



Staying Social While Staying Distant

By Ted Benson

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Every responsible person is “social distancing” to fight this virus. But really, it's "physical distancing." Socializing and physical activity are critical for health. So how can we still get those?

It's imperative: we each must pull back from physical interaction with other people. As far as this new virus is concerned, each of us is just a big, cheap motel: easy to check into, reproduce madly in, and then move on... If the virus sets fire to the place in the process it doesn't care. Then the fire department has to rush from hotel to hotel and eventually may not be able to help all that need it – which is when things get really bad. We absolutely must slow the virus spread by physically distancing ourselves from others, each and every one of us, to “flatten the curve” and minimize the death rate. This is now our common higher purpose. It works only as well as we do it, and it will save lives.

For some of us, that distancing means keeping a wide berth while still going to a workplace. For many of us, increasingly, it's going to mean staying at home.

But we know isolation is bad for us. Think about it: Misbehaving children get sent to “time out.” Prisoners risking the lives of others are put in solitary confinement. Well before now, loneliness was known to be a significant social problem, and the mental toll from long-term isolation is well-documented. As we are now ethically compelled to put literal distance between us, it's normal to have an increase in loneliness, stress, anxiety, confusion – and feeling overwhelmed. We know in our hearts that we absolutely need to talk with each other, hear and be heard by each other.

So we must find new ways of social interaction: emails, phone calls, video chats, webinars, even online social networks like this one. Calls and video chats are particularly good, because we can respond to each other in real time. To maintain important relationships and our own sense of self, our interactions must provide the small but vital interpersonal validations that we need. Especially in stressful times, honest person-to-person communication lets us acknowledge that we are stressed, identify constructive ways to address that, engage in acts of kindness towards each other, and talk about things other than the virus. All of these are powerful actions that won't make things perfect, but certainly can help.

Sometimes kindness is simply the chance to share, listen and say you understand. The other night I had a video chat with family up and down the East Coast. Once we all got used to the set-up, the conversation flowed easily. People talked about the virus and their fear, but the chat moved on to all kinds of things. They even got to laugh long and hard with each other: tremendous tonics in a difficult time. Another tonic: a videochat with a friend and a beer. It's not as nice as a pub, but it helps.

Physical activity is also crucial. If you're sitting a lot at your home desk, or couch, or spending lots of time in bed because the world seems overwhelming right now, that's all understandable. But exercise is crucial – moving around regularly is good for your body and your mind. Exercise as you can in your space, or if possible get outside once a day. My friend Don Alexander starts every day with exercise and a positive audiobook; I take a walk every afternoon away from others, with nothing but birds to listen to. Exercise helps you do something with your nervous energy, gives you a change of pace (literally), and tires you out to sleep better at night.

So as we physically separate from one another, let's remember to deliberately reach out to one another however we can, and to get the physical exercise we need, every single day. While we can't say with certainty what the coming weeks will bring, this new situation will be a marathon, not a sprint. And as every distance runner knows, we need to pace ourselves – and take care of ourselves – to endure, survive and eventually thrive.

