Why social cohesion is our greatest challenge

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In this Forum, we will be tackling some big issues — ecological, technological, economic, cultural — within the context of this highly ambiguous word "sustainability". My perspective is societal: however else we approach the idea of sustainability, let's not forget that society itself — the way we actually live, the way we interact, the kind of institutions we establish to preserve our values and to do cooperatively and collaboratively the things we can't do individually — must also be sustainable.

In many respects, we're doing well. Perhaps chief among the things we can be proud of is the fact that we have set an example to the world of how to create a harmonious society out of extraordinary ethnic and cultural diversity. We've brought people here from 200 different birth places around the world and made it work so well that if there are occasional outbreaks of racism or ethnic tension — as there inevitably are — they are reported as news, because they are not characteristic of us.

Multiculturalism is in our DNA. When the first fleet arrived here in 1788, about 60 nationalities were represented on board those 11 ships, and they arrived on a continent where between 300 and 400 Indigenous nations were already co-existing.

But I believe our social harmony — our social cohesion — is under threat, and any threat to social cohesion represents a threat to the sustainability of our very way of life. The threat I am referring to can best be described in terms of two key facts about contemporary Australia, both of them deeply uncomfortable for us to confront, but necessary for us to confront in any honest discussion of social sustainability.

The first of those key facts is that we are experiencing a mental health crisis. The Beyond Blue organisation has told us that last year alone, two million Australians were suffering from an anxiety disorder. Another two million were suffering from depression and another one million from other mental illnesses — so at any given moment, about five million of us are dealing with mental illness.

The second key fact is that we are becoming more socially fragmented. In spite of all the wonderful things that many local neighbourhoods and communities are doing to preserve social cohesion, the factors impelling us towards fragmentation are now very apparent — and none of them, by the way, has anything to do with immigration or, indeed, cultural diversity.

Let me remind you of just six of the many social changes that are putting pressure on the stability and cohesiveness of our local communities and heightening the risk of social fragmentation.

Our shrinking households

In the last 100 years, our population has increased fivefold and the number of dwellings has increased tenfold. So we've been creating households at twice the rate we've been growing the population, and have now reached the point where the average Australian household is 2.5 people — heading, the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) pre-

dicts, for 2.2. The fastest growing household type in Australia (as in the US) is the single-person household. Already accounting for one household in four, the ABS is projecting that will reach one household in three. A society in which every third or fourth household contains just one person is a very different place from the one we all grew up in. Not everyone who lives alone feels socially isolated, of course; many solo householders relish their sense of freedom and independence. But *The Australian Loneliness Report,* recently published by the Australian Psychological Society and Swinburne University of Technology, tells us that one in four Australians report suffering feelings of loneliness for more than half of every week, and the trend towards ever-smaller households clearly increases the *risk* of isolation.

Our rate of relationship breakdown

Approximately 35-40 percent of contemporary marriages and other relationships are expected to end in separation or divorce, with obvious emotional and social consequences for the couples who are splitting, their families, their friendship circles and neighbours. It's also disruptive for any children caught up in the process — and many are. One million dependent children now live with only one of their natural parents and half of these are involved in a mass migration, once a week or once a fortnight, from the home of the custodial parent to the home of the non-custodial parent. Particularly in the early stages of these arrangements, this can be hugely disruptive and fragmenting not just for the families that have found themselves in this situation but for the micro-communities they're moving in and out of.

Our falling birth-rate

The post-war baby boom sent our birth-rate to 3.6 babies per woman. Our present birth-rate, at 1.7 babies per woman, is way below replacement rate. Relative to total population, we are now producing the smallest generation of children we have ever produced. Why mention this in the context of a discussion of social fragmentation? As any parent knows, when a family moves into a new neighbourhood, it's usually the kids who get to know each other first — on the school bus, in the playground, on the sports field, wherever it might be — and social networks gradually evolve from those connections. Today, that social lubricant provided by kids is in shorter supply than ever. We compensate, of course. It's amusing to compare the graph of Australia's falling birth rate with the graph of rising pet ownership. It's pretty obvious — even from the names they are being given — that many of those pets are child substitutes, particularly the dogs. (I mean no respect to the President of your Society when I mention that I recently met a dog called Ian.) Maybe taking your dog to the dog walking park is a bit like taking your kids to the playground, but I personally think there's a huge difference!

Our increasing busyness

When we greeted each other, we used to say, "G'day" or "How are you going?" Now our standard greeting has become, "How are you going — *busy?",* reflecting a revved-up way of life that leaves us less time and energy for the nurturing of personal relationships, especially with neighbours. Our busyness often serves as a barrier between us and that, too, erodes social cohesion.

Our increasing mobility

On average, we move house once every six years and, thanks to almost universal car ownership, most of us live in drive-in/drive-out suburbs and towns where footpath traffic has declined and there are fewer opportunities for the incidental social contacts that build a sense of community trust. You wave at your neighbour's car. You assume that your neighbour is driving but that's not quite the same as stopping and saying hello on the footpath.

Our increasing reliance on information technology at the expense of personal interaction

The IT revolution is brilliant, seductive, efficient, convenient … and paradoxical: it connects us like never before while making it easier than ever to stay apart. (No wonder that, among young people, the heaviest users of social media also report the highest levels of loneliness and anxiety.)

None of this means that we are inevitably going to become a more socially fragmented society or that social cohesion is inevitably going to be lost. But the threat is real and the level of social fragmentation is already disturbing.

The two key facts I mentioned at the beginning of this paper — our mental health crisis and the increasing threats to social cohesion — aren't really two facts at all. They are not independent of each other; they are merely two sides of the same coin. In any society, in any human setting, if you increase the level of social fragmentation you will increase the incidence of social isolation and, over time, raise the level of anxiety and associated forms of mental illness.

Of course, there are many triggers of anxiety in individual cases — relationship break-down, job insecurity, rent stress, loss of faith, insufficient contact with the natural world — and some people are simply genetically predisposed to anxiety. But when you're looking at this at a societal level — when you're faced with an epidemic of anxiety — we have to go beneath those individual causes and ask what's happening in society itself. And that's where it seems to me social fragmentation is emerging as the villain.

Many negative health consequences flow from social isolation. In October 2018, the *American Journal of Epidemiology* published a paper reporting that "social isolation directly affects health by causing changes in the body such as inflammation, cognitive decline, hypertension and poor immune functioning" and that's on top of the mental health issues we've already mentioned. Socially isolated people are also more likely to have sleep disturbances, to smoke, to make less use of health-care services, and are more likely to be exposed to the health risks arising from over-reliance on information technology.

It's not surprising, therefore, to learn that social isolation is now looming as a greater threat than obesity to public health. We are, after all, members of a social species. We humans need each other; we need a sense of belonging to communities that nurture us, sustain us, protect us and even give us a sense of personal identity. (A lot of nonsense is talked about this question of personal identity as though it's something that people could discover by staring in the mirror or gazing at their navel. You don't discover personal identity by introspection; you discover personal identity by looking into the faces of the people who love you, the people you work with, the people who are your neighbours, the people who need you, the people who'll put up with you. For

an individual, as for a nation, identity needs a context.)

We're herd animals and when a herd animal is cut off from the herd, negative health consequences are bound to follow. In our criminal justice system, solitary confinement is the worst punishment we can inflict on a prisoner because, for a member of a social species, solitary confinement *is* the worst punishment most of us could imagine. Living alone — or any experience of social isolation — is by no means the same thing as "solitary confinement", but when people start to feel as if they don't belong anywhere, as if they are socially excluded, overlooked, powerless, or simply not being acknowledged and listened to, that is a dangerously unhealthy state for them, and an anxiety disorder can be the first sign of that danger.

There is a circularity here for people whose anxiety is induced, or increased, by social isolation: anxiety itself tends to make us more self-absorbed, less sensitive to others, tougher in our social attitudes, more obsessed about the concept of control, more vulnerable to fear (including fear-based propaganda, political and otherwise) … all of which is likely to *increase* the sense of social isolation.

We are not mere bystanders to these trends and their consequences, and I urge you not to be "mere scientists" in your response! This is *our* society I am describing. These are *our* communities. These are *our* local neighbourhoods. The places where *we* live are the places where social cohesion is under threat; the places where a growing number of people are experiencing loneliness; the places where social isolation is becoming a public health issue.

We ourselves are participants in the social changes that have increased the risk of social fragmentation. We ourselves have driven the divorce rate up. We ourselves have driven the birth-rate down. We have shrunk our households; we have allowed ourselves to become addicted to our information technology devices; we have embraced busyness as a way of life. The health consequences that flow from all these disruptions are therefore our collective responsibility. To be dispassionate and analytical about it is important in understanding the social science, but we must never forget that we are also humans ourselves, we are citizens, we are neighbours.

The tragedy for us, as a society, is that we are not always living as if we understand that our own health, especially our mental health, depends on the health of the communities we belong to, though it does, and the health of those communities depends on our willingness — person by person, street by street, neighbourhood by neighbourhood — to engage with those communities.

There's no simple answer to a complex, evolving problem like the threat to social cohesion. But if we value social cohesion — and we should, since social cohesion builds social capital, and social capital builds strong societies — then the key word for us is the word "compassion." By that I don't mean some bleeding-heart, emotionally-charged condition: on the contrary, I regard compassion as a tough mental discipline, and the only rational response to an understanding of what it really means to be human. Once we acknowledge that, being members of this species, we depend for our survival on the maintenance of healthy, sustainable communities to support us, then the only way to ensure the sustainability of those communities is to treat each other with kindness and respect. Think of compassion as the high-octane fuel that drives the machinery of social cohesion.

Compassion is a deeply civilising discipline. Indeed, our willingness to treat each other kindly and respectfully — even when we don't like someone, and especially when we disagree with them — is the test of how civilised we can claim to be.

In essence, I'm talking about a very small-scale response to a very large-scale problem. I'm proposing — as so many people in the past have proposed — that it is our personal, individual ways of living that determine the kind of society we will become. We need to acknowledge that "neighbour" is one of the most important dimensions of our role as citizens. Yes, we have other dimensions: we are members of families, we have friends, we have professional colleagues and we might belong to a range of other communities. But we *also* live in a street or an apartment block, and that implies some responsibility to engage with the life of that neighbourhood.

We all know how to act like neighbours when there's a flood, a fire, a storm or some other catastrophe. What a tragedy it would be if we became the kind of people who needed a catastrophe to galvanise us into acting like neighbours.

In cities like Sydney and Melbourne "we don't know our neighbours" has become a kind of urban cliché, yet no one ever says that with pleasure or pride. It's always said wistfully, as if we know there's something wrong with a situation in which the people who live right next-door, or even in the same street, are strangers to us.

If you accept, as I do, that the health of any society can best be measured by the health of its local neighbourhoods and communities, then the task of preserving social cohesion is an urgent one. In practice, it involves some very simple strategies: get to know your neighbours; be alert to the wellbeing of anyone in your street, or your apartment block, who is at risk of social isolation; don't pass someone in a local street, or stand with them at a bus stop, without acknowledging them with a smile and a greeting; give the gift of listening, generously and attentively, to those who need it.

As I said at the outset, this Forum is addressing some very big issues and some very big challenges, but let's not forget the small, local, personal challenges as well. We may be scientists, economists, IT strategists … but we are also neighbours. We may be called on to show leadership within our professions, or in society-at-large … but true leadership entails setting a good example in every aspect of our lives, including our local neighbourhood.

When we exercise compassion in all our dealings, and when we take our responsibilities as neighbours as seriously as our grander and more professional responsibilities, we will be helping to slow the process of social fragmentation, and to minimise the risk of social isolation. That's how we'll help preserve social cohesion and, in the process, help curb the rising epidemic of anxiety.

In the end, that's what prevents any society, any community, from descending into the chaos of rampant individualism. It's not a matter of luck, but of a disciplined commitment to helping create the kind of society we all want to live in.

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