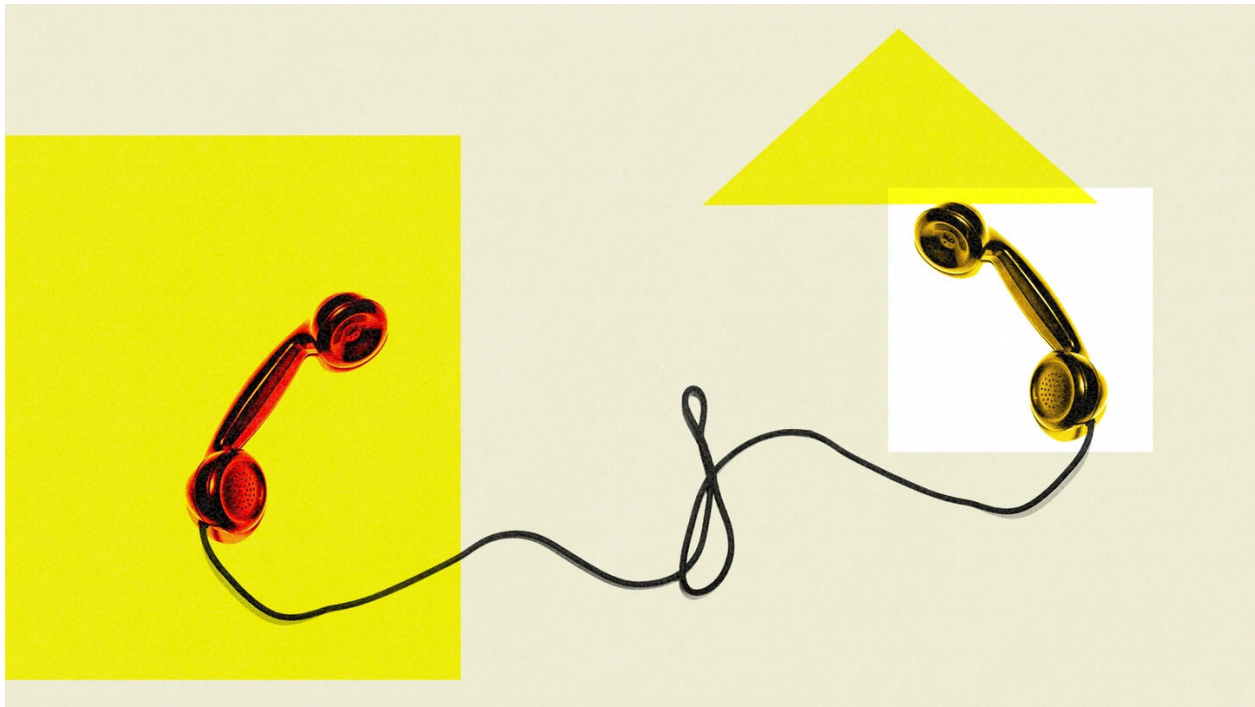

FAMILY

The Art of Socializing During a Quarantine

Being cooped up at home will likely prompt feelings of loneliness no matter what, but these strategies might help make the experience less stifling.

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Recently, several hundred thousand, if not millions, of Americans have started working remotely, at the behest of their employers and in the interest of limiting the spread of the coronavirus. And for the foreseeable future, a group much bigger than that will, in accordance with encouragements to practice social distancing, start socializing remotely as well.

Earlier this week, my colleague Kaitlyn Tiffany put together a primer on what

social distancing means in practice, asking a panel of public-health experts to rate the danger of a range of social scenarios. Some of the experts said it was okay (if not ideal) to have small (and symptom-free) gatherings at home or visit a noncrowded bar or restaurant, but all of them called for caution and restraint. “People should be at home as much as possible,” one advised.

[Read: [The dos and don'ts of 'social distancing'](#)]

Thankfully, those who stay in have at their disposal a suite of communication technologies that people who lived through previous pandemics couldn't have fathomed. I recently spoke with some researchers who study communication and social connectedness, asking them how they'd try to replicate the pleasures of socializing in the absence of actually meeting up with friends. Being cooped up at home will likely prompt feelings of loneliness and isolation no matter what, but the following strategies might make the experience of being stuck at home a bit less stifling.

KEEP DINING AND DRINKING 'TOGETHER'

People probably won't have much trouble remembering to stay in touch with their best friends while stuck at home, but less-regular catchups—such as occasional lunches with co-workers or bumping into an acquaintance at a coffee shop—are more at risk of falling by the wayside, because they're often impromptu. Melissa Mazmanian, an informatics professor at UC Irvine, told me that it might help to proactively schedule a videochat date that functions as a “low-level exchange of ‘What's going on with you today?’” to compensate for these lost interactions.

Scheduling something that usually originates spontaneously can feel contrived, Mazmanian noted, but “you have to formalize it a little more, because we're not going to run into each other.” It may be easy to default to eating lunch in front of the TV or computer, but shared meals can be an opportunity for connection. Recently, she and a colleague agreed that while they were working remotely, they'd set up a standing videochat lunch date, chatting and eating “together” in front of their laptops.

Similarly, Jeff Hancock, a communication professor at Stanford University, told me that even before the outbreak, he and a friend in another city often set up Skype calls to drink whiskey and catch up. “One of the reasons that we want to hang out with people often is to eat and drink together,” he told me, and people can simulate that at a distance with videochat. Moreover, Hancock said, “committing to a dinner or a lunch with somebody is a signal that ‘I care about this relationship’” and that they want more than just, say, an intermittent text-message thread that each party contributes to when he or she has the time. Plus, everyone has to eat, even our busiest friends.

REACH OUT TO FRIENDS NEAR AND FAR

In Mazmanian’s view, phone calls and videochatting are also well suited to promoting “deeper forms of human connection,” enabling heart-to-hearts even across distance; friends who live where you do are normally easier to keep up with, but during a near-quarantine, friends and family across the country (or world) are basically just as easy to stay in touch with as someone who lives a mile away. With that in mind, Mazmanian suggested “revisiting the people who you really care about and don’t have time to talk to very much,” now that people’s social calendars are sparse.

In planning your list of remote social engagements, note that having a range of different types of relationships can help people feel socially connected—Hancock described an “ecology” of friendships, including confidants, friends you get dinner or go to a movie with, and “friends that you can do nothing with.”

[Read: [What you can do right now about the coronavirus](#)]

USE A VARIETY OF MEDIA

It’s not just the types of relationships you have that matter—it’s also the media you use to sustain them. Hancock told me that attention-heavy “synchronous” conversations (like those had in real time over the phone or videochat) can foster closeness, but so can “frequent, lightweight contact” (like sharing links or sending short messages). “The little pings matter,” he said.

Carving out big chunks of time for your loved ones is important, but so is integrating them into your day in smaller ways. One slightly unusual means of doing that: initiating a videochat with a friend or loved one and then leaving it running in the background for an hour or two as you go about your days. It sounds a little intrusive, but, as I wrote last year, many long-distance romantic couples do it, finding that it allows them to spend time together, chatting intermittently as they might if they lived in the same space.

Another more passive form of interaction is to watch a movie or TV show at the same time from afar—there are tools for syncing up Netflix across multiple computers and for streaming the same videos on different screens.

SUPPORT OTHERS (OR JUST LET THEM KNOW YOU'RE AVAILABLE)

An important element of feeling socially connected is receiving support from others, or at least knowing that the support is there to call on if needed, according to Julianne Holt-Lunstad, a psychology professor at Brigham Young University. She told me that research also indicates that offering support can be beneficial to the offerer in addition to the offeree.

This support can take a variety of forms. It might be “tangible”—an offer to drop off some extra food at a friend’s house if needed. It might be “informational”—a response to a concerned friend’s advice-seeking about how to handle some aspect of life during a pandemic. Or it might be “emotional”—a check-in to see how a friend is weathering it all. “Even just perceiving that support is available, if needed, can be enough to dampen stress responses,” Holt-Lunstad said.

CONNECT WITH THE PEOPLE IN YOUR OWN HOME

This suggestion may be a bit obvious, but with many workplaces and schools closed, the surest face-to-face socializing people will do is with those they share a home with. “This is a time when life is going to get simpler,” said Holt-Lunstad of her own household. “Now we have time to do some of the things that I think we don’t often have time for in our really hectic, busy schedules.”

Life under coronavirus is governed by uncertainty and worry, but in the moments when she is able to put those aside, Holt-Lunstad said she'll be "trying to think of ways that we can really enjoy this time together rather than feeling distressed about it." She anticipates playing games, camping, and going on walks, when she and her family are able to.

FIGHT MONOTONY

Though it's not an element of social connectedness, per se, one pleasure of getting out of the house is the change of scenery. For instance, with the proper social distancing, going on a walk can provide a reprieve from looking at the same walls and furniture. It can also enable spontaneous encounters with strangers and recreate some semblance of life without coronavirus. "You may see someone in the distance, but you can still smile and wave and say hello ... whether that's your neighbor that you've known for 10 years, or whether it's a complete stranger," Holt-Lunstad said. Additionally, you could schedule a phone call with a friend for a time when you both can go on a walk. It won't be like having them alongside you, but at least you'll each be getting out of the house.

Perhaps the goal of varying your environment can even be achieved in the home, to a degree. "This sounds really trite, but I actually don't think it is: Play with the lighting in your house" when you videochat, Mazmanian suggested. "Think of your video screen as a stage where you change the background for those you're talking to and yourself." It sounds a bit forced and won't be for everyone, but maybe a videochat coffee date with a friend would be made more enjoyable if the setting resembled the coffee shop where you usually meet, with its dimmed lights and candles.

Similarly, Hancock noted that some people who work from home put on a different outfit when they start to work, in order to help them differentiate between work life and home life. Maybe remote socializers could take inspiration from that, and dress up for that videochat coffee date as they would if they were actually going out. (It probably sounds a bit desperate when described like that, but little things like this could be genuinely fun and spirit-lifting.)

REMEMBER THAT SOMETIMES, SOCIALIZING ISN'T FUN

“I think it’s important to not forget that human relationships are not always pleasant,” Mazmanian said. “Having a break from them can be good.” Obviously, this is nicer for people when they get to do it on their own terms, but it’s worth bearing in mind that when you’re being deprived of opportunities to go out and socialize, you might be more likely to remember the good parts than the bad. (To that end, I’d add that one perk of socializing remotely is that when you’re done with your phone call or videochat session, you’re already home—no need for a possibly drunken late-night commute from a bar or friend’s house.)

So go forth (or rather, stay in) and socialize, but also consider using your newfound time at home to do things you enjoy but can’t usually squeeze into your day. “Hunker down and do something cool with your hands and with your mind, like a science project, or knit a sweater,” Mazmanian said. “[You can] try to find a place of enjoyment in those more solitary activities.”

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