

How to Make Sure Social Distancing and Self-Isolation Don't Hurt Your Mental Health

6 ways to fight feeling depressed and lonely as the coronavirus pandemic goes on.

By [Jenna Birch](#)

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What might have seemed unfathomable a week ago, when we were talking about how to effectively wash our hands, is happening in America. Cities are going on lockdown. Bars and restaurants have shuttered in-house dining. Movie theaters are closed. Airlines are seeing huge dips in travel. Sports leagues are canceling their seasons. Weddings are being canceled.

We're isolating, part of a global "social distancing" movement to slow the spread of coronavirus and give hospitals a chance to treat the sick. For at least 15 days, top health experts are asking us to avoid social gatherings of 10 or more, work from home if at all possible, and stay home entirely if you're sick or in a high-risk group.

Of course, we have to protect one another, avoid voluntary gatherings, and stay at least six feet apart. But there's a reason to be concerned for our mental health. "Because social contact is such a fundamental human need, we suffer both mentally and physically without it," [Jud Brewer, MD, PhD](#), a neuroscientist, addiction psychiatrist, and an associate professor of behavioral and social sciences at Brown University School of Public Health, tells *Health*.

Of course, there's a difference between isolation and loneliness, which is especially important to emphasize now while we're social distancing. "Isolation is the physical separation from other people, while loneliness is an emotional state of feeling alone or separated," says Brewer. "The two are tightly associated but not the same thing. Loneliness is strongly associated with high blood pressure, sleep disturbances, immune stress responses, and declining cognition. From a mental health perspective, we see much more depression and anxiety among the lonely."

Those with anxiety may feel particularly vulnerable as the world seems to be entering uncertain times. "Many people are not used to being alone," [Tara Well, PhD](#), an associate professor in the Department of Psychology at Columbia University's Barnard College, tells *Health*. "When we feel anxiety, we have a natural tendency to want to affiliate with others." Even introverts feel this, she notes.

Those with depression may also be vulnerable while physical distancing, [Art Markman, PhD](#), a professor of psychology at the University of Texas, Austin, tells *Health*. "One of the biggest risks, particularly at a time like this, there's a tendency to get lost in negative thinking." Markman says there's no way to stop the cycle when you can't verbalize your fears and be checked by others. "For people who are prone to depression who want to isolate, it boosts your mood to be around other people," he adds. "You can find yourself, not only spiraling into negative thoughts, but feeling very closed in."

The goal of social distancing these days is to be separated, but not lonely. Here are some ways to do it.

RELATED: [What Is Social Distancing—and How Is It Different From Self-Quarantine and Self-Isolation?](#)

Contact others face-to-face

We live in a world where digital communication is as prevalent as in-person communication. But without any face-to-face contact at all, not all substitutes are created equal, says Brewer.

“Standard social media interactions of rapidly scrolling through the activities of others, superficially commenting on posts and generally engaging in activities that promote comparison of your situation to others, is not helpful and likely even harmful,” he says. “Instead, use social media and communication tools to have meaningful interactions with just a few people.”

Brewer suggests setting up a family chat or having regular video meetings with co-workers while you’re not in-office (Glossier just did [a big one](#)!). “As with many things, quality matters more than quantity,” Brewer says. “In the end, I won’t be surprised if we learn that some of us actually deepen our relationships because this crisis forced us to use new channels of communication.”

RELATED: [If You Are Immunocompromised, You Are at a Higher Risk of Coronavirus. Here's What That Means](#)

Do meaningful things

Constantly checking the latest COVID-19 updates is probably not productive for your mental health. Instead, engage in meaningful tasks. “These can range from housework to reading to finally starting that project you’ve been unable to dig into,” says Brewer. “Staying engaged in the world allows us to use the newer, more logical parts of our brain, making it less likely we will dwell on what’s out of our control.”

Hang with pets

If you have a pet, remember that this is a great time to rely on them for companionship. A little touch increases dopamine and serotonin, both of which help stabilize mood and relieve stress, says Well. “In times of social distancing, petting your cat or dog might be especially comforting,” she explains. Play fetch. Take them for a long walk. Love them really well right now.

Keep your sense of humor

Keep sending memes to your friends. Don’t stop watching really stupidly silly movies. It’s okay to laugh at some parts of your situation, which is unprecedented. Never joke at someone else’s expense, Markman says, but keep smiling.

“It is very easy to be very serious about everything right now,” says Markman. “Of course, this is serious. There are people who are sick and people who are dying. But if you look throughout history, the worst situations, the people who get through it feeling best from a mental health standpoint are those who keep their humor.”

Markman says “gallows humor” exists for a reason—people poked fun at the idea of death, to make something scary a little less so. “To joke with friends about being alone is an incredibly valuable thing,” he says. Humanity’s “ability to find humor in anything” is one of its more valuable traits, he adds.

Reach out to those who might be worse off

Maybe you’re afraid of feeling lonely. But you can probably think of a few people who might have it worse; maybe they have clinical depression or another diagnosed disorder, or they’re just prone to lonely feelings. So make an effort to connect with them in a way you’d like to connect with others.

“Think about that list of folks who may not have people that they get to talk to,” says Markman. “Make sure you reach out, send a note, give them a call. One of the nice things right now, while some industries are quite busy, there are a lot of people who are less busy right now for better or worse. If you know people who might be struggling economically, reach out and let them know they are not alone. Reach out to people you know that are not alone. Give them a text or a phone message at first so they know they are connected to others.”

Focus your energy outward the way you hope people check in with you, whether it’s on your kids, a great aunt who’s at a nursing home across the country, a friend who’s single and living alone, or a brother who’s job might be hurting during this crisis.

Exercise, preferably outdoors

The virus is less likely to spread outside in open air, so spend *a lot* of time there. If you see a friend or two while you’re hiking or biking, that is also better than indoors. “Being outside is a safe thing to do,” says Markman. “As long as you’re giving yourself physical distance, you can be around [a friend] outside.”

Markman also notes exercise is [great for mental health](#). If gyms in your area are closed down and you can’t get a workout in, go for a walk or bike ride outside. As we move toward warmer weather, you’ll have more opportunities to be outside and active, and you’ll score more [mood-boosting vitamin D](#) from the sun.

The information in this story is accurate as of press time. However, as the situation surrounding COVID-19 continues to evolve, it's possible that some data have changed since publication. While Health is trying to keep our stories as up-to-date as possible, we also encourage readers

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