and the range of activities carried out by sheds differ from the next. Most sheds engage in activities such as woodwork, gardening, carpentry and community work. However, there are more special interests sheds that focus on things like music, fishing and restoration work (Irish Men's Sheds Association, 2020). Men's sheds are community-based organisations open to all men regardless of age or background. Men's sheds are grassroots, member-focused spaces which offer men a pressure-free environment in which to share skills, make new friends and connect with their communities. The company of other like-minded men, comradery and banter are placed at the heart of every Men's Shed.

The Men's Sheds movement has been so successful in Ireland due to, as the Shedders would state, the sense of comradeship found within them but also the freedom to come and go autonomously in a non-pressurised environment that many would have experienced in their professional and working lives. Many of the Shedders who I have come across and been lucky enough to hold meaningful conversations with, have shared their experience of loss and bereavement and facing cross roads in their lives that ultimately led them to the Men's Sheds. What follows next are heartening stories of belongingness, support and encouragement that they gain from attending their shed and the friendship they find in other Shedders. Many of the Shedders are indeed candid enough to share their battles with depression and how the sheds and its sense of community and comradeship saved them from darker moments and offered them hope during times of loneliness and despair. For others, they simply recognise that joining the shed means that they can maintain their wellbeing and a sense of purpose in their lives through the enjoyment of working on shared projects or learning and teaching new skills. Previous work also highlights that Shedders are motivated to participate by a need for peers support and to do something they considered meaningful with 97% of men reporting enhancements in their wellbeing simply by having their shed to attend (Carragher & Golding, 2015).

It is widely accepted that men are not as forthcoming to engage with health and wellbeing compared to their female counterparts in the past (White et al., 2011). Positive movements towards gender-specific initiatives such as the Men's Sheds are contributing to a societal shift in the resigned acceptance that men do not like to talk about their physical or mental health. On the contrary, my time spent in the sheds and other research has shown that in the right environment men will and quite rightly, want to talk about their wellbeing (Lefowich, Richardson & Robertson, 2015). The Men's Sheds are health enhancing for men because they are informal, non-clinical safe spaces where health and wellbeing is not always directly addressed, but where the friendship, comradeship and sense of purpose and belonging offer inherent health promoting benefits. Shedders will testify towards the importance of safeguarding this sense of community and belonging. The Men's Sheds movement highlights the importance of friendship for our physical, mental and spiritual wellbeing. A quote from a Shedder himself perhaps captures the argument which inspired this work

"The Men's Sheds protect something very sacred that we don't have any more in modern society; our sense of community. Spending time in the sheds you quickly learn how

fundamental community and social cohesiveness is in protecting our wellbeing"- Larry,

Men's Shed Member

Conclusions

This paper has aimed to highlight the importance of friendship and community in protecting our wellbeing particularly in a modern fragmented society, using the men's sheds movement as an example of where community and friendship is placed at the heart of the shed and highlighting the benefits Shedders reap as a result of that approach. There is something we all can take away from the message to be found within the Men's Sheds. Community is sacred and we should all work collectively to protect that by not dwelling on nostalgia of the past but by making a push towards encouraging the growth of grassroots initiatives such as the men's sheds and making small changes to facilitate face-to-face interaction at local level to enhance both our own wellbeing and the wellbeing of those near to us in friendship and locality that may be feeling isolated particularly in the unprecedented times we face. We may need to social distance during this pandemic but we can still encourage human connection and move away from alienating individualism.

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