

'We have lost touch with one another': Survey shows growing divide among Canadians

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It appears Canadians are not getting along like they used to, and the divide is growing.

According to a new study from the University of Saskatchewan, 75 per cent of people surveyed said society is more polarized than ever, with 72 per cent blaming the pandemic, and 73 per cent blaming the recent federal election.

When searching for answers to explain these numbers and this trend, Halifax psychologist Simon Sherry says it's linked to how we have changed our communication style in society.

"The private world has very much become the public world," said Sherry. "We are pretty much freely discussing everything."

Boundaries that used to be formally present have collapsed. Sherry said people, more than ever, are publicly sharing what they think about issues, the pandemic, vaccines, and politics on both sides of the border. Emotions are rising.

"We have lost touch with one another as neighbours and community members," said Sherry. "And that most assuredly is part of the pandemic."

As for the primary forces that are feeding tones of toxicity and negativity in our society?

"One would be social media," said Sherry. "Social media wants your attention and social media platforms have learned to capture attention. They need to be putting forth ideas they create outrage, anger and anxiety."

This brings us to digital anthropologist Giles Crouch, who has been watching this trend for the past several years.

"One of the big contributors to the division that I have seen for the past three or four years, is the use of memes," said Crouch. "We get an image with words in it and they are usually very emotional or moral statements."

Crouch said they help sow further division and promote themes of disagreement and incivility.

"That helps foster the divide," said Crouch. "It's one of the biggest things on social media that I have seen."

Sherry said he was not surprised by the recent survey numbers, but he was alarmed. He added, there is a positive pathway forward to help heal relationships and bridge the divide in our communities.

"In a simple way, it is very possible to have a disagreement and to argue a pushback," said Sherry. "If you are talking to someone who thinks the earth is flat, it's OK to argue back against that."

But he urges people to do it with curiosity, civility and empathy.