

A Human Right to Companionship: Addressing the Post-pandemic Technological Isolation

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The COVID-19 pandemic has significantly exacerbated mental health issues worldwide, with a notable increase in the prevalence of conditions such as anxiety and depression. One of the primary contributors to this surge is the heightened isolation stemming from the widespread adoption of modern technology in work and education. The shift to remote work and online education, while necessary for maintaining societal functions during lockdowns, is continued even in the post-pandemic ‘new normalcy’ which has given rise to unprecedented forms of alienation and isolation, especially in the institutional frameworks originally designed and intended to facilitate human interactions. The vitality of companionship has been asserted by many psychological, sociological, and neuroscientific studies. Several human rights bodies including the United Nations Human Rights Council have identified the significance of mental health as a global health priority and has recognized the potential effects of COVID-19 on mental health, and the present study seeks to investigate whether the existing international standards on the right to mental health have adequately addressed the human need for companionship as one of its essential components. A close inspection of relevant international and regional human rights treaties and other universal standards reveals that their major emphasis is on the rights of the mentally disabled and that they offer limited opportunities to meaningfully facilitate a human right to companionship. Therefore, this research aims to establish that companionship is a human right stemming from a fundamental human need and the necessity for its formal recognition in the human rights discourse. Given the interdisciplinary nature of this study, the authors engage in mixed methods research in analyzing the socio-psychological impact of the use of technology on human interactions, and in an in-depth qualitative analysis of primary and secondary legal sources to investigate the human entitlement to companionship and the need for its recognition as a fundamental human right.

Keywords: Right to Mental Health, Post-Pandemic ‘New Normalcy’, Remote Work and Online Education, Human Right to Companionship