

## *The Dangers of Urban Life*

By Ryan Harrison, MA

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Whether it's the glamour and glitz of the high life, or the electric buzz of endless information and high-tech possibilities, there's much to love about living in a big city. Large libraries, well-tended museums, art houses and discos, shopping malls, restaurants, cinemas, plazas and neon nightlife...all these things appeal to us in ways we cannot deny. The allure of "city life" is practically archetypal – stories abound of people leaving their homes in the countryside to seek their fortunes amid the masses in metropolitan areas.

But is "urbana" really paradise? What if city living actually reduces your quality of life? Sure, no matter where you live you can find information on the latest threats to life. From war and terrorism to the bacteria lurking in your bathroom, there's always something that is exerting its harmful influence on you and your loved ones, making life less peaceful and healthful than we assume it is supposed to be.

But with the exponential growth of large cities, "urban sprawl" is at an all time high. Increasing numbers of people are spending more of their time in urban regions, while knowing little of the hazards that are present there. Here are some of the most common and insidious dangers of urban life:

**Performance Pressure.** Nowhere is there as much pressure to perform as there is in the city. Some industries, the news and entertainment likely leading the pack, are known for their cutting-edge and cut-throat tactics employed in a daily struggle to stay on top. Other industries produce their fair share of pressure to perform; in an ever-increasing service-based world market, even small companies have to constantly refine, update and increase their line of products and services. If you can't keep up, you're left out. In an age when more = better, performance is everything.

**Stress.** While certainly a product of a culture obsessed with achievement, stress can come from many other angles in the city, as well. Bills, transportation costs, food and living expenses top the list of urban stressors, as it is notoriously more expensive to live in a city than outside of one. But noise, light and traffic pollution take their toll as well. And that says nothing of the general fast pace of city life. It's commonly said that "a city never sleeps." What's left out of the phrase is "...that's why it's so hard for you to."

While some stress can be helpful and propel us toward greatness, too much stress is directly linked to several chronic ailments including cardiovascular disease, weakened immune system, gastrointestinal disorders, depression, and substance abuse, just to name a few. The urban response has been to increase its production of "New Age" shops and day spas, yoga and wellness centers and herbal muscle relaxants. While these may actually help to some degree, they can also add to a person's stress, becoming one more thing to buy, one more appointment to make (and hopefully keep), one more ritual to add to an already crammed schedule.

**Loneliness.** The first time I visited New York City I found myself sinking deeper and deeper into my seat on the bus. Buildings towered all around me and people scurried everywhere like disturbed insects on the run. There's certainly a beauty and grandeur to the strength and modern achievement of large metropolitan areas, and I enjoyed my brief stay in NYC immensely. Still, I will never forget how small and inconsequential I felt. Is it possible to live in a city of over 8 million people and feel isolated and alone? Absolutely. When you are only one of such a staggering number of people, it can be very easy to feel utterly insignificant.

It's ironic that in an age of unprecedented global communications and networking, people are feeling increasingly lonely. We can order groceries and other necessities from home, pay bills and send gifts with a few clicks of the mouse. We can view religious and other spiritual programs on our computers or televisions, can download videos and games for use on our cell phones, work out in our living rooms to the latest exercise DVDs, and can even share our deepest thoughts, fears, dreams and wishes in virtual communities in online forums...and yet not even know the names of our neighbors. This trend toward isolationism – keeping ourselves distant from people around us by choice and for convenience's sake – is a peculiar cultural development.

While it's possible to feel lonely anywhere, it can feel particularly distressing to feel lonely in a city full of people. If population and proximity don't heal the problem, is it possible that some aspects of the city are actually causing it?

**Environmental Issues.** Cities are among the most polluted areas of the world. Some of the worst offenders that contribute to this environmental onslaught include: noise pollution, tobacco smoke, vehicle emissions, acid rain, industrial run-off, sewage disposal, domestic waste, and herbicides and pesticides. To be frank, you simply cannot avoid it whether you live in the city or out, but levels in an urban area tend to be much higher.

Consider the following account: A groundbreaking study was conducted by the Mount Sinai School of Medicine in New York, in collaboration with the Environmental Working Group and Commonweal. Researchers at two major laboratories found an average of 91 industrial compounds, pollutants, and other chemicals in the blood and urine of only nine volunteers from five different cities, with a total of 167 chemicals found in the group. Like most of us, the nine people tested do not work with chemicals on the job and do not live near an industrial facility. Of the 167 chemicals found in those nine tested individuals, 76 are known to cause cancer in humans or animals, 94 are toxic to the brain and nervous system, and 79 cause birth defects or abnormal development.

These were just “normal” people like you and like me living in cities most likely like yours and mine. The startling reality is that, if tested, we might also be found to be sharing our bodies with any number of toxic chemicals or other pollutants.

We may like to think that urban areas have the best water purification, air filtration, and food options available, but the truth is that city standards are often pitifully low where our health is concerned. Most, if not all municipal water filtration plants, for example, either allow or add

various amounts of fluoride and chlorine (both of which are toxic to the body) to the public water supply, and may not be able to filter out other contaminants like PCBs and heavy metals like mercury and lead.

Then of course, there's smog so bad in some cities that children are told *not* to play outside, for fear of sudden respiratory problems, visits to the emergency room and even elevated mortality rates. As for food production and processing, most of the food that is bought and served in the city (in marketplaces and restaurants alike) has had to travel long distances from where it is originally grown or made. It is common knowledge that food loses its nutrients during travel, and that many food companies add chemicals to preserve and color the foods that they hope will make it to your plate. This is a far cry from the fresh fruits and vegetables that used to be grown at the local farm and sold at the local farmer's market.

**TV Culture.** Is it any surprise that the most popular programs on television are set in urban areas? After all, that's where the greatest number of viewers lives! The average American watches more than four hours of television each day with 99 percent of households having at least one television and many having two or more. By the time an average viewer is 65 years old, he or she will have watched a whopping 9 years of uninterrupted television.

The modern equivalent of the campfire, around which people used to sit and enjoy conversation, sing songs or share stories, the television lulls an entire audience into near complacency for nearly 28 hours each week. This number is rising with the younger generation, as this kind of entertainment has come to occupy an important role as surrogate mother. Sometimes, it's a question of the lesser of two evils: Have the children play outside where it may not be safe? Or have them inside watching TV, where they may be lifeless, but at least off the streets? The latest fad is to install small screens in vehicles, so that children can watch movies or other recorded programs while their parents drive.

Experts are slowly coming to recognize the dangers of a generation more inclined to watch television than relate to "real people." Replacing physical activity and social interaction by basking in a TV's bluish glow can lead to obesity, depression and poor school performance...all of which are rising in many metropolitan areas. Even more troubling is the tendency for children to emulate fictional characters whose behavior translates to real-world health risks such as violence, eating disorders, sexual activity and substance abuse.

### **What You Can Do**

Before you pack your bags and your family into the car to head for the countryside, you may want to sit and think about the changes you can make, which will help protect you from some of these ubiquitous urban health hazards:

- ✓ Set realistic goals that allow you to stretch toward excellence without becoming obsessed, and don't bring work home from the office.
- ✓ Schedule time for relaxation. This could be as simple as a walk at night, a warm bath followed by a cup of tea and a good book, or a friendly visit with someone you enjoy spending time with.

- ✓ If you feel lonely, try connecting with others at a local church or community center. Take classes at a community college or volunteer somewhere you feel you can make a difference. Seek professional counseling if you think you should, with the aim of making use of the community services that will help you meet others and make friends.
- ✓ Purchase a water purifier and check your air filters. Buy organic foods grown as close to your home as possible, and complete a full-body detoxification program once a year.
- ✓ Limit your time and your family's time with the television. Reduce the list of programs you follow regularly; one or two is better than three or four. Pick an evening to keep as a "game night" for the family to play together. Spend more time talking and interacting.