

How to connect?

Connectedness in times of Social Disruption

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In times of increasing social disruption, marked by global crises such as wars, the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, economic de-localization, alienated working environments and the increasing influence of individualization and technologization, the urgent question arises as to how human connectedness can be maintained. Connectedness, defined as a multidimensional capacity that encompasses social integration, emotional belonging and digital networking, is central to mental and physical well-being. Studies show that social isolation is a significant risk factor for increased mortality, especially relating to cardiovascular diseases. In particular, research findings from the period after the COVID-19 pandemic show that social connectedness has positive effects on stress regulation and general well-being.

The planned study explores from a psychoanalytic perspective how a sense of connectedness can be fostered and restored in an increasingly fragmented world. Psychoanalytic theories offer various concepts and terminologies on the topic of connectedness in a child's development and later as adults as well as strategies to improve the ability of connectedness through psychotherapy. Sigmund Freud viewed attachment through the framework of libido and object relations, while Erich Fromm saw the need for love and belonging as a basic human need. Heinz Kohut emphasized the role of empathy and stable self-objects for the healthy development of the self. Sándor Ferenczi emphasized the importance of corrective emotional experiences for the healing of early disorders, and John Bowlby's attachment theory highlighted the crucial role of early secure attachments in the ability to form stable relationships in adulthood.

Methodologically, the study is conducted in several steps. First (1), a thorough condensation of the psychoanalytic literature is carried out in order to formulate a comprehensive theoretical framework for the entire study. In addition to the theorists mentioned above, other relevant authors are also taken into account in order to develop a sound basis for dealing with the topic of connectedness.

In the second step (2), a comprehensive literature review of current longitudinal studies and meta-analyses will be conducted to investigate the effects of social disruption on feelings of connectedness. The literature review will cover the areas of post-Covid studies, work and health, digitalization effects in childhood and adolescence, social isolation in older people and inclusion strategies for marginalized groups in societies.

Subsequently (3), explorative, qualitative interviews with experienced psychotherapists and supervisors will be conducted. The experts will be asked about their clinical experiences and observations on the desire for connectedness in their patients, especially

in relation to specific patient groups such as people with symptoms of depression and anxiety. Further questions to the experts concern the role of digitalization as well as the challenges of certain groups, such as young people and the use of social media, the social isolation of older people and the inclusion of minorities. These interviews are analyzed qualitatively and serve as a basis for the next steps.

Based on the qualitative results of the expert interviews with experienced psychotherapists, (4a) a screening instrument will be created and distributed to the population of our psychotherapeutic outpatient clinic. The aim is to identify patients who stand out in the areas of isolation, loneliness and the desire for more connection in order to invite them to (4b) in-depth qualitative interviews. These interviews offer valuable insights into the subjective experience of connectedness, isolation and their coping strategies. In this fourth part of the study, the affected patients are included as a further group of experts. The analysis is based on the grounded theory approach.

In the final and central step of the study (5), the psychotherapeutic process is examined. Patients who complete the screening questionnaire when registering for psychotherapy in the outpatient clinic and who stand out here due to a high score will be informed about the study. If they are interested, they can take part in the study voluntarily. By participating in the study, they will receive psychoanalytic psychotherapy (“treatment as usual” at the outpatient clinic), whereby the psychotherapeutic intervention at the outpatient clinic will take place without waiting time and free of charge. For this part of the study, the sessions will be tape-recorded and subjected to a multifactorial qualitative analysis. The focus is on the investigation of therapeutic interaction, particularly in relation to the topic of promoting connectedness, whereby the concept of “corrective emotional experiences” according to Sándor Ferenczi and Franz Alexander plays a central role.

The results of this study should help to understand how psychoanalytically oriented approaches in psychotherapy can contribute to the restoration of connectedness in times of social fragmentation and thus sustainably promote the well-being of individuals.

(German prompts were entered by me in ChatGPT after current literature research and formulated there into a scientific abstract, which I corrected and finalized in the current version. The log is documented. The translation to English was generated by DeepL and proof-read by me)