

Staying social while social distancing

Marnie Vinall 19 March 2020

By nature, humans are social creatures. Yes, some of us are introverts (hello, I see you) but we all require some kind of social interactions in our lives for our mental wellbeing.

An essential part of finding fulfilment in our lives is the ability to share them with others. As social beings, we crave connections with friends and family and thrive with social interactions in our weeks. For some of us, that may just being able to say good morning to our co-workers each day, and for others, it's constant meet ups, dinners, drinks and outings.

However, right now with COVID-19 sweeping through the globe and threatening lives right across our nation, we're living a bizarre time of self-isolation. Those of us who can work from home are urged to and everyone is encouraged to stay home as much as possible. Basically, if you can self-isolate, you should be.

Although this is a necessary step to stop the spread of COVID-19 — and especially in order to protect those most vulnerable if our communities such as the elderly and immunocompromised — being confined at home is going to take its toll on the mental wellbeing of many of us.

When we are cooped up inside, it's likely we'll experience cabin fever; a condition of those in confinement who experience feelings of restlessness, irritability, boredom and dissatisfaction. Some will also see increased levels of stress and anxiety.

Plus, with the uncertainty around the spread of the virus, the rising infection rate and the economic repercussions, many will feeling more anxious and overwhelmed. Additionally, those with pre-existing anxiety may find the isolation and current crisis particularly stressful with the constant stream of news, and self-isolated people will be reaching for their phones even more than usual, becoming prone to the onslaught of headlines.

'In times of crisis, often others share our fears, doubts and anxieties and when we talk them through with one another, we feel some of the weight lifted. There is solace in knowing we aren't going through this scary time alone.'

Loneliness is also something we need to watch out for as a side effect of self-isolation, which can lead to increased levels of depression, anxiety, paranoia or panic attacks. Along with this, sufferers can experience negative feelings such as worthlessness, hopelessness and a lack of motivation and tiredness.

To combat this, we need to be checking in on each other during this period. Although we can't have face-to-face contact, we can still touch base digitally and over the phone, and ask each other how we're doing.

The World Health Organisation advises people in isolation should try to maintain their social networks. They recommend that as social contact is limited, we should aim to stay connected via email, social media, video conference and telephone.

Despite the mess of the world right now, we're lucky to live in a digital age where many of us have the technology at our fingertips to bring us together. We can video chat over morning coffee, have lunch dates over video calls, send endless Snapchats throughout the day and make group chats discussing our favourite shows and the sports games still running.

In times of crisis, often others share our fears, doubts and anxieties and when we talk them through with one another, we feel some of the weight lifted. There is solace in knowing we aren't going through this scary time alone. Sometimes just speaking to another person can boost our spirits and help us feel less isolated and more validated in our feelings.

R U OK? Day is in September, but let's amp up the mission of it and regularly be asking our mates and family if they're okay throughout this turbulent and distressing period. And if you have a friend who's extroverted, lives alone or has a pre-existing mental illness, I especially encourage you to reach out to them as they'll be really impacted by missing out on social interactions.

It's also proven that reaching out and helping others has proven to be beneficial for your own mental health and wellbeing as it helps reduce stress and improve emotional wellbeing. It's something you can do for own wellbeing, as well as other people's.

So while we're isolating, let's regularly check up on our loved ones in safe ways. We're all in this together, even if we're physically apart.

Marnie Vinall is a freelance writer and copywriter in Melbourne, Australia. She is a regular contributor of Beat Magazine and Concrete Playground, and has bylines in ABC News, Mumbrella, B&T and Globo Hobo.

Main image: A woman video chatting at her kitchen table (Getty images)

Recent articles by Marnie Vinall.

What does it mean to be a settler?