

Play your part, stay apart: Advice and insight on physical distancing

April 14 2020, by Jessica Wolf



Credit: Jessica Wolf

It has been a month since the wide-ranging safer-at-home directive went

into effect in Los Angeles on March 17, following, and followed by, similar policies in other states and countries around the world.

It's been hard. It's wreaked havoc on our economy, our communities and our sense of emotional well-being. People understandably want to connect, go outside, share physical spaces, make a living, enjoy friends and family.

We asked Daniel Fessler, professor of anthropology and director of the UCLA Bedari Kindness Institute to help unpack why physical distancing feels so counterintuitive even while it represents one of the greatest mass acts of kindness—what scientists call "prosocial" behavior—we have witnessed as a species.

Why is it so hard to stay away from the people we are closest to socially?

Our evolved mental mechanisms prioritize close social relationships over disease avoidance because those relationships were so important to the survival of our ancestors. One of the results of this is that we underestimate the risk of contagion that is posed by those to whom we are emotionally close. And as a consequence, people visit their relatives and close friends, and by so doing, they put at risk those whom they love the most.

The truth is, you're probably even more dangerous to your loved ones than you are to strangers. After all, when's the last time that you hugged a stranger on the street? If you care about the welfare of people you care about, then stay away from them.

Why is it so hard for us to fully accept that we might be dangerous to others, even if we don't feel sick?

Our evolved mental mechanisms are only attuned to overt cues of illness, so it's difficult for us to grasp that we can be symptom-free and still infectious.

We can sort of understand that in an abstract way, but it's hard for us to understand it in an emotional way. Likewise, our evolved mechanisms are attuned to harm that is tangible and immediate. The harm that we can do others is transmitted invisibly in this current situation and occurs after a delay of days or weeks. I'm quite confident that none of those college students who were partying on the beach in Florida during [spring break](#) would ever intentionally run over an elderly person in a crosswalk, but they're potentially doing exactly that by contracting and spreading the virus.

How do we remind ourselves that staying away from one another physically is actually a huge act of kindness right now?

As individuals, we all have a role to play in mitigating the impact of this disease. But problematically, social distancing doesn't feel like prosocial behavior. And the reason it doesn't feel like [prosocial behavior](#) is because in the world of our ancestors, helping other people and working together meant working face-to-face and side-by-side. You can think, for example, about how good it feels to help a stranger on the street or to work as a team to clean up trash on a beach or repaint an elementary school.

These things feel really good, right? And this is because our evolved psychological mechanisms are sensitive to cues that we are part of a prosocial cooperative group.

You may also think about how great it feels to do the wave with a huge

crowd at a sporting event or to sing the national anthem together with thousands of people. These things are emotionally moving. They feel great because we are sensitive to the situation in which we're coordinating our actions with those of many people around us towards a common goal.

Yet in the current crisis, for most of us, the first prosocial action that we must engage in is to stay away from other people. And ordinarily, staying away from other people can feel selfish. So staying away from other people doesn't feel like we're helping anyone.

I encourage everyone to think creatively. How can you help? For example, millions of kids are out of school right now. Can you tutor children via video link? Maybe just read a child a story. Many small businesses are in danger of going bankrupt. Can you purchase products or services at a distance that will help them to stay afloat?

Or maybe you can help deliver meals or medication to the elderly or to children who normally rely on school lunches and school nurses for their needs—of course, conducting yourself appropriately with regard to the safeguards of hygiene and social distancing when you are making those deliveries. Think outside the box. Get some ideas online. Find a way to help other people while still playing your part and staying apart.

What can we do to encourage others to continue to practice safe distancing until city and state leaders relax guidelines?

If you see someone ignoring social distancing guidelines, you need to acknowledge in discussion with them that you understand that it may seem safe because neither you nor they feel sick right now. But despite this, it doesn't mean that either of you can't transmit the virus to the

other or to someone else. How we feel physically is simply not an accurate index of whether we might harm other people by being near them. Those kinds of conversations, of course, you need to hold at a [safe distance](#), six feet or so.

In having those conversations, it's helpful to think about language. Language can reflect the priorities and needs at the moment. People coin new words all the time. Just think, for example: Phrases like "gig economy," "screen time" or "trending" weren't things a few years back. I find acronyms particularly useful in this regard. You can Google the origins of two of my favorites—snafu (situation normal, all fouled up) and fubar (fouled up beyond all recognition)—two terms that were coined during other desperate emergency times.

We can coin a new acronym, a new word: PYPASA. It stands for "Play Your Part, Stay Apart." You can use the word as praise for people who are doing a great job of social distancing: "Hey, man, way to go! You're really PYPASA-ing," and remind people who might forget or who might underestimate the importance of social distancing.

Provided by University of California, Los Angeles

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