

Behavioral insights for minimizing loneliness during the COVID-19 pandemic

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abstract

Social distancing is a necessary policy with an unfortunate name. Although maintaining geographical, or physical, distance from one another is important for slowing the spread of COVID-19, people should strive to maintain social connections even while physically apart. That is because the lack of connection and the attendant loneliness that can result from physical distancing are not benign: loneliness can impair well-being and harm health. In this article, we review evidence demonstrating the ill effects of loneliness and summarize actions that psychological science suggests can enhance social connection during the COVID-19 pandemic despite physical distancing. We also discuss ways that governments, nonprofit organizations, and for-profit organizations can help motivate people to adopt these actions. Efforts to mitigate the medical risks of COVID-19 should not have to exacerbate the public health problem of loneliness.

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Some form of social distancing—a necessary policy with an unfortunate name—has been in force in every American state and much of the rest of the world to slow the spread of COVID-19. Despite the word *social* in the term, the phrase actually refers to maintaining geographical, or physical, distance between people. Everyone should, in fact, strive to maintain social connections while physically apart. The reason: Whereas geographical distancing has the potential to improve public health, true social distancing can exacerbate loneliness and thereby pose a grave risk to psychological and physical health.

Loneliness was understood to be a public health problem by researchers^{1,2} and policy-makers³ well before the COVID-19 pandemic. The chronic feeling that one is alone can cause substantial psychological damage.^{4,5} Lack of social connection predicts mortality to roughly the same degree as heavy alcohol consumption, smoking, obesity, and high blood pressure do.⁶ The physiological sensations that a lack of social connection can produce resemble those induced by hunger, pain, or cold.⁷⁻⁹ This commonality occurs because social connection is a fundamental human need, as studies have shown in multiple cultures.^{10,11} People who feel more socially connected tend to have a stronger sense of meaning in life, are happier, and have greater motivation to achieve than people who feel less connected.¹²⁻¹⁵

Psychological research has accumulated evidence that the actions we describe in this article can increase feelings of social connection. These actions can be implemented even when people are geographically apart from others. However, simply because people can readily engage in activities that boost social connection while physically apart does not necessarily mean they will do so. Research in behavioral science documents this gap between intentions and actions. People know that maintaining a healthy diet, exercising, and saving for old age are important, but they fail to engage in these activities as frequently and regularly as they would ideally like.^{16,17} The same goes for maintaining social links. People may

not use opportunities to connect with others when geographically distant because doing so requires modifying established habits, schedules, and norms—demands that create barriers to behavior change.

Governments, nonprofits, and for-profit organizations can help spur people to connect with others by creating environments that minimize the behavior change required to act and that thereby reduce the intention–action gap. To be sustainable, the interventions will have to not only enhance social connection but also be consistent with the interests and motivations of the organizations and governments delivering them. With each action we propose for enhancing social connection despite physical distance, we highlight steps that governments, nonprofits, and for-profit organizations might undertake to reduce the intention–action gap. (Table 1 summarizes the recommendations.)

Actions That Can Enhance Social Connection

Use Social Media to Actively Connect With Others

The question of how social media use affects social connection and well-being is of obvious interest in a time of sheltering-in-place. The emerging research suggests that the answer depends on how people use social media. Actively participating in direct exchanges with others (for example, by sending messages, posting status updates, or commenting on posts) has been found to increase feelings of connectedness and well-being in both correlational and experimental studies.¹⁸⁻²⁰ In contrast, using social media passively—by merely observing other people’s posts, comments, and likes—reduces well-being, as was found in an experiment in which participants were instructed to use Facebook either actively or passively.²¹ This decline in well-being may occur partly because the self-disclosure that is missing during passive observation is a key determinant of social closeness.²² Disclosing one’s thoughts and feelings to others on social media can help transition online interactions from superficial talk into deeper exchanges.²³

Table 1. Actions that can reduce loneliness from physical distancing

Actions individuals can take	How governments and organizations can help
Use social media to actively connect with others rather than passively observing other people's posts.	Social media companies can encourage people to initiate interactions and share information about themselves on their websites.
Do something for others.	Nonprofits can provide people with opportunities to help and donate to others, enhancing social connection most by targeting the help to specific individuals rather than to others in general.
Engage in activities in synchrony with others.	Local governments, in particular, can move existing classes and cultural events online. Online streaming services can create platforms in which people can communicate with each other as they watch movies and television shows while physically apart.
Create or reenact rituals with others.	Individuals are better suited than governments or organizations to adapt existing rituals to a remote world.
Pursue joint goals with others.	Schools and civic organizations can connect people who are pursuing shared goals, such as parents who are homeschooling their respective children or members of interest groups.
Adopt a mindset of gratitude.	Local governments can create processes by which community members can send thanks to first responders, medical professionals, and others.

These results suggest that to maintain a sense of social connection, people should use social media to actually connect with others rather than to merely observe their activities. It is interesting that this research also found that people typically spend more time observing others than actively connecting with them on social media, suggesting that people may need some nudging to become more interactive.²¹

Private companies have a built-in incentive to promote the value proposition they offer in the marketplace, and enhancing social connection among consumers is a way to do that. For example, they can use their social media platforms to encourage active participation by periodically reminding users to post status updates, respond to others' online posts or by requiring such actions in exchange for some benefit. For example, well before the current crisis, the online employer-review website Glassdoor encouraged engagement and ultimately connection by requiring users to contribute information about their employers to the website in return for seeing evaluations by others.²⁴

Do Something for Others

Helping is known to facilitate social connection and well-being.²⁵ Experiments testing the effects of performing small acts of kindness, such as volunteering or spending money for others' benefit, consistently find that helping

others promotes connection and happiness.^{26–29} The same is true for giving help to organizations: engaging in charitable acts leads to higher levels of well-being.³⁰ Of course, when the giver and receiver are in different locations, helping can be more difficult. Nevertheless, some forms of help—especially gifts, money transfers, or words of support and encouragement—can be proffered from a distance.

One psychological explanation for why helping engenders social connection is that aiding others—especially helping specific individuals³¹—is a conduit for thinking about other people, and the mere act of thinking about another person³² increases the sense of connection to that person, as experiments have shown.^{33–35} This salutary psychological process does not depend on geographical closeness.

Nonprofit organizations are particularly well positioned to motivate people to take helpful actions, given that to succeed in their missions, these organizations need to bolster public engagement with their goals; offering opportunities to help is one way of increasing engagement. For example, the nonprofit Children International enables people to donate funds to help specific children, which fosters social connections between donors and recipients. In another example, the NorthShore University HealthSystem, a hospital system in

the Chicago metropolitan area, has a charitable foundation that allows people to donate and that regularly communicates about its work in providing testing and treatment during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Engage in Activities in Synchrony With Others

If being with others is not possible, doing activities synchronously—in parallel with them—can boost social connection. Research finds that synchronous behavior leads to stronger feelings of affiliation between the participants.^{36–39} Most of these experiments have tested basic behaviors, such as tapping or singing in time, but the findings extend to synchronous activities outside the lab, such as doing yoga or attending religious services at the same time.⁴⁰ Because synchrony does not necessitate physical proximity, social connection can plausibly be enhanced by engaging simultaneously in activities through video chat applications, such as watching television shows with one's extended family, having lunch with colleagues, or exercising with friends.

Before the pandemic, many local governmental agencies already provided multiple opportunities for social connection through synchronous activities such as fitness classes and musical and cultural events. Many of these events can be conducted virtually. In addition, private companies, especially online streaming services, can support synchronous activities by facilitating virtual watch parties—making it easy for people to watch movies or TV shows simultaneously and comment to one another in real time despite being in different places.⁴¹

Create or Reenact Rituals With Others

Rituals are symbolic activities that are typically enacted at or in honor of meaningful events, such as religious holidays or the death of a loved one. However, rituals can also be idiosyncratic and relationship-specific, such as family traditions or activities surrounding the periodic rewatching of a favorite movie. One important psychological function that rituals fulfill is cementing social bonds.⁴² Rituals direct people's attention to a shared experience,

create synchronous behavior (see the previous section), and signal that the participants are part of an "in-group."^{43–45} One experiment that linked an arbitrary ritual to a necklace-beading activity found that children who performed the ritual felt a stronger social connection to one another than did children who engaged only in necklace beading without the ritual.⁴⁶

One implication of this research is that creating and preserving rituals can mitigate loneliness. Although many existing rituals involve physical proximity, some can be adapted to a shelter-in-place world. For example, a weekly card game at a player's home can be carried out using game software while videoconferencing. A monthly dinner at a neighborhood restaurant can be replaced by having meals delivered from the same restaurant but eaten separately while communicating through a joint videoconference. Friends who have taken the possibility of meeting in person for granted—and thus may have continuously postponed doing so because of constant busyness—may nurture friendships by making periodic phone and video calls.

Beyond creating shared experiences, rituals may help to reduce loneliness by evoking *nostalgia*, which is defined as an emotion that results from reflecting on a happy period in the past that cannot be repeated in the present. Research has shown that nostalgic experiences involve memories of oneself interacting with close others, are triggered in part by loneliness, and bolster the sense of connection to others.⁴⁷ Nostalgic feelings also allow people to maintain feelings of well-being as they face the limitations that accompany aging.⁴⁸ Remembering happy times spent with others seems to have positive effects even if the feeling of nostalgia is bittersweet because it was triggered by memories of unrepeatable experiences. Although research has not directly linked rituals and nostalgia, it seems reasonable to think that the former can evoke the latter and, in so doing, reduce loneliness.

Because rituals are often idiosyncratic, individuals are better positioned than organizations and governments to modify them in ways that

accommodate geographical distance. Fortunately, people engage in their existing rituals by default, and so maintaining them at a distance may require only relatively small degrees of behavior change.

Pursue Joint Goals With Others

It has been well established that social incentives—such as accountability to others and information about others’ performance—can motivate behavior aimed at attaining goals.^{49,50} An equally well established but perhaps less emphasized finding is that pursuing joint goals can also foster social connections between people.⁵¹ Pursuing goals together—such as exercising regularly, reading particular books, or homeschooling children who are in the same grade—can facilitate not only the attainment of goals but the strengthening of connections. For example, people who exercise at home can have virtual check-in sessions, members of book clubs can meet virtually, and parents who are homeschooling their respective children can set learning objectives together and help teach one another’s children virtually. Jointly setting goals, reporting on progress, and reflecting on challenges can be beneficial for both reaching goals and enhancing social connection without the need for physical proximity.

Schools are naturally positioned to facilitate the setting of shared goals as well as the holding of periodic virtual meetups that provide accountability, information sharing, and connection. Similarly, civic organizations, such as interest groups, amateur sports clubs, or community-sponsored reading clubs, can facilitate the pursuit of joint goals by providing consistent contact among members for tracking goal progress and providing advice and encouragement—say, through periodic meetings or check-ins. In addition, local government agencies can frame public policies as joint goals to be pursued by the entire community, such as by providing information about citywide progress toward disease prevention, sustainability benchmarks, or other important goals. For example, the Singaporean government sends daily updates to citizens on progress toward reducing

the number of COVID-19 cases relative to relevant benchmarks.

Adopt a Mindset of Gratitude

The objective events that happen in people’s lives rarely influence their well-being as much as their interpretations of these events do.^{52,53} The practice of interpreting events by focusing on the positive can markedly improve well-being by engendering gratitude for the good things one has (and for the bad things one has avoided). For example, in one field experiment, participants in the experimental condition were asked to list things they were grateful for each week for 10 weeks. At the end of the study period, these participants scored higher on measures of well-being than did the participants in the control condition.⁵⁴ Moreover, a set of experiments asking people to express gratitude to others for something the individuals had done in the past increased the grateful people’s sense of social connection to the individuals they thanked.⁵⁵

Being grateful and expressing gratitude do not require physical proximity and are effective ways of maintaining social connection with others. Local governments can help people express gratitude by creating processes that enable them to send words of gratitude and donations to such groups as first responders and medical professionals.

Conclusion

The ill effects of loneliness are serious, but people can reduce loneliness and remain socially connected even while being physically apart. Further, governments and organizations can facilitate such actions. Mitigating the medical risks posed by COVID-19 should not have to exacerbate the public health problem of loneliness.

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