

Social distancing prevents infections, but it can have unintended consequences

By **Greg Miller** Mar. 16, 2020 , 11:00 AM

In response to the coronavirus pandemic, public health officials are asking us to do something that does not come naturally to our very social species: Stay away from each other. Such social distancing—avoiding large gatherings and close contact with others—is crucial for slowing the spread of the virus and preventing our health care system from getting overwhelmed. But it won't be easy.

“The coronavirus spreading around the world is calling on us to suppress our profoundly human and evolutionarily hard-wired impulses for connection: seeing our friends, getting together in groups, or touching each other,” says Nicholas Christakis, a social scientist and physician at Yale University.

And social distancing also tests the human capacity for cooperation, he adds. “Pandemics are an especially demanding test ... because we are not just trying to protect people we know, but also people we do not know or even, possibly, care about.”

The effects of short-term social distancing haven't been well studied, but several researchers—most of them scrambling to deal with disruptions to their own lives because of the coronavirus—recently took time to share some thoughts with *ScienceInsider* on the potential social and psychological impacts, and how to mitigate them. Here's what they said:

What's known about the effects of social interaction on mental and physical health?

Over long periods of time, social isolation can increase the risk of a **variety of health problems**, including heart disease, depression, dementia, and even death.

That may be because social contacts can buffer the negative effects of stress. Lab studies by Holt-Lunstad and others have found that having a friend present can reduce a person's cardiovascular response to a stressful task. There's even a correlation between perceived social connectedness and stress responses. “Just knowing that you have someone you can count

on if needed is enough to dampen some of those responses even if [that person is] not physically present,” Holt-Lunstad says.

What effects, if any, might be caused by social distancing in response to the coronavirus is an open question. “I have a couple competing hypotheses,” Holt-Lunstad says. “On the one hand, I am concerned that this will not only exacerbate things for those who are already isolated and lonely, but also might be a triggering point for others to now get into habits of connecting less.”

A more optimistic possibility, she says, is that heightened awareness of these issues will prompt people to stay connected and take positive action. “We’d love to be collecting data on that,” she says.

Are certain people or populations more likely to be affected?

People of all ages are susceptible to the ill effects of social isolation and loneliness, Holt-Lunstad says. But a recent report from the National Academy of Sciences (of which she was a co-author) highlights some reasons **older people may be more susceptible**, including the loss of family or friends, chronic illness, and sensory impairments like hearing loss that can make it harder to interact.

There’s enormous individual variation in people’s ability to handle social isolation and stress, adds Chris Segrin, a behavioral scientist at the University of Arizona. It’s important to remember that not everyone is going into this with the same level of mental health, he says. “Someone who is already having problems with, say, social anxiety, depression, loneliness, substance abuse, or other health problems is going to be particularly vulnerable.”

Overall, though, people are remarkably resilient. And many have endured far worse situations. Segrin points to case studies of U.S. prisoners during the Vietnam War who were confined in tiny cells called “tiger cages,” sometimes in water up to their chin. One trait that predicted their long-term psychological health was optimism: Prisoners who believed that, no matter how bad things were, they would survive and the war would eventually be won **had better mental health** later on in life.

Can technology help compensate for some of the downsides of social distancing?

Texting, email, and apps like Skype and FaceTime can definitely help people stay in touch. “We are fortunate to live in an era where technology

will allow us to see and hear our friends and family, even from a distance,” Christakis says.

Even so, those modes of communication don’t entirely replace face-to-face interactions, Segrin says. “When we interact with other people, a lot of the meaning conveyed between two people is actually not conveyed in the actual words, but in nonverbal behavior,” he says. A lot of those subtleties of body language, facial expressions, and gestures can get lost with electronic media. “They’re not as good as face to face interactions, but they’re infinitely better than no interaction,” Segrin says.

What will we miss by not being able to go to things like concerts and sporting events?

One hundred years ago, French sociologist Émile Durkheim used the phrase “collective effervescence” to describe the shared emotional excitement people experience during religious ceremonies. The same concept applies to sporting events where spectators simultaneously experience the rise and fall of emotions during the course of a game, says Mario Small, a sociologist at Harvard University. “It dramatically magnifies the sensation for you while also reinforcing the idea that you’re something larger than yourself,” Small says.

Such events help build cohesiveness, he says, and although no one expects society to fall apart just because NBA and other sports leagues have suspended their seasons, for many sports fans (and music fans and festival goers) the growing list of canceled events represents another coping mechanism they’ll have to temporarily get by without.

What else can we do?

“Any one of us can pick up a phone and call to see how people are doing and what they might need,” Holt-Lunstad says. She notes that research on altruism has found that giving support can be even more beneficial than receiving it. “Not only will helping others potentially help them, but it can help us to still feel connected as well.”

There’s also the inspiration of people under lockdown in Italy **singing and playing music through open windows** to keep spirits up. “That’s the kind of thing we need!” says Robin Dunbar, an evolutionary psychologist at the University of Oxford. “But maybe only the Italians would have the flair to do that without being embarrassed,” he adds. The rest of us, it seems, will have plenty of time to work up the nerve.

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