

How social distancing could ultimately teach us how to be less lonely

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By Arthur C. Brooks Columnist

As recently as late February, practically no one had ever heard of “social distancing,” the awkward term for staying away from others to slow the spread of the coronavirus pandemic. It was introduced by public health officials in the last days of February; by the end of the first week of March, it was trending on social media. By the 12th, it had passed “Taylor Swift” as a Google search term; on the 17th, it had passed “Joe Biden.” (The president will no doubt be relieved that “Donald Trump” is still far ahead.)

As panic about the highly contagious virus spread, and the country shut itself down for who-knows-how-long, social distancing meant no hugs; then no handshakes; then no congregating in large groups; then no close in-person interaction with strangers. For some today, it means no meaningful human contact for an indeterminate period of time — weeks, maybe months? No one can say. This is seen as an essential state of affairs to prevent the most apocalyptic scenario, in which the majority of Americans contract the disease, hospitals are overwhelmed and millions die.

While public health officials are no doubt correct that social distancing is necessary, as a social scientist I would add that it is a necessary evil. Enormous amounts of scholarship have shown that social connectedness is central to well-being and good mental health. Indeed, the father of the field of positive psychology, the University of Pennsylvania’s Martin Seligman, places social closeness at the very center of his model of human happiness. Research shows that this includes regular contact not just with friends and family but also with acquaintances and even strangers.

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Why is social closeness so important? And more to the point, why is social isolation so deleterious to our well-being? One explanation comes from the work of Paul Zak, a professor of economic sciences, psychology and management at Claremont Graduate University in California. Zak studies the effects of oxytocin, a highly pleasurable neurotransmitter (not to be confused with the pharmaceutical opioid OxyContin) that acts as a hormone in the brain. It is sometimes called the “love molecule” because it is excreted when we have contact with others.

By endowing social connection with pleasure, oxytocin binds us together. It raises happiness and lowers stress, and increases kindness and charity toward others. In contrast, when we are isolated from others and thus bereft of oxytocin, life can feel cold and empty. For many,

Loneliness and even depression follow. Today's regime of social distancing may well spare us from covid-19 infection. But if it continues too long and without remediation efforts, it will also deprive us of the oxytocin we need to survive and thrive.

Oxytocin is produced in response to physical touch. Based on his research, Zak finds that it spikes at the 20-second point in a hug between romantic partners. But the production can also be spurred by a simple touch between friends. Especially for women, hugging and oxytocin increases lead to lower blood pressure and heart rates.

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Eye contact has a similar effect. Perhaps the most famous study on this was published in 1997 in the Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin. Unacquainted young men and women were asked to stare into each other's eyes and answer a series of personal questions. The participants reported experiencing an intense bond despite never having met; at least two of the couples who met in the experiment wound up getting married. But again, the benefits are not just associated with romance; eye contact between friends, and even strangers, can prompt a pleasurable oxytocin release.

What can we do to keep oxytocin high while avoiding the coronavirus? First, social media is a poor substitute for human contact in the best of circumstances, because it provides neither touch nor eye contact. (No doubt this is why many lonely people binge on social media yet can wind up feeling even lonelier.) While practicing social distancing, it is important to rely instead on technologies that provide a simulacrum for true contact, especially those that allow us to see each other, such as Skype and FaceTime. Make a list of family and friends to contact each day, and set aside an hour or two to do so.

Second, make a point of establishing more eye contact with others in the real world. Doing so can feel strange, especially for some people. But look others in the eyes — even the people you see during forays to the supermarket. (In case you are wondering about how not to seem like a weirdo, research shows that people start feeling uncomfortable with your gaze after about 3.2 seconds.) At home, don't keep your eyes on a phone screen or the page of a book while talking with a family member; look them in the eyes. There's even evidence that direct eye contact with your dog will stimulate oxytocin — in both of you!

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Finally, during these socially distanced days, you need more touch than usual with your touchable loved ones. Suggestion: Make a house rule that everyone gets a 20-second hug every two hours. And if you live alone but have a pet, maybe make a practice, on the hour, of taking a break to pet the dog or cat or even the hamster.

Armed with these protocols, I believe we can successfully endure the necessary evil of social distancing. If we make these practices into habits, we might just come out of this period better than we went in: less glued to social media, making eye contact with others and freely

hugging our friends and family.

That actually sounds pretty good to me.

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