

MAINTAINING SOCIAL CONNECTION WHILE MAINTAINING SOCIAL DISTANCE

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In 2019, I had the great pleasure of listening to Dr Alex Haslam share his thoughts on Social identity and the new psychology of mental health. He highlighted that the key social indicator of poor health outcomes is the subjective experience of loneliness; directly attributable to decreases in social identity, meaningful social connections and belonging. Loneliness has a corrosive impact on our bodies, including increasing the adverse effects of stress and reducing immunity and resilience. He cited studies which found that lonely people are more likely than the non-lonely to die from cardiovascular disease, cancer, respiratory illness, and gastrointestinal causes—essentially, everything. One study found that those with fewer than three people they could confide in and count on for social support were more than twice as likely to die from heart disease than those with more confidants. They were also roughly twice as likely to die of all causes, even when controlling for age, income, and smoking. Surprisingly, the young reported being lonelier than the aged. Some regard this finding as an outcome of excessive social media use and the absence of meaningful relationships.

“Loneliness is not simply being alone,” writes John Cacioppo, the author of *Loneliness: Human Nature and the Need for Social Connection*. He points out that many of us crave solitude, which feels restorative and peaceful. Consequently, we need to differentiate between the objective experience of social isolation and the subjective experience of loneliness. In other words, it’s all about how lonely a person feels. Feelings matter.

The public health measures announced by the Federal Government to curb the COVID-19 infection rate, including social distancing and working from home, are necessary and appear to be having a positive impact. However, these measures may also be associated with decreases in social identity, meaningful connections and belonging, and a parallel epidemic of loneliness.

To get through the COVID-19 pandemic, we need to develop a *connection culture* that is rich in relational engagement and combats loneliness while maintaining social distance between individuals.

Here are practical actions you can take to enhance a connection culture: (Sourced from an internet article ‘Why relational connection is so important during coronavirus pandemic’ <https://www.smartbrief.com/original/2020/03/why-relational-connection-so-important-during-coronavirus-pandemic>):

1. Cultivate a connection mindset. Boosting connection begins with adopting a mindset that connection is desirable and necessary.

2. Maintain an optimistic mindset. There is reason to be optimistic. China and South Korea seem to be past the worst of the COVID-19 outbreak. In time, scientists will develop a vaccine. It’s extraordinary what people can accomplish when they pull together to serve a cause greater than themselves. For example, watch Larry Brilliant’s inspiring TED talk on the case for optimism, in which he describes his experience as part of the multinational effort that eradicated smallpox https://www.ted.com/talks/larry_bright_my_wish_help_me_stop_pandemics.

3. Take care of yourself. You can’t give what you don’t have. To be a good connector with others, we need to make sure we are physically and emotionally healthy and steady. We do this by making sure we are connecting with people who energise us. Each day, schedule phone calls or video calls online with people you enjoy including your work colleagues. Take virtual coffee breaks in the morning and afternoon while connecting on a video call. Schedule a call each evening with relatives and friends who may need connection; this is an excellent time to take the initiative and reconnect with friends

who you may have lost touch with over the years. Also, be sure to get adequate sleep, exercise and eat healthily. When we are stressed or lonely, these practices often get pushed aside.

4. Cultivate practices that produce contentment and avoid excitatory practices. Constantly checking your smartphone, email or social media stimulates the production of dopamine, an excitatory neurotransmitter that in excessive amounts makes us anxious. Switch off when you can. Do one task at a time rather than multitasking. Practices that produce a positive emotion of contentment stimulate the production of neurotransmitters, including serotonin. For example, painting or colouring, reading, assembling puzzles and playing games.

5. Get creative on how you might engage in activities with others. Reinvigorate those social groups, craft, church and sports groups, electronically. Pivot and adapt and reach out innovatively. Have you seen the videos of spontaneous outdoor concerts as Italian neighbours stand on their city balconies and sing? Check out this video of a Melbourne Zookeeper live-streaming his dancing moves <https://www.bbc.com/news/av/world-australia-52000441/coronavirus-melbourne-zookeeper-s-livestream-dance-goes-viral> .

6. Pause to be grateful. Every day, take a few minutes to write down at least three things for which you are grateful. Gratitude increases your emotional strength and also helps you connect better with others.

7. Go for walks. If public health measures allow it, go for a walk each day to get fresh air and sunlight. Remember to maintain 1.5-metre separation from others. If possible, walk among nature. Even being in your yard or walking your city block will help.

8. Play music. Throughout the day, play the music you enjoy. Music is proven to calm anxiety. Have your own dance party (why not?).

9. Learn something new. Boredom is one risk of being physically isolated. Check out this site which highlights 12 world-class museums you can visit online.

<https://www.mentalfloss.com/article/75809/12-world-class-museums-you-can-visit-online>

10. Set aside time each day for a quiet period. Quiet activities include contemplation, meditation, prayer and journaling.

11. Never worry alone! Whenever you feel anxious or stressed, phone a friend and talk it through. Doing this will move your brain activity from the amygdala, where threats are processed, to the cortex where we make rational decisions.

12. Serve others. Reaching out to help others in need boosts neurochemicals that produce positive emotions.

Remember this unmatched season we are in is temporary. It will pass. The situation continually changes, and we face individual and societal challenges that we have not encountered before. It's important we recognise loneliness is a super-stressor. By intentionally increasing social connections while still maintaining social distancing, we make a meaningful difference, not only in our own life but in the lives of others. We bring out "the better angels of our nature." In harnessing the power of connection as we combat COVID-19, we will combat the epidemic of loneliness, as well.