

Social distancing for the social animal

“Man is by nature a social animal” penned Aristotle in his treatise *Politics*, and since that time, scientists have confirmed that humans are indeed social animals. Our brains are quite literally wired to be social.

Therefore, when we are called upon to engage in “social distancing” during the coronavirus pandemic, it’s not our nature to do so. What, then, does it mean to “socially distance”? Does it mean not going to parties? Not going on a date or taking a trip? Concrete guidelines can answer these questions. Below are links to help you guide your “social distancing” behavior.

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention:
cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/php/risk-assessment.html

Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration:
store.samhsa.gov/system/files/sma14-4894.pdf

What about social isolation?

There is no avoiding social distancing to control this pandemic. Of course, the people who are most threatened by the pandemic—people older than 60 and those with preexisting conditions—are the ones most vulnerable to isolation. However, all of us face loneliness as we agree to social distance to bring coronavirus under control.

Isolation and loneliness are significant mental health challenges, and so we need to take care of both our mental and physical health (indeed, our mental and physical health are intertwined). Following are some tips to help you stay connected during this public health emergency.

1. **Mitigate your own risk.** If you’re young and healthy, take recommended health precautions seriously. Young people are some of the highest risk for transmitting the virus to others. Wash your hands frequently; stay away from crowded public spaces (keep a distance of six feet between you and others); and leave the house only when necessary.



2. **Get together outdoors and not in tight crowded spaces.** Take a walk in the park or the woods. Do not go to a movie or eat in a restaurant. Be sure to check with your community’s guidance as some areas are advising against this type of activity.
3. **Virtual connection.** During times like these, virtual connection is critical. For people who are not technology savvy, be sure to provide needed technical support. Use technology such as video chat or FaceTime. Share dinner that way or have a virtual book club meeting.
4. **Be proactive about staying in touch.** Sometimes we need to remind ourselves to make that telephone call, text or video chat. Now may be the best time to reach out to that long-lost friend.
5. **Keep yourself busy.** If you have a focused project, you have less time to think about your social isolation. Is there a project around the house you’ve been meaning to do, such as clean out the garage? How about Sudoku, a crossword, or a puzzle?
6. **Limit media overload.** Too much news about the coronavirus can accelerate our sense of isolation. Watch a movie or read a book that connects you to the human experience and the resiliency people can have to overcome challenges.

If you need further guidance, call your company’s employee assistance program, which specializes in addressing mental health and other life challenges. You can also contact 24-hour helplines, such as the Samaritans Helpline at 877-870-4673.