

Mobility

Is urban stress actually good for us?

The next time you're running to catch the bus, remember: there are some surprising upsides stress in the city.



May 26, 2014

Article at a glance

- People living in cities are more sensitive to stress and mental illnesses
- By 2050, two-thirds of humanity will live in cities
- Achieving healthy cities is truly a political and city planning necessity
- City stress keeps us aroused and forces us to participate: Richard Sennett

Blaring sirens. Overcrowded subways. Suffocating smog. Traffic gridlock. This is just some of the unpleasantness that city dwellers have been facing every day for years. You would think we would have got used to it by now.

Apparently, we haven't. According to Mazda Adli, psychiatrist and stress researcher at **Charité hospita in Berlin**, studies are showing city dwellers are more sensitive to stress than people in rural areas. Furthermore, people who live or grow up in cities run a higher risk of developing depression and anxiety and are twice as likely to become schizophrenic.

That's important, says Adli, because more people today live in cities than do not. If urbanization continues as expected to 2050, over two-thirds of humanity – that's over 6 billion people – will live in cities. It begs the question: are we going to need more psychiatrists and sofas? "Achieving healthy cities is truly a political and city planning necessity," says Adli. "We need collaboration between neuroscientists, city planners, architects, new media, the different urban disciplines, and politicians."

Adli discussed these trends at an April 2014 event at the Allianz Forum in Berlin, "Stress and the City: Mental Health in Urban Environments." The event brought together a diverse set of speakers, including Sissel Tolaas, an olfactory expert or "smell scientist," and sociologist **Richard Sennett**, who delivered

the keynote address.

Sennett, who teaches at **New York University** and the **London School of Economics**, argued that city stress can be a good thing. Having studied psychological well-being in cities since the 1960s, Sennett is still interested in the “positive sides” of anxiety and disorder that cities provide, largely in the form of social interaction.



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Teenage kicks

This kind of stress is what keeps us “aroused,” says Sennett. Communities that are insular – like the rising number of gated communities in the United States – reflect a more adolescent psychological state. In these places, people interact with each other less, and therefore encounter less ambiguity and uncertainty in their daily lives.

It turns out that being able to accept and manage uncertainty and ambiguity is a psychological trait of adulthood. Adolescents, on the other hand, tend to formulate inflexible views of the world before really experiencing it.



Dr. Richard Sennett, sociologist at New York University and the London School of Economics.

“There are adolescent conditions of community in which the outside world is refused, in which experience of people who are different is frightening, and for whom the picture of the ‘other’ and of oneself becomes highly rigid,” Sennett told the Forum.

Not surprisingly, this leads to stereotyping and prejudice, but also isolation and boredom. In one gated community in Florida, teenage drug use was 30% higher than the surrounding area, because, as Sennett put it, “this is the only way they have to stimulate themselves.”



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Open cities

The antidote, Sennett suggests, is an “open city” where residents are compelled to interact with each other and participate. Residents move freely throughout the city, less obstructed by social and physical barriers. Sennett observes that open cities would be a boon to – among others – elderly urban residents, marginalized ethnic groups and, yes, even motorists.

In a recent experiment, traffic signs were removed in an English community. Surprisingly traffic accidents decreased. And though Sennett admits this approach may not be perfect for everyone – particularly for blind or deaf pedestrians – it does illustrate the potential benefits of social interaction.

“The unresolved character means that you must participate,” said Sennett. “Your survival depends on being involved.”

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