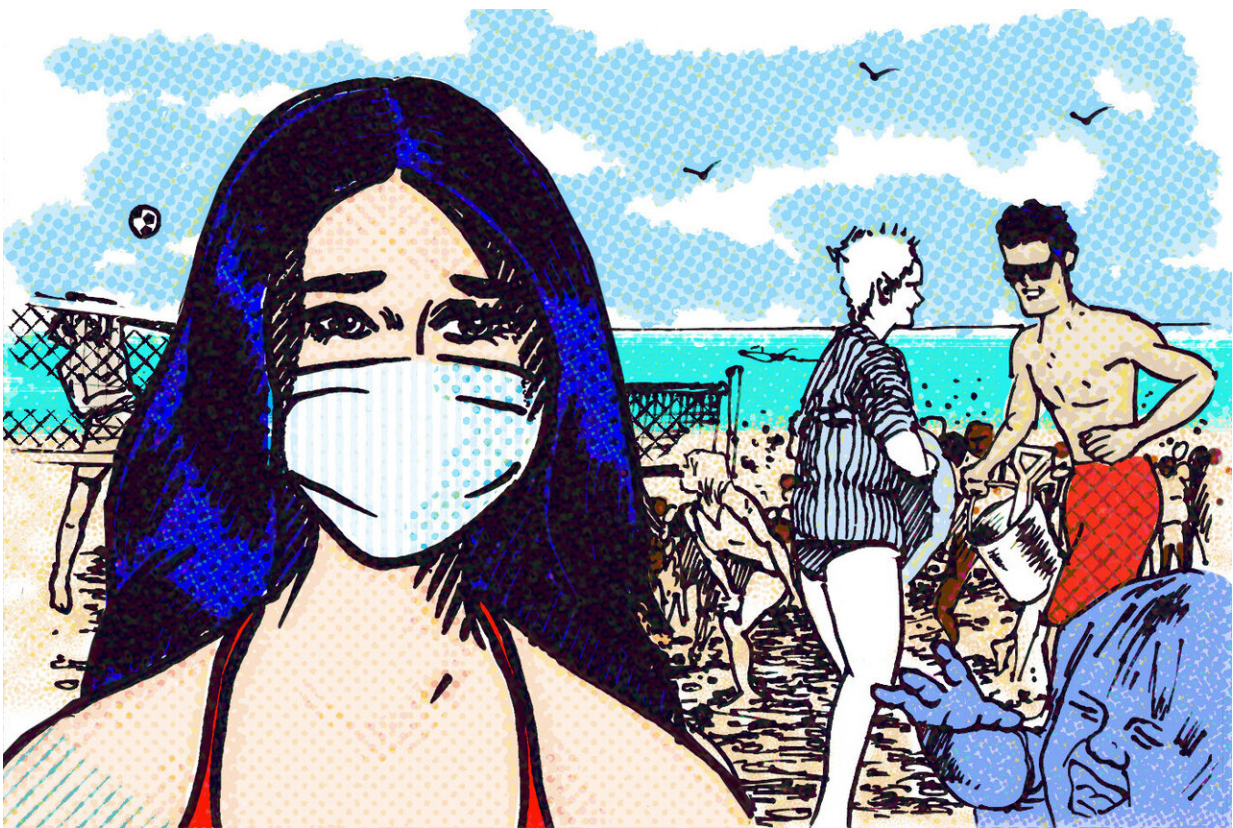


Distancing to prevent the spread of the coronavirus can be awkward. How are can we deal with it?

June 11 2020, by Roberto Molar Candanosa



Credit: Gregory Grinnell/Northeastern University

Let's be real: Keeping our distance from one another to slow the spread of the coronavirus can be super awkward—like when that uncle

genuinely forgets distancing etiquette and tries to show you a meme on his phone.

Or when someone at the park "isn't worried about that stuff," but still wants to come and pet your dog, or when a shopper or commuter rushes past you, too close for comfort.

For some people, especially those who have trouble being assertive, asking others to respect the [recommended distance](#) of at least six feet isn't just awkward. It's an excruciatingly uncomfortable experience.

Often, people can feel that way because they are afraid to come off as rude and create tension with others, says William Sharp, an assistant professor of psychology at Northeastern.

Those fears, he says, often stem from people's misunderstanding of aggressiveness—that there's something inherently bad about it.

"There really isn't," says Sharp, who is also a practicing psychoanalyst in Boston. "It's just a feeling that can be used constructively or destructively."

While aggressiveness generally involves a complex set of behaviors that people use to attack others, Sharp says it can also play an important role if it's used in everyday interactions when people need to be assertive.

Those interactions can range from complex interchanges with an overly demanding boss at work, to simple discussions of dinner plans with a loved one.

To explain the nuances of aggressiveness, Sharp uses an example of a person who, after hitting a pothole while driving, becomes extremely aggravated and lashes out at other people for it. That would be

destructive behavior.

"You could also get pissed off enough to call the department of public works, report that there's a pothole on your street, and ask that somebody get out there and fill it," Sharp says. "That would be using the same aggression in a more constructive way."

Scientists have been rushing to study several aspects of how the coronavirus spreads, from how much exposure someone would need to contract COVID-19, to the period when someone begins and stops shedding the virus.

To reduce some of the risk associated with the specifics that remain unclear about how the [coronavirus](#) infects the [human body](#), researchers and public health officials have emphasized that groups of people who don't live in the same place should stay at least six feet apart at all times.

That means that people who are trying to follow those guidelines might need to ask others to stay back, particularly if taking a step back themselves isn't always the easiest option.

Think supermarkets and public transportation—or other spaces people feel that they should not avoid, such as large gatherings to protest the killings of Black people.

Even now, when the effects of COVID-19 have permeated the world for months, asking people to keep their distance is a new aspect of life, and doing it can be difficult. That's especially true because people might not always have the right words to do it, Sharp says. In other words, the pandemic isn't just changing our lives, it's also changing our vocabulary.

Sharp says the answer to that problem is practicing the words and embracing the situations in which people need that assertiveness.

Practicing what to say can help most people cope with their fear of being shunned, rejected, or mocked, he says.

"As soon as you start saying it, and you realize that some of these irrational fears don't actually happen, it becomes a little bit easier to say it more and more, and you get better," Sharp says.

Of course, each situation and interaction will be different, and the exact words and approach people will need to ask others to back off will vary. Still, Sharp has one piece of advice: Tell those who come too close to you how uncomfortable their approach makes you feel, before asking them to back off.

Focusing on yourself is an old strategy in clinical psychology, Sharp says. He recommends it for other tense situations, such as discussions about something [significant others](#) said or did—even for something as simple as reaching an agreement on what to eat for dinner.

"You generally are not going to say, 'Well, you're an idiot,'" Sharp says. "Instead, you can say that you really wanted beef tonight and not pasta."

As people learn to voice their concerns, Sharp also wants them to recognize that being with others always involves tension. And, he says, learning new ways to interact with one another will be just one of the things we will all need to figure out along with the many other aspects of life affected by the COVID-19 pandemic.

"We can't control what people are going to do," Sharp says. "But we've learned to deal with the conflict. That's what our personalities are, they're the ways in which we've developed to deal with the conflict that's between us."

Provided by Northeastern University

Citation: Distancing to prevent the spread of the coronavirus can be awkward. How are can we deal with it? (2020, June 11) retrieved 6 May 2024 from

<https://medicalxpress.com/news/2020-06-distancing-coronavirus-awkward.html>

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