Medical Xpress

Examining the social impact of COVID-19

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After being forced to relocate from their MIT dorms during the COVID-19 crisis, two members of Professor Rebecca Saxe's lab at the McGovern Institute for Brain Research are now applying their psychology skills to study the impact of mandatory relocation and social isolation on mental health.

"When 'social distancing' measures hit MIT, we tried to process how the implementation of these policies would impact the landscape of our social lives," explains graduate student Heather Kosakowski, who conceived of the study late one evening with undergraduate Michelle Hung. This landscape is broad, examining the effects of being uprooted and physically relocated from a place, but also changes in social connections, including friendships and even dating life.

"I started speculating about how my life and the lives of other MIT students would change," says Hung. "I was overwhelmed, sad, and scared. But then we realized that we were actually equipped to find the answers to our questions by conducting a study."

Together, Kosakowski and Hung developed a survey to measure how the social behavior of MIT students, postdocs, and staff is changing over the course of the pandemic. Survey questions were designed to measure loneliness and other aspects of mental health. The survey was sent to members of the MIT community and shared on social media in mid-March, when the pandemic hit the United States, and MIT made the unprecedented decision to send students home, shift to online instruction, and dramatically ramp down operations on campus.

More than 500 people responded to the initial survey, ranging in age from 18 to 60, living in cities and countries around the world. Many but not all of those who responded were affiliated with MIT. Kosakowski and Hung are sending follow-up surveys to participants every two weeks and the team plans to collect data for the duration of the pandemic.

"Throwing myself into creating the survey was a way to cope with feeling sad about leaving a community I love," explains Hung, who flew home to California in March and admits that she struggles with feelings of loneliness now that she's off campus.

Although it is too soon to form any conclusions about their research, Hung predicts that feelings of loneliness may actually diminish over the course of the pandemic.

"Humans have an impressive ability to adapt to change," she says. "And I think in this virtual world, people will find novel ways to stay connected that we couldn't have predicted."

Whether we find ourselves feeling more or less lonely as this COVID-19 crisis comes to an end, both Kosakowski and Hung agree that it will fundamentally change life as we know it.

The Saxe lab seeks additional survey participants. To learn more about this study or to participate in the survey, click here.

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