Social psychologist explains proper social distancing, steps to counter loneliness

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In response to the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, the public is being asked to do what we aren't always well-equipped to do in the face

of a crisis—nothing.

By now, you are probably more than familiar with the term "social distancing."

Humans have basic needs for emotional and social connection. While that connection may be more natural in-person, we—as a society—need to do our part to reduce transmission of the virus and flatten the curve.

Those efforts include washing your hands, sanitizing common surfaces and maintaining at least 6 feet of distance from others. But as Tony Love, assistant professor of sociology in the UK College of Arts and Sciences, stresses in the Q&A below, it's important to stay socially connected—even during times when we can't physically be together.

UKNow: Lately, we've been hearing and using the phrase "social distancing." How would you describe social distancing? And based on your definition, is that what we—as a society—are being asked to do?

Love: "Social distancing" is an interesting term. I think whoever came up with the term wanted to convey that we should keep a safe physical distance from each other while socializing. In all reality what we should be doing is physical distancing, not social distancing. We should remain physically separated from one another, but it is very important that we remain socially close.

UKNow: By asking people to socially, instead of physically, distance themselves, could that cause unintentional harm? What are some of the psychological impacts of social distancing?

Love: I think most people get the gist of it. Anyone who pays attention knows that we are being asked to stay physically apart from each other (literally 6 feet apart). However, stricter guidelines for physical separation (stay-at-home orders, for example) threaten to impact socialization and create real social distance between people. The key is to stay connected to friends and family from a safe distance, whether that be by phone, text, video, etc.

UKNow: Does using the term "social distancing" push against our fundamental need for connection?

Love: I certainly think that some people will engage in a version of physical distancing that includes the cutting off of social ties. That is not a good strategy for mental health or self worth. The self is socially created. That is, the reflected appraisals of others give support to the definition we hold for ourselves. As such, feedback from others is absolutely vital to our own self-esteem and even our own identity. Whether we realize it or not, interaction with others in our day-to-day lives is crucial for knowing who we are as individuals. Even interactions with unpleasant coworkers or strangers give us information about ourselves.

UKNow: While practicing physical distancing is imperative to our health, how crucial is it for us—as a society—to connect socially during this time of uncertainty? Perhaps, do we need social connectivity now more than ever before?

Love: That's a great question. In the absence of typical social situations, it is important to connect with each other in other ways. It would be a good strategy to intentionally check in with people who you normally

keep tabs on in person. For example, before the changes made in response to the virus, you might have noticed your coworker or friend having a rough time just by happenstance. Since you are in relatively close physical contact, you could pick up on nonverbal cues. Now, on the other hand, you may not notice. If there are people you care about who you haven't heard from in a while, you might want to make an effort to check on them. In the absence of work routines, intentional social connectivity has new importance.

UKNow: That being said, how do we remain socially connected and responsibly engaged during this time?

Love: As we have all seen, technology helps us stay connected as much as possible. Many people can work from home because of technological innovation. Friends and family can call one another with voice or video. Email and other types of text messaging, of course, are ubiquitous. Although technology mediated interaction can feel clunky or inefficient, everyone can learn to make the best of it. Social interaction might feel better or more authentic in person for a number of reasons, but technology mediated interactions can still be fulfilling as a substitute. The reason that in-person interaction feels better (or more efficient) is because we do a LOT of communicating in nonverbal ways. We know a lot more (or think we know a lot more) about the people we are interacting with when we can see them clearly and in real-time. If we have good information about who another person is in an interaction, then we can make inferences about their motivations and make attributions about what their words really mean. We don't really speak to each other with very specific terms. So, we need this extra information to fully understand. Knowing another person's motives and meanings is not only important for knowing who they are and for defining the situation, but it is also important for defining who WE are vis a vis the other person and the situation. So, you see, uncertainty about another

person or persons' meanings and uncertainty about the situation lead to uncertainty about our own role in the situation. That makes us uncomfortable and likely to favor more certain situations (that is, situations with more readily available information). My recommendations for fruitful interactions during a time of technology mediated interaction would be twofold. First, try to use the most specific language you can muster. Second, everyone takes everyone else at their word. You don't have enough information to make inferences regarding ulterior motives or secondary meanings. This will cut down on miscommunication, and it will make everyone feel better about the interaction. Say what you mean (as specifically as possible), and mean what you say.

UKNow: I think, some people feel compelled to do their part—to help others. Does physical distancing still allow us to provide material support to those most vulnerable? What are some examples?

Love: The economic impacts of social distancing regulations are staggering. Whether and how we recover from this economically is a good question for an economist, and I would hope that their answer would be hopeful. I've seen some movements aimed at supporting local businesses, especially restaurants, by ordering food for pickup. This and other strategies certainly allow us to help one another without too much breaching of safe physical distances. You will know better than I about other ways to support worthy causes, including monetary donations (which require absolutely no physical contact). Please educate me and others on this point.

UKNow: Just as physical distancing can combat the virus, what are the long-lasting effects of finding

creative and socially responsible ways to connect?

Love: I think there will be some long-lasting effects. I truly believe that new relationships will be formed via technology. Some folks will become friends who otherwise never would have done so. I also believe that some relationships will dissolve, some for the better and others for the worse. Finding innovative technological strategies to connect will have positive effects on society moving forward. We all know the saying, "Necessity is the mother of invention." Here we have the need to interact (or at least continue our job functions) and the need to be physically separated. What innovation will meet these needs simultaneously? We are seeing the innovation of new interaction techniques before our very eyes.

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