

Nice to meet you, now back off! How to socially distance without seeming rude

March 23 2020, by Nathalie Collins

ALTERNATIVES TO HANDSHAKES, HUGS, HIGH FIVES AND HONGI



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Depending on your culture, you are probably used to greeting someone with a handshake, [hug](#) or [nose bump](#). Well, not any more.

As introverts everywhere silently (of course) celebrate the need for social distance, the rest of us are struggling to navigate how to project our feelings [without touch](#).

How much we touch someone when we greet them [varies by culture, personality and gender, as well as relationship](#). Besides being an important [greeting ritual](#), appropriate touch can also serve to strengthen [emotional bonds](#) and help to establish the relationship status of two people, whether family, friends, business colleagues, or strangers.

Hands off

Important as handshakes are, the need for personal safety trumps everything. You absolutely don't have to shake someone's [hand](#) just because they offer it.

How should we deal with any awkwardness that arises? The [best advice](#) is to talk about it, but not at length. It doesn't require an apology or a long explanation.

When [refusing a handshake](#), do so simply and without fuss, and mention the [coronavirus](#) at the first opportunity. Say something simple and concise, such as: "Due to the virus I am not shaking hands at the moment."

Or, to make it totally clear that it's nothing personal, you could try saying: "I am not shaking anyone's hand."

The tone in which you say these things is crucial. It should be light and maybe even playful. You could further put the other person at ease by saying something friendly like: "It's lovely to see you again."

Whatever you do, do it with a smile. The gesture on your face is more important than the ones with your hands. If you're feeling awkward, make a conscious effort to remember to smile, especially if you are a bloke—one study found that men [tend to smile less often than women](#).

With handshakes and even elbow-bumps now off the table, you could try non-contact options such as a thumbs-up, a "namaste"-style prayer gesture, or even an ironic [jazz hands](#) if you think you can pull it off.

Heading off a hug

While it's vital to prioritize your own health and safety, a guiding principle of etiquette is to put the other person at ease by showing you value their feelings and comfort over your own. Make it less about the "I" and more about the "you."

For example, you can head off a potential hug by getting on the front foot, saying "I'm so glad to see you, I'm sorry we can't hug" rather than waiting for it to happen and then diving out of the way. Being proactive shows you value the other person's feelings and have considered them in advance.

Another way to do it is to emphasize this is part of a collective effort to tackle the virus. Make it clear you're avoiding [physical contact](#) for the other person's safety, as well as your own. This might be a particularly useful strategy with older relatives.

Manners maketh meetings

Although there are no hugs or handshakes online, the same basic etiquette principles apply here too. If working from home, you can show others you value their [feelings](#) by logging in on time to meetings, muting yourself until ready to speak, and making sure any distractions are minimized (not always easy with kids or pets around).

Support the person chairing the meeting, and be just as willing to engage as you would be if you were in the same room. If you think about a

situation in advance and believe that action will make others more comfortable, even if your effort fails, you will be perceived as polite.

As we strive to get used to the strange new feeling of social distancing, remember manners and respect are what make society work. This used to mean shaking hands, but now it means demonstrating our concern for each other's health by *not* shaking hands.

Etiquette is a cornerstone of social interaction, and what we learn from it is this: it is not the distance that matters. Showing each other we care is what brings us closer together.

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