

# Order amid chaos: Why jigsaw puzzles are a popular pandemic pastime

May 25 2020, by Sean McNeely

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The rise of jigsaw puzzle sales during the COVID-19 pandemic is, well,

puzzling. Social media is filled with images of completed, half-completed or sometimes abandoned puzzles.

Leading jigsaw puzzle manufacturers are struggling to keep up with the demand, with some even selling out completely. What's behind this surge?

Marcel Danesi is a professor of semiotics—the study of signs and symbols—in the University of Toronto's department of anthropology in the Faculty of Arts & Science. He is also the author of several books on puzzles including *The Puzzle Instinct: The Meaning of Puzzles in Human Life*.

Danesi recently chatted with Arts & Science writer Sean McNeely about what may be driving the pandemic puzzle trend.

Why have jigsaw puzzles become so popular during this pandemic, especially when we have so much technology at our fingertips?

Jigsaw puzzles involve tactility. Touching the pieces, moving them around with the hands, etc., allows the brain and body to interact, leading to a successful and satisfying solution—usually. In an age of disembodiment, this re-integration of body and mind is becoming very common.

Jigsaws are an example of this trend. I know this sounds far-fetched, but I have found that young people today have become so accustomed to doing everything on the screen that when they discover the "pleasure" of the body in something as seemingly trivial as jigsaws, they plunge into it.

## **What do puzzles provide for people psychologically?**

There is always a sense of chaos within us, due probably to the fact that

life is so unpredictable. Life is a puzzle with no answers. Puzzles do have answers and reaching them provides a kind of instant and temporary relief from the angst.

They restore order to the chaos in our minds. Henry Dudeney, a great puzzle-maker, put it this way: "Every good puzzle, like virtue, is its own reward." So, when there is a sense of order in the mind, I can only infer that illness can be obverted—for a while at least.

## **How do puzzles combat the negative feelings, anxiety and uncertainty that come with coping with this pandemic?**

They are a form of escape. Once you are concentrated on doing a puzzle, it seems the outside world recedes temporarily. You immerse yourself into the intricacy of the puzzle and forget about everything else. Of course, this is afforded by other activities, such as reading and video games. But puzzles certainly fall into this category.

## **Do you see puzzles as a solitary pursuit, or do they help bring people together?**

They are largely solitary – unless they are turned into games, such as crossword puzzles becoming the game Scrabble. However, puzzle lovers, when they discover each other, do share experiences concretely. So, crossword clubs, etc., bring people together with a common pursuit and this is a good thing, especially nowadays.

## **Are puzzles good for all personality types?**

Like music or reading, certain people take to certain [puzzle](#) genres and

then stick to them fervently. However, if exposed to other genres most people will become interested. Some people stay away from them for fear of failing. Not finding a solution can be frustrating and even self-demeaning, since we see them as indicators of intelligence—which is not the case, by the way.

If you have re-discovered the joy of piecing together [jigsaw puzzles](#), the Thomas Fisher Rare Book Library [has an online page that offers a number of digital literary-themed puzzles](#), as well a timer to measure your speed.

Provided by University of Toronto

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