COVID-19 is evaporating casual connections and why that's bad

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Credit: Joshua Rodriguez/Unsplash

It's the conversations with a local barista, a bus driver, a casual work acquaintance, or a person in line at the store that make up what the experts call "weak ties": individuals we don't know well, if at all, but who

nevertheless contribute to our happiness and sense of belonging.

These encounters have largely gone missing with the advent of stay-at-home orders and lockdowns issued in an effort to combat the spread of COVID-19, and that loss could be taking a significant toll on our emotional health and professional productivity.

"These ties are critical to our well-being because they end up giving us the opportunity to vent, confide, brainstorm, and discuss things that we think are important," said Mario Luis Small, Harvard's Grafstein Family Professor of Sociology, who studies personal networks. "Because of COVID-19 we don't have that many opportunities to just run into people anymore, not just strangers, but also those who are not exactly strangers but people we know casually, or because they're in our profession or line of work."

Research suggests there are many reasons these informal connections are so beneficial. They are typically brief, taking up little time in our overscheduled lives. They offer people a way to be seen, heard, and appreciated, as well as the chance for them to express gratitude. They frequently come free of any expectations. They are likely to be bridges to other communities and networks. And, perhaps most important of all, according to Small, they can help us cope with some of life's most pressing challenges.

People may think otherwise about themselves, "but they will repeatedly, willingly, and even without much reflection confide deeply personal matters to individuals they are not close to, even to those they barely know," writes Small in his book "Someone To Talk To," which looks at how individuals decide who they will turn to when they need to talk something through. In his book Small also notes that "approaching individuals they are not especially close to appears to be what adult Americans do more than half the time they confide in others."

Why do we opt to share personal information with strangers instead of friends or family? For Small, empathy plays a key role. We often talk to a colleague even though we may not know them well, he said, because we think they will be able to relate to a work problem or concern. "It's this idea of cognitive empathy," said Small, "the ability to understand your predicament as you understand it."

Yet when we confide in casual acquaintances, or even a stranger sitting next to us on a plane, with news of a cancer diagnosis or pregnancy before we tell those closest to us, something else is going on. In part, Small explained, we do so because we don't want our secrets spreading. "You don't tell your mother about something very embarrassing because the whole family is going to know," he said.

Perhaps most surprisingly, Small found adult Americans frequently share deeply personal information with someone "simply because they were there." As part of the research for his book Small asked a group of people to describe the last time they spoke to someone about a sensitive topic and whether they were planning to talk to that particular person, planning to talk to somebody but not necessarily that person, or not planning to talk to anybody at all. "The last two categories represented roughly 40 percent of the replies," said Small.

"These results point to the fact that life doesn't come at you at times when you are conveniently in front of your spouse or your parents," said Small, "and so the answer 'because they were there' suggests the need for venting strongly supersedes a rational belief that we have to be careful about whom we vent to."

But with social distancing and working from home come fewer chance in-person encounters in our daily lives. Small recommends turning to an informal messaging option like an online chat function as a way to check in with colleagues or friends, in place of long virtual exchanges. "It is

sort of low-consequence. There's no camera. You don't have to check for broccoli in your teeth. I think that's actually probably a really kind of low-cost way of getting a little bit of that kind of opportunity for serendipity."

Besides making us feel less happy, the lack of casual interactions also may be undermining productivity. According to Harvard Business School Assistant Professor Ashley Whillans, the loss of impromptu office conversations isn't good for morale or the bottom line. Whillans, who co-authored a recent paper titled "Why You Miss Those Casual Friends So Much," said weak work ties represent "an underestimated source of sensemaking and of creativity."

"They're something we need to build time in for, not only [socially] to increase well-being, but also to have that kind of sense-making process in the workplace or that water-cooler conversation that's now gone missing," said Whillans, whose forthcoming book is "Time Smart: How to Reclaim Your Time and Live a Happier Life."

Most workers find that they attend at least as many meetings as before—in many cases more, because remote work can call for more coordination. But this structured virtual contact lacks something important, said Whillans: Impromptu conversations in office kitchens or corridors often go a long way toward helping employees feel connected to their colleagues, and to the work they are doing.

"The hallway conversation is not happening, so some people are not understanding what the work is, or not feeling like their team is cohesive or on the same page, which can lead to difficulty in getting things done," she said.

In addition, there's increasing evidence that more time spent on video conference calls is associated with higher levels of stress, said Whillans.

Reports suggest Zoom calls heighten our anxiety and leave us exhausted, in part because we have to work extra-hard to understand video conversations in the absence of nonverbal cues that are obvious in face-to-face exchanges. Harvard researchers have also found that many of us are working longer days. So when it comes to scheduling time for a call with family or friends, that too can feel like work instead of a break from the daily grind, Whillans said.

"We're overscheduling our calendar to compensate for the lack of social interaction," she said. "But in doing so, we're not leaving any time for these informal interactions within our personal or professional lives, which are so critical."

When looking to connect with weak work ties, and even with close family and friends, Whillans, like Small, suggests a quick chat with an online app, a text, or a phone call instead of a long conversation over Zoom.

"We need to reduce the default setting of one-hour video calls and give each other a break."

Provided by Harvard University

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