

Move over social distancing, it's time for physical distancing

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Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

With more and more countries shutting down, about half the globe is social distancing. The WHO says it's time to give up the buzz phrase for physical distancing instead.

Despite its widespread use, [social distancing](#) can be misleading as a term.

To combat COVID-19, we should be encouraging the strengthening of social ties while maintaining physical distancing. The switch will help stop connecting being 'social' with something negative.

Physical distancing: embrace it

"Technology right now has advanced so greatly that we can keep connected in many ways without actually physically being in the same room or physically being in the same space with people," said WHO epidemiologist Maria Van Kerkhove in a daily news briefing. "We're changing to say [physical distance](#) and that's on purpose because we want people to still remain connected."

Dr. Van Kerkhove added: "[Y]ou may have heard us use the phrase physical distancing instead of social distancing ... But it doesn't mean that socially we have to disconnect from our loved ones, from our family."

Speaking to [Al Jazeera](#), Martin W Bauer, professor of social psychology at the London School of Economics, called the change "long overdue." Prof. Bauer explained why he welcomed the change: "It occurred to me from the beginning that this was an unfortunate choice of language to talk about 'social distance,' when actually what was meant was 'physical distance.'"

What's in a term?

"Physical distance is measured in metric metres or centimetres. It is the geographical distance from person A to person B while 'social distance' is a measure of distance across social boundaries," Prof. Bauer continued. "It is good that WHO finally tried to correct an early error of mistaking physical distance for social distance." He says it's important to

physically separate ourselves from others, yet continue to remain socially connected. "In these strange times of the virus, we want clear physical distance (minimum two metres), but at the same time, we want people to remain close to each other 'socially.'"

Some experts don't think the change in terminology is needed. "People understand what [social distancing] is," Lori Peek, sociology professor at the University of Colorado at Boulder and director of the Natural Hazards Center, [told the *Washington Post*](#). "They are adopting it as individuals, and organizations are adopting policies that are rooted in this protective action."

Semantics or not, what's undeniable is that social networks and connections will be key to overcoming COVID-19. "History has shown us that collaborative, mutually supportive communities are the ones that are most successful at sustainably recovering from large disasters," said Robert Olshansky, an emeritus professor of urban and [regional planning](#) at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign who has studied how communities recover after large urban disasters.

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