

Cybersex, erotic tech and virtual intimacy are on the rise during COVID-19

July 14 2020, by Simon Dubé, Dave Ancil and Maria Santaguida



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The coronavirus pandemic is affecting [sexuality and relationships](#). The confinement and social distancing measures protecting us are unintentionally exacerbating [intimacy-related difficulties and limiting](#)

[people's access to partners.](#)

For some, COVID-19 is synonymous with loneliness and relationship stress. Many people end up choosing between intimacy and security. [Singles looking for partners resign to celibacy](#), while couples experience tensions related to forced isolation.

But creativity loves adversity.

In the face of a global pandemic, [we are finding new, innovative and safe ways to \(re\)connect intimately and sexually through technology.](#)

As researchers studying erototics, a field intersecting sexuality and technology, we are interested in how human-machine erotic interactions can contribute to well-being—even in times of worldwide health crisis.

Sex in the time of coronavirus

The COVID-19 lockdown and social distancing measures are impacting human life. Paradoxically, these protective measures also generate unintended stressors. For example, [illness-related anxiety, heightened grief of losing a loved one, loneliness, domestic violence and financial stress.](#)

When it comes to sex and relationships, the pandemic is creating a situation where people are either living in close proximity (possibly with partners, children or other family members) or are limited in their opportunities to find partners for prolonged periods of time. These circumstances can directly impact our [intimacy.](#)

A recent online survey found that [a majority of participants in a sample of 1,559 adults reported a decline in the quality of their sex lives \(43.5 percent\) during the COVID-19 pandemic, while only a minority reported](#)

[improvements \(13.6 percent\)](#). Interestingly, however, despite people reporting a decrease in the frequency of sexual behaviours compared to the past year, one in five individuals (20.3 percent) added at least one new activity to their sex life, such as a new sexual position, incorporating pornography or engaging in cybersex. Compared to people who made no change, those who spiced things up were more likely to report improvements in their [sex life](#) since the beginning of the pandemic.

Additionally, preliminary evidence from another study suggests that [believing that a partner is caring and understanding, can partly shield against some of the impact of COVID-19 stressors on the relationship](#).

Sex tips for the pandemic

Suggestions for [safer sex during COVID-19 have been proposed](#). These include: hand-washing; limiting sexual activities to partners who are part of the household; using physical barriers such as masks, condoms and dental dams; creatively enacting positions that reduce risks of transmission and masturbating.

As the New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene says: "[You are your safest sex partner](#)."

This same department also suggests taking a break from in-person dates and instead trying virtual dating, sexting and kinky "Zoom parties."

Necessity is the mother of invention, and this is particularly true of technology. Including a suggestion like the video-conferencing platform Zoom is telling. The integration of social and interactive technologies in work and relationships accelerates exponentially with confinement.

COVID-19 and sex technologies

Sex tech is more than sex toys [or objects used for sexual stimulation](#). It is a billion-dollar industry that builds a wide range of products for [interactive, immersive and connected erotic experiences](#). This includes but is not limited to: virtual, augmented and mixed reality, "teledildonics," dating applications and platforms, online erotic games and [artificial erotic agents \(or erobots\)](#) such as sex robots, virtual partners or erotic chatbots.

Sex tech is perhaps one of the only industries resilient to pandemics. The [sale of sex toys skyrocketed](#), companies have reported an increase in [sex and love doll purchases](#) and [sex-tech startups are thriving](#). While numbers from the private sector should be interpreted with caution, [COVID-19 is affecting how we explore intimacy with ourselves and others](#).

Sex tech is a safer way to [fulfil our sexual and emotional needs](#) in times of lockdown and social distancing. It offers innovative and inclusive ways to erotically engage with humans and machines that can address our desires for sexual pleasure and also cater to our needs for affection and companionship. Sex tech could help alleviate the suffering borne out of solitude or forced celibacy and let us keep touch with our loved ones while we wait for the storm to pass.

In sum, the [pandemic](#) could be a chance for us to become a bit more "digisexual," or sexually oriented towards technology.

Beyond the pandemic

Historically, societies are deeply [transformed by great pandemics](#). COVID-19 is no exception, with a renewed interest for remote work—and the adoption of new erotic behaviours. As such, we can realistically expect that norms and practices regarding love and sex may open up as we are currently exposed to a diverse range of more positive and safe intimate technological possibilities.

Several [studies](#) assessing the [impact](#) of the [COVID-19 crisis](#) on [human intimacy are currently seeking responses](#).

Whether this will lead to enduring change remains unknown. We should take full advantage of the connectivity established by technology to extend the boundaries of love and sex, now and for the future.

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