

Alan Hu Foundation Mental Health Lecture Series

How Wisdom Can Protect Against Today's Loneliness Epidemic

Webinar by Dilip V. Jeste, MD

Director, Social Determinants of Health Network and
President-elect, World Federation for Psychotherapy
August 12, 2025

[00:00:00]

Chih-Ching Hu: And welcome everyone to the Alan Hu Foundation Mental Health Lecture Series. I'm Chih-Ching Hu, Co-Founder of the Alan Hu Foundation and host for your webinar. Today, Dr. Dillip Jeste will present, "*How Wisdom Can Protect Against Today's Loneliness Epidemic.*" We'd like to thank the Three Valleys Community Foundation for funding this webinar. We'd also like to thank the Mental Health Association for Chinese Communities for providing simultaneous Chinese interpretation and thank you to Ida Shaw for Chinese interpretation. Alan Hu Foundation's mission is to promote mental health, raise awareness and remove stigma surrounding psychiatric disorders and support fundamental research for cures. Please consider making a gift to the Alan Hu Foundation by using the donation link in the chat box. Thank you for supporting our programs. Today it is our great honor and privilege to introduce Dr. Dillip Jeste.

[00:01:01]

Dr. Jeste is the Director, Social Determinants of Health Network, and President-Elect, World Federation for Psychotherapy. He is a former Senior Associate Dean for Healthy Aging and a Distinguished Professor of Psychiatry and Neurosciences at the University of California San Diego. He was a research fellow and later Unit Chief at the National Institute of Mental Health before joining UCSD where he worked for 36 years. Dr. Jeste has been a principal investigator on numerous training and research grants focusing on schizophrenia, neuropsychiatric interventions, and healthy aging. He has published 16 books and 800 peer review journal articles. A past president of American Psychiatric Association, a member of the NIH Council of Councils and the TEDMED speaker, Dr. Jeste is listed in the Institute of Scientific Information list of the world's most cited authors and has received awards from NIMH, VA, APA, NAMI, NARSA, and various organizations and universities. He's a member of the National Academy of Medicine.

[00:02:20]

In this talk, Dr. Jeste will explain that loneliness is increasingly viewed as a silent pandemic in the 21st century. Loneliness increases the risk of physical and mental illnesses associated with higher mortality. His recent studies have found a strong inverse relationship between loneliness and wisdom both psychologically and biologically. He will discuss recommendations for strategies to promote compassion and wisdom at individual and community levels. This webinar is being recorded. Recordings will be available on the Alan Hu Foundation website and the Alan Hu Foundation YouTube channel in about two weeks. Please subscribe to Alan Hu Foundation YouTube channel. And following the presentation, there will be a Q&A session. Please use the Zoom Q&A function to submit your questions. The presentation is for educational purposes only. It is not intended for medical diagnosis. If you have any persistent symptoms, please seek professional help. With that, I'm turning to Dr. Jeste. Welcome, Dr. Jeste.

[00:03:39]

Dr. Jeste: Thank you, Mr. Hu.

[00:03:42]

Chih-Ching Hu: Let me stop sharing.

[00:03:53]

Dr. Jeste: Thank you very much, Mr. Hu. I am delighted to be here. I admire and appreciate the wonderful job that the Alan Hu Foundation has been doing for the past several years. It's really important to have foundations like this which focus on improving the focus on mental health, reducing the stigma against mental illnesses and promoting research in this area. So thank you, Alan Hu Foundation. So let me share my screen, and okay. Can everybody see the slide?

[00:04:49]

Chih-Ching Hu: Yes, I can see it. Yeah, it's clear. Yeah.

[00:04:52]

Dr. Jeste: Thank you.

[00:04:53]

Chih-Ching Hu: Thank you Dr. Jeste.

[00:04:53]

Dr. Jeste: Okay, as Mr. Hu said, I'm going to talk on how wisdom can protect against today's loneliness epidemic. So I'm going to begin with what I mentioned; the loneliness epidemic. So of course, what is loneliness and really what do we mean by an epidemic of loneliness? And then, the second part is of course what is wisdom. I will present some data showing that wisdom actually is an antidote or vaccine for the loneliness epidemic, and that would bring us to the third portion, which is how can we enhance wisdom to conquer loneliness. So let us start with the loneliness epidemic. Let us start with how we define loneliness and social isolation.

[00:06:25]

These two things are obviously closely related, right? What is loneliness? Loneliness means feeling alone and distressed. That's important; that it is not just feeling alone but it causes a lot of discomfort, anxiety, stress. So that is loneliness. Social isolation really talks about social contacts. So social isolation means one does not have or has very few social contacts. Loneliness is subjective how you feel, whereas social isolation is objective, it's the number of social contacts. Right? So that would mean that people who are socially isolated will all be lonely and vice versa. In reality that's not true. One can feel lonely in a crowd.

[00:07:27]

Think about a college student who lives in a dorm. There are 100 other students in the dorm, and also the student has about 500 Facebook friends. So he really is in the midst of so many other people and yet, he may feel very lonely. On the other hand, you can have a person in a cave or in some far removed temple or some other place. There is no social connection there for him and yet he or she feels quite content, not distressed at all in spite of being alone. So the point here is that loneliness and social isolation often go hand in hand but not always. Sometimes a person can feel lonely even when they're surrounded by people. On the other hand when they're not surrounded by anybody they may not feel lonely. There was a very nice book called *Biography of Loneliness* that was published in the UK. It was written by a British historian Fay Alberti, and she wrote that before the year 1800, the word loneliness did not exist in the English language.

[00:09:01]

The word that existed was "oneliness". So, oneliness meant being alone. But there is a big difference between loneliness and oneliness, because oneliness just means being alone. And people who feel onely often feel peaceful. It was kind of a spiritual reflection. They felt that they were in touch with nature or God. Whereas being lonely as I said is really feeling very distressed. So there was practically very little loneliness before 1800, after which loneliness increased. Why? So what changed in 1800? Industrialization. The society until then was more of an agricultural society. You know there were small villages, small towns and groups of people, the families that worked together. Once industrialization started that really changed everything. Now, people started working much harder than they did before, but they also worked on their own.

[00:10:16]

Previously in the agricultural community, these were large communities, big families working together. Not now. After industrialization, people started working on their own or in small groups of people. And that is what made loneliness worse. And this loneliness has continued and actually has increased in the last 25 or so years. This is something people are not aware of. We all know about the COVID pandemic, right? And we know millions of people died. The average lifespan in the US and elsewhere fell after COVID. But did you know that the average lifespan in the US fell before COVID? Yes. In 2015, 2016, 2017, the average lifespan in the US fell for the first time since the 1950s. Why did it fall? It was not because of any infections like COVID. It fell because of an increase in loneliness and I will show you evidence in favor of

that and that is what is called the silent or behavioral pandemic of loneliness in the 21st century. So in the US, our former surgeon general Dr. Vivek Murthy wrote on the loneliness epidemic in the US, but it is not restricted to the US. So in the last 25 years or so, more people are dying from loneliness associated with various physical illnesses, suicides, opioid use than the number of people who die from stroke or lung cancer. Just think about that. Such a serious condition, right?

[00:12:30]

And it is not just a health issue. It's a general issue. New ministries of loneliness were established just a few years ago; first in the UK and then in Japan. And why were these established? Because they found that people were getting more lonely. The work production was going down and it really had an impact on the economy as a whole. And the World Health Organization reported two years ago that loneliness is a global health priority. So it is not just an American epidemic or even just in the UK or Japan. It is a global pandemic just like COVID was. So why is loneliness so bad? Why do people die from loneliness? A number of studies have clearly shown that loneliness increases the risk of many major illnesses: heart disease, diabetes, obesity, major depression and suicide, opioid use, alcohol use, Alzheimer's disease, other dementia. So there are so many major disorders, potentially fatal disorders, which increase because of loneliness.

[00:14:07]

Suicides, the rates of suicide in the US increased by 33% in just two decades. And this was true in men and women, and it was true at all age groups but especially in younger people. Suicides have gone up considerably in younger people. Even 10 year olds have been reported to have committed suicide. So why is this happening? There are some major changes that have occurred in society which have had a good impact but also a pretty bad impact. Three such things. One is globalization. You know the world clearly has come together now, right? You can fly from any city to any other city in the world in just within a few hours. We can actually communicate with people all over the world. Right? That's nice. Similarly, technology has advanced so fast. This webinar we are having today, I don't think this would have been possible 20 years ago.

[00:15:24]

Technology has been helpful. Social media, say Facebook, Twitter, X, they have brought together people in the world. These things which I said have positive sides, but also have major negative sides, and that is why loneliness has become a problem. Globalization, for example, has increased competition. When I apply for a job, I'm not just competing with people in my town, or even country, but from all over the world. So, it's hard for me to get a job, right? Technology is growing so fast that it is becoming stressful for many people. Social media has major disadvantages, especially for younger people. Younger people are preoccupied by social media and it often has a negative impact on what people do; it reduces your self image. For all these reasons, these changes, globalization, super fast growth of technology, and social media has made the population become more lonely because they don't want to connect with other people, many of them are afraid of that. That's why they are by themselves and distressed.

[00:16:56]

That is why loneliness has increased and it has led to various illnesses. What can we do? That's the part I want to focus on; that while loneliness is terrible, we do have a possible solution. We do have a possible vaccine or antidote, and that is wisdom. We have published eight studies, including several thousand people from the US as well as Italy, and they have consistently shown that wisdom, especially the compassion component of wisdom, protects against loneliness. We have shown that people who score higher on wisdom and compassion are much less likely to be lonely a number of years later, which means that they are less likely to have obesity, heart disease, stroke, major depression, dementia. People will live longer and healthier lives if they have wisdom and compassion.

[00:18:00]

That is what I want to talk about now; what is wisdom, and after that I'll talk about how we can enhance wisdom to conquer loneliness. What is wisdom? I've been interested in wisdom for the last 10 years or so. I really think this is a very important part, not just for philosophy or psychology, but also for medicine and health. We published a book called *Wiser*, which looks at the scientific roots of wisdom, compassion, and what makes us good. So what is wisdom? Wisdom is a personality trait. We know other personality traits like resilience is a trait, optimism is a trait. Being social, asocial, those are traits. Wisdom is a personality trait, but it differs from many other traits in that it has a positive purpose. It enhances a person's well-being; not just individual, but the whole society's welfare increases with wisdom. Wisdom has a purpose, in that it increases the well-being of individuals and the societies. People often confuse wisdom and

intelligence. People often talk about somebody who is very smart and they think that that means he is very wise. That is actually not true. People with the highest IQ can be very dangerous to society.

[00:19:50]

Some of the mass murderers, some of the terrorists are very intelligent. If you did their IQ, you'll find that their IQ is very high. What is sad is that they are antisocial. They're not helping others. They're hurting others. That's what they take pride in. Of course, that doesn't mean that all intelligent people are antisocial. That's not the case at all. But the point here is that just having intelligence doesn't mean that you are helpful to society. So what is wisdom? I talked about personality traits, but they have different components. What are the components? The most important components are empathy and compassion. Empathy means understanding somebody's emotions. Compassion means helping them. In the next few slides, by the way, I'm going to talk about each of these components. As I said again, empathy and compassion. It is also called pro-social behavior. Then comes emotional regulation; control over the emotions. It is not that the emotions go from being very depressed at one moment and the next moment being very happy; that's not emotional regulation. Self-reflection is the ability to look inwards, the ability to understand ourselves; that is self-reflection.

[00:21:26]

Accepting a diversity of perspectives and accepting a diversity of different people. We live in a world in which different people are different. They look different. They also have different thoughts, different feelings. And there's nothing wrong with that. Unfortunately, we have become a very polarized society all over the world today. And that is something that needs to change. Decisiveness, ability to make decisions rather than being ambivalent. Sometimes, you see people who just cannot make a decision. They are struggling with this side, or that side, and they actually accomplish nothing because they are so indecisive. That is not good. Decisiveness means being able to make a decision, not quickly, it can take a long time. That's okay. But one should eventually make a decision and wise advising. A person who is wise, their job is to also help others. They want to help others so they can train, teach others, and give advice so that they can do better. These are the components of wisdom. There is one component I didn't include in that slide, and I'll talk about that slightly later. That is spirituality, which is also an important component. It was not considered a component of wisdom until recently.

[00:22:50]

In the last 20 years, there has been a lot of research on spirituality. Let me just say a few words about some of these components I mentioned. Empathy and compassion. As I said, empathy means the ability to understand and share another person's feelings. If I see somebody who is stressed out, who is sad, I can understand that, and that is empathy. That means I understand, but that is not enough. If I want to help, I should do something to help that person so that their depression comes down. That should be my job. That is compassion. Compassion means going beyond understanding emotions and going to help other people, which illustrates your compassion for others. That's empathy and compassion.

[00:23:53]

You don't have to be compassionate only to other people. You need to be compassionate toward yourself also. We have to be kind to ourselves. That is self-compassion, self-kindness. Offer yourself soothing and comfort as you would to your friend. If our friend is having a problem, we help that person, the friend. Similarly, we should help ourselves when we need that sense of common humanity. If I make a mistake, I would feel terrible about that. Why did I make a mistake? I spent a lot of time on that. That's not worth it. Everybody makes mistakes and we have to grow out of that. So again, accepting the fact that everybody makes mistakes. So if I make a mistake that's okay. I won't do that again. Thirdly, mindfulness. For example, if I am feeling fearful, that shouldn't bother me too much, because I have felt fearful in the past. 10 years ago, I felt very fearful, but here I'm alive and doing well today. That means that fearfulness disappeared and I did well. Self-compassion means understanding yourself so you can treat yourself better, then comes emotional regulation through positivity. Think about a teenager whose emotions fluctuate considerably. One day, he or she may be ecstatic. They may be so depressed, so angry the next day, and the next day they may be ecstatic. That is not actually good for one's survival and thriving. We need control over emotion. Of course emotions will fluctuate, and they should fluctuate. At the same time, we should be positive. We shouldn't focus on something negative or depressing.

[00:26:01]

How do we assess emotional regulation? The question is, "Do I remain calm under pressure rarely, sometimes or frequently?" This is the type of question we should ask to test emotional regulation. Then comes self-reflection, which is like looking into the mirror. We are not looking in the mirror physically, we are looking at the mirror mentally, understanding ourselves. We want to find out the components of wisdom that we are strong in. What components of wisdom am I weak in? Another component I mentioned was the acceptance of diverse perspectives. As I said, we live in a very diverse world, demographically diverse, for example: age, sex, race, ethnicity, where people come from, the primary language, all of these. We see different people. Even more so are the differences in people's thinking. The world has become increasingly polarized. Some people will view one aspect in some way and other people will view it in exactly the opposite way. There's actually nothing wrong with that. Different people can have different opinions. The problem is that we dislike and even hate people who think differently, which is wrong. We don't have to agree with others, but we should respect their different views. That's what the acceptance of diversity is. Next, let's talk about spirituality.

[00:27:54]

Spirituality means belief in a higher power. Religious people also believe in higher power. But that power usually is God. Different religions have different gods. But people who don't believe in any god can still be spiritual, disciplined. That's the point. They just believe in nature. Spirituality is that kind of a belief in higher power. How do we measure wisdom? We developed a scale called the San Diego Wisdom Scale and this has seven items and we can rate each of those in a 1 to 5 scale. Examples of these items are, "It is important that I understand the reasons for my actions." So this is testing self-reflection. Another is, "I have trouble thinking clearly when I'm upset." That means I don't have emotional regulation because I get upset easily. So these are the types of questions that we can answer to understand how wise we are. This is the neurobiology of the brain. What parts of the brain are important for wisdom? I don't want to go into these details and would be happy to answer any questions later on. The parts of the brain that are oldest in evolution and the newest in evolution are involved in wisdom.

[00:29:28]

I described wisdom which as I said is a unique personality trait as having a positive side for our well-being and it has different components, especially empathy, compassion, self-reflection, spirituality, emotional regulation and so on. We found that wisdom and loneliness go in opposite directions. That is a solution for loneliness then, increasing wisdom. We wanted to find out if there were any studies that actually found that the wisdom component can be increased. Is that possible? Yes. We published a review of 57 randomized control trials to see if the specific component of wisdom could be increased. The components were empathy, compassion, emotional regulation and spirituality. To make the long story short, we found that in some studies, these components could be increased clearly. We can increase the components of wisdom. But what can we do in daily life? I'm going to describe three things.

[00:31:05]

So the first is three good things. You know, you can google three things and you'll find something about that. A while back, there was something called a gratitude diary. Some of you may have heard about it. What they wanted was, before going to bed, they would write something that made you feel grateful. They wanted people to keep their diary gratuitous. Unfortunately, people have trouble keeping such a diary every night and writing something every night. But now, what people are advised is to think of three good things. When you go to bed, before you fall asleep, think about three good things that happened to you in the last 24 hours. And the good things are of two types. One is gratitude; when somebody did something for me and I feel grateful. Somebody was so nice and helpful to help me. I feel good about that. But it also includes the other way around. I helped somebody else so I feel proud of myself. We should think about three good things that happened in the last 24 hours. We helped somebody, or somebody helped us.

[00:32:28]

Second is volunteering activities; going outside of just doing our job that we are getting paid for to help others. For example, we can work with kids who have disabilities, work in a nursing home to help older people with dementia, and meet with people who are different. Diversity of perspectives is very common and unfortunately, there is so much polarization around the world that it is increasing loneliness. That's the issue. This polarization is making loneliness worse. And the way to reduce it is not by giving up our views, agreeing with others, but to respect people who have different ideas. Social connections - the single most important determinant of health and longevity is social connection. It is more important than hypertension, diabetes, heart disease, anything. Social connections are very important for our health. This is based on considerable data. This is a beautiful quote by an epidemiologist, "you must need others to

survive. Social connection is crucial to human development, health, and survival." The evidence supporting this contention is unequivocal. There are perhaps no other factors that can have such a large impact on both the length and quality of life, from cradle to the grave. Another important thing is the purpose in life. I'm sure some of you are familiar with this. Viktor Frankl, a Holocaust survivor, published a book called Man's Search for Meaning. This is an amazing, brilliant book. And this is an important sentence there. He said, "Those who have a 'why' to live can bear any 'how'." If you have a purpose in life that is meaningful, you'll find ways in which you can tackle adversities and overcome them. But that is because you have a purpose, a positive purpose for living for yourself and for others.

[00:35:00]

So actually, Mr. Hu showed me a number of questions that people had asked, and I'm sure those questions will come up in the last 15 minutes. A number of those questions were based on, "How do we treat loneliness," the questions were, for example, "I have a 19 or 20 year-old son who is in college and he looks like he's very lonely. What should I do?" This is a very common question because loneliness is becoming very common and it's killing people. We have to do something about that. So, the first thing is, when somebody comes to you and tells you that they are feeling lonely, listen without judgment. We should not immediately come to the conclusion that this is loneliness because of depression or something else. We don't know that at all. So don't make any judgment about what it is. Just try to understand what the person is saying. Secondly, acknowledge their feelings without minimizing or offering quick fixes. For example, if a college student comes and tells me that he is feeling lonely, I wouldn't say, "Oh, that happens to college students when they go to college. Don't worry about that. Just go and talk with your friends."

[00:36:30]

So what we are doing here is we are minimizing the value or problem of loneliness and we are offering some quick fix that is totally wrong. We should not do that. What we should do is to try to explore the possible causes for this loneliness. So we can ask, "When did you start feeling lonely, and did something go wrong before that?" The person may say yes, and he or she may have lost some friend that was with them for a long time or they relocated again. When going to college, you're really in a new environment and that can be pretty stressful. So just finding out what the causes were is very, very important. Encourage mental health support if it is needed. If you suspect or if you have any doubt that a person may have a mental illness, whether it is depression, an anxiety disorder, PTSD, whatever it is, if it is a possibility of mental illness, then you shouldn't ignore that problem.

[00:37:58]

We should immediately see that they receive mental health care and that they approach somebody who can provide mental health care; that is really critical. One other thing we need to do when somebody reports loneliness is to find out how lonely they are. There's a scale for measuring loneliness. Just as I was talking about the wisdom scale, there's a three item loneliness scale. And somebody might say, oh, just ask how lonely you feel? That actually is the wrong question to ask. That really doesn't tell us how lonely somebody is. So the questions we should ask are, "How often do you feel that you lack companionship? How often do you feel left out? How often do you feel isolated from others?" Let us find out what the person responds, in terms of hardly ever, sometimes or often. That is how we can assess loneliness and we can repeat those assessments in a month, two months, or three months.

[00:38:59]

So that's the first step for dealing with loneliness. For the next step, we should start with someone random, and we are excluding people who have a mental illness. We are talking about what the parent can do, what a teacher can do, or someone else. Start small, ask them to join some walking group for example or some class, or establish one or two genuine relationships with their old friends; bringing them back, something like that. Another would be some purpose-driven activity or creative project. For example, if a person is interested in arts, let's say, then they can go into an art project, work in a museum, volunteering activities, mentoring, getting mentored as well as helping the younger people. Healthy routines are helpful. Massive amounts of exercise aren't required, just normal amounts of exercise to be healthy. Exercise isn't just beneficial to physical well-being, but also our mental health. Spending some time outdoors is also very helpful, so we don't spend all our time just watching TV at home. Can we use technology? My answer is actually in today's world, I would not recommend using technology to overcome loneliness. However, technology is changing rapidly and I really believe that technology can help us, even from the therapeutic perspective, but not right now.

[00:41:02]

Finally, what do we do beyond that? We have already assessed that they don't have mental illnesses, and we started small. Now what? Now, we can actually expand the activities so they can now spend a considerable time helping others, because they themselves have been helped and have received compassion. Now, they can give compassion to others; they can invite others to join their social activities. So now you are helping other lonely people. When I was lonely, I needed help. But now that loneliness has been overcome, I can now help other lonely people and I can even introduce new people to others. In the beginning, I needed help in being introduced to people. Now, I can help others. How we treat loneliness is really important when somebody comes to you. Again, I want to stress that it starts with not advising anything, because we don't know much about that person's reason for loneliness. We should understand more about that and if they don't have a mental illness, we can help them initially on a small basis rather than on a larger basis. So I talked about machines and robots. As we all know, artificial intelligence is growing very fast. There is no question about that. Intelligence is becoming super intelligent. The problem is this though, I told you earlier that intelligence is not enough. We need wisdom. The people with the highest IQ are not necessarily good. Same thing with AI. We are talking about super intelligence and so on. That's fine. But what we need is not super, super, super intelligence. What we need is wisdom. And can the robots become wise?

[00:43:00]

Again, they can, but it'll take a number of years. It's not going to happen today. But because of the large language models and the development that are occurring, I fully expect that maybe within 5 to 10 years, there will be machines that will serve as caregivers, assistants, coaches. The future machines will be able to understand and offer compassion; they'll be able to help emotional regulation. Of course, the machines will never have minds of their own. They won't have emotions, but they can understand emotions in the person. Similarly, they can promote compassion and accept diverse perspectives in the users. I think what this needs is a collaboration between mental health experts, AI leaders and ethicists because one problem with artificial intelligence machines is that they can do damage, and we really have to make

sure that the ethical side and the moral side is taken into account. So until now, I have been talking about individuals who are lonely and how we can make them wiser through compassion and other things, etc. What about society though? I think we all know that today's society is not a happy society in most places. Again there are exceptions, but by and large in today's society, and I'm not talking only about the US, this is also true for most other countries. The world today has become overstressed, polarized, angry, anxious, and depressed, and that is what is causing the loneliness epidemic. That is why suicides have gone up so much. Opioid related deaths have increased tenfold in the last 20 years. Tenfold. Why? Again, that reflects loneliness at the societal level.

[00:45:05]

What should we do? We need to promote wisdom and we need to promote wisdom in education and in healthcare. Just to give you one example, in education, we just focus on intelligence and we award or reward those who are smartest, those who get the highest scores on the SATs or MCATs. In sports the champion is somebody who defeats everybody else. I think we need to do more than that. In sports, we should have an award for sportsmanship. Similarly in schools, medical schools, engineering schools, computer schools, we need to reward people for their compassion, kindness. I think we need to do that in order to bring societal loneliness down. And I'm almost done. Last slide. Those of us in California, and especially in Northern California, know what redwood trees are, but those who don't, these are amazing trees. These trees live up to 2,000 years and they are huge. They grow up to 350 ft tall and 22 ft wide. When I first saw these trees in the redwood forest, I thought that they would have long roots for trees as big as them to survive.

[00:46:36]

You know what I read? Their roots are only 6 ft deep. Only 6 ft. How can they survive and be so large? The roots grow horizontally to 100 ft and connect and intertwine with every single redwood tree in the vicinity which helps them overcome natural disasters. What we need is something like that. We need to transform human society into a redwood forest where we connect with one another; where we help one another. That is the way in which we can convert today's lonely, distressed, polarized world into a happier, healthier and wiser society. I'll stop here. Thank you for your attention, and I'll be happy to take any questions. So let me stop sharing.

Q&A

[00:47:30]

Chih-Ching Hu: Thank you very much Dr. Jeste for the wonderful talk. Now we are open to Q&A. The first question, can we say that everyone has wisdom to some extent? Are there ways for everyone to enhance their wisdom?

[00:47:50]

Dr. Jeste: Very good question. As I said, wisdom is a trait, and every person has a trait. Resilience, optimism, social skills, whatever it is. So everybody has wisdom. The question is how much wisdom do we have? We vary in the amount of wisdom that we have just like intelligence. Intelligence is also a trait and we all have some intelligence. But some people have very high intelligence; their IQ may be 200. Some people have very low intelligence, their IQ may be 40. Same thing with wisdom. Some people may have a low level of wisdom. Some may have a higher level of wisdom. Wisdom is a naturally occurring human trait. But the level varies a lot. And that is where the question comes in about how we can increase wisdom. And that's actually the positive side.

[00:48:42]

I may not have control over how much wisdom I was born with, but I know how to increase it. There are interventions to improve empathy and compassion so they're very helpful. Practical wisdom can be learned at any age. It has to be. Of course nothing is easy and nothing will happen in a day or two. It means changing our behavior, such as in the example of compassion to go out and help someone. It means helping other people, and of course, if I go out and help somebody today, that doesn't mean my compassion has increased. That means my personality needs to change, that every time, I need to look for people who need help and then I go out and help them. That is something that is a continuous process which takes a long time; days, months, maybe years. We can change our wisdom level, but it's not going to happen overnight. It's not going to happen in one week, one month, or one year. It'll take time. Increase it slowly, but that is what we should focus on. I mean in a way those of us who have kids; what do we do? You know when the two year olds and three year olds start fighting, we tell them, "don't fight with your siblings." If you have something, share that with your sibling so they can share their toys with you. So of course, they won't change immediately, but if we continue that, they will change. We can become wiser but we need to be practical and this needs to continue for a while.

[00:50:41]

Chih-Ching Hu: So the next question, "Various reports note an increase in the estrangement of adult children and their parents. What accounts for it?" The feeling of separation; the physical separation and emotional separation between the children and the parents. There are various reports noting the increase of this phenomenon, and what accounts for it?

[00:51:11]

Dr. Jeste: Okay, great question. Great question. This is a real problem. I think what has happened is, and there is actually strong data suggesting that this is indeed the case, that in general, the relationship between younger people and their family actually has gone down in the last 30 years or so. There are several reasons for that. One is social media. Social media has really taken over teenagers' lives. We all know teenagers who spend 15 hours a day on social media, so their primary relationship with Facebook, Twitter, X and these other media causes them to spend time not with their real family, not with their real friends. I think that is definitely one important reason, and then it becomes a vicious circle because if you only work with social media and you ignore your family and friends, then they won't understand you, and so the relationship goes down.

[00:52:27]

We, the parents, don't even know what to do. It is a common problem. It is getting worse and I think that's something that, again, society needs to handle. Social media has pluses, but they also have minuses as I said. So what should we do? What needs to happen is we need to bring them closer together. Again, there is no simple solution, but the parents need to work with the teenagers. The parents shouldn't go and just criticize the teenagers saying "oh you don't know what to do, and you're just hung up on social media." If you say that kind of thing, they will get even more angry at their parents and this will only increase. You can say, you know, I know that you are spending so much time and I can understand that because your classmates are also doing something similar, but that's actually not good for you and then let us see how we can do.

[00:53:29]

So let me offer you something.” So the parents should offer some nice things that they can engage in that are of interest to the teenagers. These are things that work; understanding the other side, where they are coming from, and not criticizing and devaluing them is really important for the parents. We can see, there are some teenagers who are actually working well with their parents and who are not using social media that much. You can say, “Okay, maybe we can make friends with those people and see how we can improve.” My point here is that this is a problem. We are not going to overcome it quickly or easily, but it has to be overcome, because I really think it is critical that the relationship between parents and teenagers should get better.

[00:54:27]

Another thing: different parents should get together, because several of them will have the same problem. Maybe the parents and the kids can get together. It is important to find the problem and the solutions in a way similar to what I was describing about loneliness. A similar thing applies here.

[00:54:55]

Chih-Ching Hu: The next question is regarding education. Are there evidence-based programs that teach practical wisdom? How do we make these programs part of a public education so kids can be taught practical wisdom in school and have the wisdom component being included in the education system?

[00:55:17]

Dr. Jeste: Great question. Great question. I think the unfortunate thing is that there still isn't a wide acceptance of this concept of wisdom. On the other hand, the only thing that is now widely accepted is compassion. I think there is an increasing acceptance of the fact that compassion can be increased. I was at UCSD until I retired, and there, the medical school started compassion courses. Similarly, several schools today, primary, secondary, and even elementary schools are starting courses in compassion and I think that is very positive and great. We need to have empathy and compassion promoted. There are interventions that suggest how we can improve compassion. For example, we can call somebody and just talk about how they are doing and how we can help them. These kinds of things need to be done at the social level. What I would suggest to all of you is to find out what you can do in your community, find out if you can talk to the principal, or the teachers of the school that your kids go to or at your job, talk to the boss, you know, how can we reward people who are compassionate? So these are the things that need to happen, but they need to start someplace.

[00:56:58]

Again, we are not going to change the world overnight but let us start, and all of you actually can begin doing that in the places that you are at. I really think that is what will improve the world's status considerably.

[00:57:18]

Chih-Ching Hu: Okay. So the next question, if a person is used to feeling lonely, will loneliness have a detrimental effect on their mental and physical health? Nevertheless, people who feel alone don't engage in their interests, instead, their interests drain their energy. Is it healthy or unhealthy?

[00:57:45]

Dr. Jeste: It really depends on how stressful loneliness is. Loneliness used to be defined as just “being alone”. There are people who want to be by themselves.

[00:57:56]

There's nothing wrong with that in the sense that musicians, famous writers, poets, they do very well when they're by themselves because then they can produce, they can spend several months strictly by themselves because they are writing a novel for example. Nothing wrong with that. That's all right. So there is nothing wrong in that so long as they are not feeling distressed. On the other hand, the same people are bothered, and although they are spending time writing something, they write something and then throw away whatever they wrote and get angry at themselves. That is not useful. The important question is not being lonely as I said but how distressed you are by that. If you are distressed by being alone, clearly you need some help because that's going to make not just your mental health but even your physical health worse, and that's not what you want.

[00:59:01]

Chih-Ching Hu: We're close to the time, can we have two more questions?

[00:59:07]

Dr. Jeste: Sure, yeah.

[00:59:09]

Chih-Ching Hu: For those people with autism who may not have the ability to have close relationships with others, how can we help them to build the wisdom for them to overcome loneliness?

[00:59:22]

Dr. Jeste: Good. Again, a very good question and it's a real question. Yes. So, one thing to remember is that autism is not one entity. There are different types of autism, different severities of autism that are there. And some kids with autism, they're actually very compassionate and helpful. Others are not. But to answer the question, I think what is needed is to not have high expectations that they may not be able to meet because it is really related to their brain function and brain structure. So if they can't do something, let's just calm down. Let us reduce our expectations. Their brains are not fully normal, right? So they cannot do everything that we can do. Correct? So we have to be compassionate about them and not expect them to immediately learn compassion and be compassionate to others. At the same time even for people with even fairly severe autism, as they live longer, things get better.

[1:00:35]

There's something worth keeping in mind that a 5-year-old or even a 10 year old autistic kid may not be very compassionate or empathic or anything like that, but the same person at the age of 20 or 25 can be much more compassionate and empathic. So we should expect that that could happen, so that's what we should do; we should do the best we can and not expect too much, because otherwise, that makes everybody feel unhappy. But on the other hand, keep in mind the positive things get better for many people over the years.

[1:01:18]

Chih-Ching Hu: Okay. Okay. So the last question is, "Should we apply a strength-based strategy on improving practical wisdom for example; there are seven components of wisdom, so should we focus on strengthening our strong components or improving our weak components?"

[1:01:35]

Dr. Jeste: Mhm. Very good question, and I would say that the answer is yes. Yes, in the sense, ideally first, if we have something that is weak and if we can increase it, then we should increase it. Of course we all have limitations; we can't do everything. For example, look at reading, writing, or arithmetic. I'm not that good at mathematics, for example, so should I spend all my energy in learning more about mathematics? I don't think so. If I'm good at languages, then I should do something with that. At the same time I have to do something in math because I can't really give it up. So, the answer is, we should try to focus on both, but choose something that you like to do and is feasible, because ultimately, positivity is very critical. Let us think about things we can do, things that make us happy.

[1:02:30]

Let's not waste our time on things that are impossible, because it'll only make us feel bad. Anyways, I mean, I must say that for the whole audience here, I'm very impressed with your questions, and also, actually what the foundation is doing as a whole. These are really examples of how we can improve society. So thank you all very much. I'm delighted and thrilled.

[1:02:57]

Chih-Ching Hu: Thank you Dr. Jeste for sharing your knowledge and wisdom with us today. Thank you so much. Thank you and also thank you to everyone for joining our webinar. We hope to see you again in the next webinar and this webinar is being recorded. Recordings will be available on the Alan Hu Foundation website and the Alan Hu Foundation YouTube channel in about two weeks. Please subscribe to the Alan Hu Foundation YouTube channel. And also, please take a moment to fill out the short survey. Your input is critical for us to improve the program. And I will leave the donation code for a few more minutes; thank you for donating to support our programs. With that, I'm closing the webinar. Thanks everyone. Thank you Dr. Jeste.

[1:03:37]

Dr. Jeste: Thank you very much for having me. I really thank you so much and all the best to everybody.

[1:03:45]

Chih-Ching Hu: Yeah. Take care and stay well.

[1:03:48]

Dr. Jeste: Thank you. Bye.

[1:03:49]

Chih-Ching Hu: Bye-bye.