

Mental health expert discusses the importance of maintaining social ties in an era of physical distancing

June 1 2020, by Michele Charlton



Credit: Andrea Piacquadio from Pexels

The novel coronavirus causing COVID-19 has now reached more than 210 countries. In the absence of vaccines and antivirals, the remarkable speed and global spread of the virus can currently only be reduced by

rigorous implementation of traditional public health measures, such as physical distancing. While effective for reducing the rapid spread of COVID-19, it can increase feelings of social isolation and loneliness, negatively impacting people's mental health.

We asked Dr. Sandra Meier, an associate professor in the Faculty of Medicine and Tier 2 Canada Research Chair in Developmental Psychopathology and Youth Mental Health, to provide perspective on the impact of physical distancing and share tips on how we can remain connected to each other, even from a distance.

What impact is physical distancing having on our mental health?

Physical distancing is likely to increase feelings of social isolation and loneliness, which negatively impact our mental health. In addition, these feelings have consistently been reported to be associated with higher rates of cardiovascular disease, cancer, psychosis, depression, anxiety, a poorer quality of sleep, and less [physical activity](#). The [lack of sleep](#) and physical activity are especially concerning as robust evidence suggests these behaviors play a central role in strengthening immunity.

Adequate sleep is a core component of mental health. It is vital for adolescent brain function and behavior, because of its involvement in brain development, learning, memory, and emotion regulation. Altered sleep is not only a [symptom](#) of mental illnesses, but also plays an important role in triggering and maintaining some conditions. So sleep loss or altered daily rhythm timing can trigger mania in bipolar patients, and persistent sleep problems increase the risk of relapse in depression, and targeted treatment of insomnia symptoms improves depression symptoms and reduces the risk of relapse in patients.

Increasing physical activity as a treatment strategy for psychiatric disorders has shown positive effects on symptoms. It can help by alleviating specific symptoms of a mental illness rather than treating the underlying illness. For example, it can reduce common somatic symptoms of depression (for example: disturbed sleep, diminished appetite) that are affected by regular exercise, rather than by alleviating the depression itself.

What is the long-term impact of being in isolation?

Longer time periods of isolation are associated with more psychological distress and poorer mental health. This means that people are more likely to experience an onset of mental illness or a worsening of their clinical symptomatology.

Isolation can also increase the risk to develop cardiovascular diseases. There are even reports suggesting an increased risk of premature death.

Do you have any tips for how we can maintain our social ties?

I believe it is absolutely essential to stay connected to family, friends, neighbors, working colleagues, and our community to overcome this difficult time together. I only have one very simple tip—be creative. Leverage modern technology, call and message your loved ones, or create virtual encounters. Try having a dinner together online, meeting in zoom bar, working out, or finding your groove together with a virtual dance party.

If you have children let them play board games, paint or watch movies together with their friends online. Or even have them play with others outside. If you live at a calm street, tell your children to stay on one side

of the street and their friends on the other, have both practice good hand hygiene and they can play ball, badminton, tennis and other sports together.

Provided by Dalhousie University

Citation: Mental health expert discusses the importance of maintaining social ties in an era of physical distancing (2020, June 1) retrieved 27 April 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2020-06-mental-health-expert-discusses-importance.html>

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