LONELINESS, SOCIAL CONNECTION AND COVID-19

CSI Response

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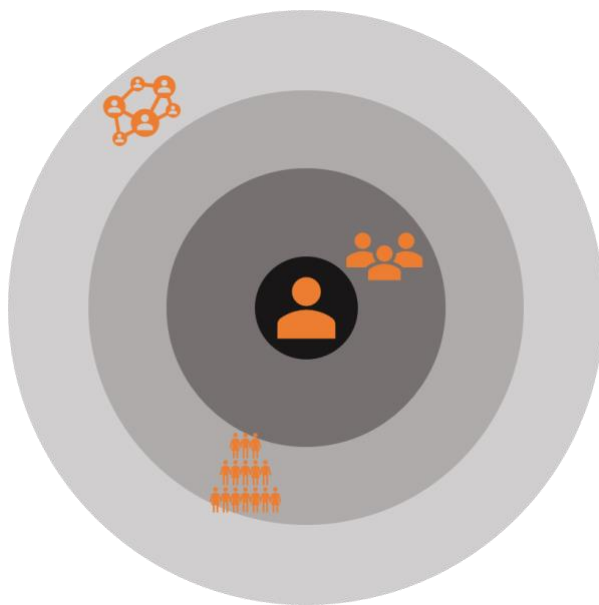*Viktoria Adler*

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We have long known that loneliness and social isolation cause people significant emotional pain and can have a negative impact on their health and wellbeing. Now, with Covid-19, we are being told to socially distance. This risks making the problems associated with loneliness worse.

It's important we focus on keeping up social connections even while physically distancing. This factsheet highlights some short-term tips on how we can be healthy social humans in these unusual times.

MAKE IT FUN | MIX IT UP | SIMULATE | LEARN & NURTURE

What is social connection?

Evolutionary psychologist Robin Dunbar has shown that humans tend to build social connections in similar ways (Dunbar & Spoors, 1995). Our immediate 'intimate' layer tends to feature around five people, then we have a layer of 'close and useful connections' (about 15 people), a 'tribe' of about 50 people we feel we belong to, and then a wider network of acquaintances (about 150 people).

This pattern of human connection has been observed time and again, internationally and historically, for example, in medieval villages, hunting tribes and army units. In modern times, the same pattern of layering is observed in studies of Facebook, Twitter, online gaming and mobile phone records (MacCarron et al., 2016).

In addition to the number, we know that the quality of connections matters too. You might have a very close connection that isn't 'healthy', like a relationship that is abusive or simply someone you no longer love. Equally, many of us have friends that we see rarely face-to-face, but it feels like conversation picks up just where we left it.

How do we create social connection?

Some have suggested that, to build our social connections, we seek out people who share similar characteristics to us.

Our work at CSI has shown that the best conditions for making connections are where connection is a byproduct, not the focus, of activities. Working with social enterprises, we've seen that connection occurs where there is space and time to test out people's shared characteristics and build trust:

- problem solving activities where people need to allocate tasks, negotiate and even debate
- pairing up the experienced who have something to teach, with those who are keen to learn
- 'bumping spaces' where people work closely with each other, literally bumping into one another prompting chat and laughter.

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Why does social connection matter?

The evidence shows that loneliness and social isolation can be bad for health and wellbeing (Holt-Lundstad et al, 2015):

- Loneliness can make you feel like you don't belong, which undermines your sense of self and wellbeing (Farmer et al, 2017).
- These factors alone are associated with worse health and wellbeing (Caccioppo & Caccioppo, 2014).
- Feeling lonely also changes how you interact with others – you can become negative or defensive (Caccioppo et al, 2013).

SOCIAL CONNECTION AND COVID-19

Living alone, feeling lonely and being isolated are terms that are often used interchangeably (Klinenberg). But loneliness and social isolation are not necessarily the same thing.

Social isolation refers to the lack of contact between a person and society. Loneliness is the gap between your actual social connections and the perception you have about the quality of those interactions (Caccioppo & Caccioppo, 2014). Now, more than ever, we know that social isolation doesn't have to mean loneliness.

So, in a time when physical presence is not allowed, how do we create the conditions for social connection?

Make it fun

Recent research shows that some activities help people to both bond with one another, and release endorphins, the brain chemicals that contribute to happiness (Dezecache et al, 2012). These activities include laughing, making music, singing and playing sports.

Despite Covid-19, we can still undertake many of these activities together through various online means. Even elements of sport, like competition and exercise, can be done collectively but separately.

Mix it up

Humans need different types of time together (Littman-Ovadia, 2019). Not all interaction needs to be in a large group.

The move to online working and socialising should still allow space for 'together alone' experiences where people are completing their own tasks but in proximity with one another. This can be created in the online world, simply by two colleagues or friends being online together at the same time, and maybe only occasionally actually interacting. Together alone experiences have been found essential to human experience, but quite different to social interaction experiences.

Simulate

Of course, in Covid-19 reality, we humans will miss physical presence and touch. There is no getting around it. This is why a significant avenue of future research is to find out how much hybrid, virtual, augmented and mixed reality technologies can simulate authentic experience. Check out technologies like the *haptic hug*.

Learn and nurture

While much of the social connection that will occur during social distancing will tend to bring people who already know each other together, there's an opportunity for the current crisis to build new connections. We are already seeing the rise of online local volunteers groups. On a very basic level, as we wander about in our social distance bubble, a simple hello and smile for our passing fellow humans goes a long way.

These connections can be nurtured so that they are maintained when life returns to 'normal'.

__We have been building a program of research on social connection, with Australian Red Cross, for three years. If you are interested in finding out more or getting involved, get in touch. Now and as we move into the post Covid-19 world, we ask for more asset-based thinking about social connection. It's perhaps our greatest resource and underpins social capital, social cohesion, good health, great neighbourhoods and being a happy human.__

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