

Expanding Our Social Networks

By Gary Fishbein

As the Dutch Spring with its milder temperatures and longer days beckons us outdoors, away from the company of television and computers, many expats become aware of having few others to share it with. Leaving friends and social support behind in our home countries can be a lonely, isolating experience.

We are by nature, social creatures. Chimpanzees, our closest animal kingdom relatives with whom we share 99.4% of our DNA sequences, live in colonies with constant communication and physical contact. For most of mankind's existence, we lived similarly, in intimate tribes of hunters and gatherers. In fact, until the 19th century, most people were members of tightly-knit communities. More recently, industrialization, mass migration, and war have eroded these networks. These days even in our native countries, telephones, email, and text messaging have made face-to-face interaction comparatively rare. It is therefore not surprising that living in an unfamiliar environment, we might crave human contact more than ever.

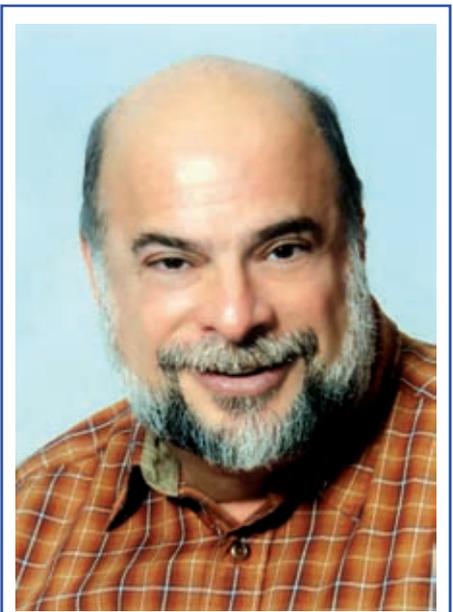
Social isolation is experienced by many who have relocated internationally. It increases the risk of developing a wide range of emotional and behavioral problems including depression, anxiety and panic attacks, substance abuse and addictions, eating disorders, and violent behaviour. Social isolation can also contribute to a decline in overall physical health.

During my first months in The Netherlands, I felt far removed from my "tribe," alone to puzzle out the deceptively subtle yet crucial differences between human interaction in New York and in The Hague. Many people in my practice experience similar forms of social isolation: the newly-posted diplomat with no one to discuss adjusting to the political climate of a new embassy; the highly-educated trailing-spouse who can neither find a job in his field, nor gain support from others in similar situations; the teacher unable to establish relationships outside of school, other than the alcohol-fuelled variety developed in pubs. Each brings their emotional issues into therapy, amplified and complicated by social isolation.

For many internationally-posted individuals expected to perform well in the social sphere, finding themselves without a circle of friends can engender a sense of shame at having failed socially. Ironically, their harsh self-judgment becomes an obstacle to social connection. A colleague of mine likens this to the experience of a child entering a busy school lunchroom and without a table to sit at, is overwhelmed by feelings of self-consciousness and a sense of being an "outsider." It is difficult enough for a child, but what of the accomplished adult accustomed to achievement, mastery and control, who suddenly feels they have regressed back to this awkward stage of life?

What can we do to combat our isolation? However uncomfortable it may initially feel, we can actively try to connect with others. Reach out to your expat neighbours. Chances are, if they are not currently in your situation, they have been there in the past and can understand what you are going through. There is no shame in letting someone know that you are new here and would like to make friends. If you can, get to know your Dutch neighbours. They are an invaluable source of inside-information about the Netherlands, Dutch customs and culture and can enrich your experience of living here. Make a commitment to join a social group, professional networking group, book club, choral or theatrical group, sports club, parenting group, English-speaking religious congregation, or become a volunteer. The volunteers at the ACCESS help-desk have a wealth of information about English-language groups and organisations to become involved with in The Netherlands.

At periods in our lives, we may be unable to summon the emotional reserves needed to reach out to others. Lowered self-esteem, anxiety, depression, or the overwhelming



Gary Fishbein was born and brought up in New York City, where he spent most of his life. He undertook his graduate studies at New York University, and received his post-graduate psychoanalytic training at the Institute for Contemporary Psychotherapy, also located in New York City. He has resided in The Hague for the past two-and-a-half years.

pressure of life in an unfamiliar environment can sap the energy required to establish new relationships. At these times, the additional support and expertise of a counsellor or therapist can help clarify and resolve issues that hinder developing meaningful social connection. Frequently, people tell me that they view it as weakness to enter therapy. I strongly disagree. It is a strength to recognise when one requires help. It is courageous to admit it and seek out the assistance one needs. Again in this situation, ACCESS can help. The members of the ACCESS Counselling Services Network, all highly-qualified English-speaking mental health professionals in private practice, are intimately familiar with the experience of being an expat and available to support those in need. They may be contacted through the ACCESS help-desk or website.

I have often heard it said that it is not the location that makes a rich experience, but the people you meet there. So go out and experience, enjoy and share The Netherlands's most lovely season with new friends and compatriots.

Gary Fishbein is a member of the ACCESS Counselling Services Network:
www.garyfishbein.com