

Staying Connected to Others During the Pandemic

You Should Know

Social connection is essential to health and well-being. Lack of connection has been linked to numerous medical problems, accelerated aging, depression, and suicide. Socializing and gathering in groups to share experiences contributes to our overall sense of well-being. Unfortunately, the coronavirus pandemic has led to what *The Atlantic* calls a *social recession*: a disconnection of social bonds marked by increased loneliness and isolation.

This lack of connection can have harmful effects on your mental health, your ability to work and learn, and even your physical health. This worksheet provides suggestions to help you stay connected to others during the pandemic, enhancing your physical and emotional health.

What to Do

Here are some ways to stay connected to others. As you review them, think of what you would like to add to your life in order to stay connected to other people.

1. Use your phone or computer to call, text, email, or have video chats with your friends, family, and other meaningful connections. Fortunately, we live during a time where the internet and smart phones make virtual communication easy and convenient. Online platforms like Facetime, Google Hangouts, and Zoom enable virtual face-to-face conversations. Zoom is quickly becoming the most popular platform because it allows a large group of people to join in on a meeting to chat, celebrate birthdays, and even sing or play instruments together.

Additionally, people are finding ways to virtually gather in groups on a variety of pastimes, including playing board games online, holding Netflix viewing parties, hosting virtual potluck meals, and participating in online knitting circles and book clubs.

2. Connect to your social networks on Facebook, LinkedIn, Instagram, Twitter, and other social media. Social media platforms can be beneficial for finding resources, advice, and inspiration, even when you don't want to communicate directly with others. You can post questions to other users for their feedback and support, or link to websites, articles, and videos that others might find helpful. You might belong to supportive Facebook groups. This type of interaction can offer a sense of community and belonging, without engaging in "live" conversation.

3. Take advantage of online self-care resources for inspiration, reassurance, and motivation. There are numerous apps and videos – a number of which are offered free during the pandemic – to guide you through mindfulness meditations, breathing exercises, and muscle relaxation techniques.

- Personal development websites and apps like Sounds True, Kripalu, Shambhala Publications, Head Space, and Simple Habit offer free online courses to help people navigate through fear and anxiety caused by the pandemic.

- Many churches, synagogues, and mosques are live streaming their worship services via Facebook or on their own websites.
- You can view soothing online content on YouTube, Instagram, and Facebook, such as nature videos, streaming music concerts, virtual museum tours, and humorous stand-up comedy and pet videos.
- YouTube channels like Fitness Blender feature a variety of free at-home workouts, and many local fitness studios offer live-streaming classes for yoga, dance, and other activities.

4. Help others. When we reach out to others who may be even more isolated than we are, it is psychologically healing and calming. Even while social distancing, you can help others and connect with your community.

- Help deliver food and supplies to elderly or quarantined individuals or collect medical supplies for local hospitals (following rules for social distancing and health protection).
- Donate blood to the American Red Cross or make a financial contribution to a charity serving populations most impacted by the coronavirus.
- Make wellness phone calls to friends and neighbors who are homebound or in quarantine.
- Try virtual volunteering. Visit volunteermatch.org, idealist.org, and catchafire.org for lists of charities and nonprofits seeking virtual help, including ones located in your community. Examples of opportunities:
 - The United Nations runs a virtual program connecting volunteers to organizations worldwide. There are opportunities including writing and editing, translation, technology services, research, advocacy, and more.
 - The Red Cross utilizes digital volunteers to monitor online discussions to find people who need help, and to share important updates on social media.
 - The Smithsonian Institute has virtual opportunities for those interested in history, science, or anthropology. Volunteers help transcribe historical documents and update relevant Wikipedia pages.
 - Get political by following and tagging your local representatives on Twitter and Facebook. With Facebook's new Town Hall function, you can find, follow, and contact your elected officials and government services.
 - Volunteer for the Crisis Text Line, which offers free 24/7 support to those in crisis. Apply to be trained for free if you can commit to four hours a week.

5. Share Your Creativity. Make gifts to cheer someone up, based on your creative talents: write, paint, knit, make jewelry, decorate cards, or sew pillows or blankets. Create a Google document to share community resources, movie and book reviews, inspiring videos, and more with friends.

6. Ask for help. If you are finding it difficult to cope with overwhelming stress and anxiety from the pandemic, ask your doctor or therapist about telehealth options. If you do not already work with a therapist, contact your insurance company for referrals, visit *Psychology Today's* 'Find a Therapist' webpage, or call SAMHSA's National Helpline at 1-800-662-HELP (4357) for a local

referral to low- or no-cost services. You can also text the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) crisis line 24/7 by texting NAMI to 741741, or explore online psychotherapy platforms such as BetterHelp or TalkSpace.

What additional resources or activities would you like to explore to stay connected?

Of all the activities and resources listed above, which would you like to try or use more frequently?

Use the following chart to record your activities for staying connected for the next week. Track how you feel emotionally and physically before engaging in the activity or project, note the people or groups with whom you connected, and describe how you feel afterward.

Day	Activity	People/Groups I Connected With	How I Felt Before the Activity	How I Felt After the Activity
Monday				
Tuesday				
Wednesday				
Thursday				
Friday				
Saturday				
Sunday				

Reflections on This Exercise

Which activities were most effective in helping you stay connected?

What were the most useful tools or resources you discovered from those activities?

Describe any improvements in your mental or physical health associated with your efforts to stay connected. What did you notice?
