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Creating Connections during COVID-19

A. Rani Elwy^{a,b,c}, Elizabeth M. Maguire^a, D. Keith McInnes^{a,c}, Gemmae M. Fix^{a,c,d}

^aCenter for Healthcare Organization and Implementation Research, VA Bedford Healthcare System;

^bDepartment of Psychiatry and Human Behavior, Warren Alpert Medical School, Brown University;

^cDepartment of Health Law, Policy and Management, Boston University School of Public Health;

^dSection of General Internal Medicine, Boston University School of Medicine

Abstract

Our research group created a public communication strategy of expressive writing, to use within our research center over the Massachusetts COVID-19 stay at home advisories. Our goals were to 1) build community, 2) recognize the unique experiences, needs, concerns and coping strategies of our colleagues, and 3) create a mechanism to creatively share those experiences. We conceptualized a weekly e-newsletter, “Creativity in the Time of COVID-19,” a collective effort for expressing and documenting the extraordinary, lived experiences of our colleagues during this unique time of a coronavirus pandemic. Through 23 online issues, we have captured 72 colleagues’ perspectives on social isolation, the challenges of working from home, and hope in finding connection through virtual platforms. We have organized the themes of these submissions, in the forms of photos, essays, poetry, original artwork, and more, according to three components of the Social Connection Framework: structural, functional and quality approaches to creating social connectedness.

Work and home are one. Desks are in bedroom corners; prized kitchen table spaces are shared with children attending school. We no longer stretch our legs walking to meetings, sharing cheerful hellos and appreciative smiles as we pass our colleagues in the hallway. Now we try to create a sense of togetherness through videoconference calls, devoid of sitting shoulder to shoulder. Children and pets punctuate video meetings, coming in for snuggles or requests. These scenes delight our colleagues, who claim these are the highlights of their day. This is our new normal.

Massachusetts, where we work and live, was among the first states to experience the surge in cases of COVID-19 (Massachusetts Department of Public Health [MDPH], 2020). We have been working at home since March 10, 2020, when Massachusetts Governor Charlie Baker declared a state of emergency. School districts abruptly closed. Colleges and universities

[✉] **CONTACT** A. Rani Elwy Rani.Elwy@va.gov Center for Healthcare Organization and Implementation Research, VA Bedford Healthcare System, 200 Springs Road (Mailstop 152), Bedford, MA 01730, USA.

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began sending students home; they would not return for the rest of the semester, and many not for the next year. Our home wireless networks suddenly faced unending demand.

We are researchers at the Center for Healthcare Organization and Implementation Research (CHOIR), one of 18 national Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) Health Services Research and Development-funded Centers of Innovation. CHOIR, co-located in Bedford and Boston, Massachusetts, consists of 121 investigators, research staff and administrative personnel whose mission is to advance coordinated, patient-centered health care for all Veterans through research and quality improvement. We confront issues in our patient population that affect other safety net hospitals, but with one difference – the military and/or combat history of many of our patients. This translates into elevated rates of conditions like post-traumatic stress disorder, military sexual trauma, and mental health and substance use disorders. Thus, we are particularly attuned to how social circumstances affect health. Hearing directly from Veterans about their perceptions of health care access and quality is a hallmark of CHOIR research.

Our team (ARE, EMM, DKM, GMF) met virtually on March 11, 2020, to brainstorm how we would communicate with CHOIR during our time working from home. Because of our organization's culture of learning from patients' stories, we felt that our colleagues would be eager to share their stories and reflections on living and working through a pandemic. We decided to create a space for them to listen to each other, and an opportunity to share their experiences through expressive writing, considered a kind of therapy that uses the writing process to cope with and heal from emotional trauma (Pennebaker, 2018, 1997; Pennebaker & Smyth, 2016). Others recognized this too: the day before we met, Professor Nicholas Christakis, tweeted:

If I were a college president and were closing schools for a once-in-a-century reason, in order to help build campus community and curate a historical archive, I would set up a system so students could record their experiences, as a kind of individual and collective diary.

Our team discussed the communication strategies we hoped to use over the next several weeks (not realizing this might be months, and eventually an entire year). We took prior research and Christakis' ideas to heart, and conceptualized a weekly e-newsletter, "*Creativity in the Time of COVID-19*," a collective effort for expressing and documenting the extraordinary, lived experiences of our colleagues during this unique time. Our e-newsletter goals were to 1) create a connected community of colleagues, 2) recognize the unique needs, concerns and coping strategies of our colleagues, and 3) create a mechanism to creatively share experiences. Our *Defining Moments* essay aims to share our colleagues' stories, highlighted in our newsletter. The themes that we identified from these narratives related to how our colleagues developed much-needed social connections during the pandemic.

On March 12, 2020, we emailed our colleagues to request contributions in the forms of short essays or stories, poetry, photos with captions, artwork, and other creative mediums (Figure 1). We set ground rules: submissions must be original, no clinical advice was to be given, newsletters would be made public to the wider research community so *highly* personal

information was discouraged (employee support for personal or work issues were described in other e-mails), and submissions involving other people would require their permission. Our team consists of three editors who solicit and track submissions and take charge of developing and disseminating an issue on a rotating basis (ARE, DKM, GMF), and one communication strategist who creates the issue layout and manages public dissemination (EMM). A draft of the e-newsletter is sent to contributors for final approval prior to Center-wide and public dissemination.

The response to *Creativity in the Time of COVID-19* was tremendous; we received submissions from 72 colleagues, many contributing more than once. Our first issue was published just one week after the conception of our newsletter, on March 18, 2020 (Figure 2). We published 15 weekly issues between March 18 and June 24, 2020; when we realized the extended public health timeline of working from home, we amended our issue frequency to monthly for issues 16–23, starting in July 2020 and continuing through February 2021. We concluded our newsletter efforts on February 24, 2021, covering 12 months of our colleagues' lived experiences and efforts to create social connection during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Our 23 issues are dominated by photos with captions, poems, essays, original artwork and games. Many reflect our coworkers' efforts to create social connection with others – family members and friends, both near and far, neighbors, and other colleagues. These submissions highlight tangible tools for creating connection, and also describe the quality of these relationships and why they are particularly important during a time of physical distancing. Below, we present topics from our submissions aligning with the Social Connection Framework, which describes the structural, functional and quality domains of social connection (Holt-Lundstadt et al., 2017). Structural connection involves the interconnections among differing ties and roles in social networks, including the number and size of social contacts, participation and active engagement in a variety of social activities and relationships, a sense of communality, and social contact frequency. Functional connection includes emotional, informational, tangible or belonging support, either received or perceived to be available when needed. Quality social connections exist when people report satisfaction and cohesion in their relationships, and ratings of conflict, distress or ambivalence in their relationships are low (Holt-Lundstadt et al., 2017). Our newsletter submissions also reveal how colleagues are actively fighting social *disconnection*, defined as social isolation, low social integration, loneliness and relationship distress (Holt-Lundstadt, 2015; Cornwell & Waite, 2009).

Creating structures to enhance social connection

Colleagues had to quickly learn to work from home. This often consisted of designing new ways of working while attending to different social roles and responsibilities that exist at home, and creating new ways of conceptualizing the existence of colleagues while working remotely. One colleague shared a poem and photo about this challenge of working away from others (Figure 3):

Wake up in the morning to telework ... still in my PJs

Practicing social isolation
 Surrounded by boxes of ...
 unidentified surveys
 Too quiet, but full on
 concentration
 Attempting not to get too ... stir
 crazy
 Miss the people, the productivity &
 predictable building mishaps at
 CHOIR ... What elevator fire?
 Home is where the work is
 For now
 Be safe everyone
 These times are just ... wow.

Others had to learn to share home spaces with other household members including pets, who helped with coping during the pandemic (Figure 4): “Here is a photo of my pup Koa, who is dedicated to helping me stay on task as I diligently reply to emails.”

For parents with young children at home, productivity often felt elusive. They sought help from other family members, sometimes even traveling to “pod,” or live together as a unit in isolation during the pandemic, to help them meet their work demands: “On the one hand, I have everything I need as I write at my in-law’s house in upstate New York. On the other hand, this view of Lake Canandaigua and my kids splashing with joy in the water is a bit distracting! Realistically, though, working from home with grandparents around has upped my productivity by a million.” Another colleague shared how she structures daily virtual connections with her research team:

Each day, I send my staff an email around noon, and I try to include a funny photo or poll question that everybody can participate in. Last week’s question was: ‘what was something you ate as a child that you would never eat now?’

Functions that provide social connection

Many colleagues provided emotional, tangible or belonging support to colleagues, friends, families and neighbors throughout the pandemic. Creating virtual game nights to connect family members across states served an important function for social and emotional connection. One colleague provided an example of how to create this critical function for others:

My family is far-flung, so we had a great family game night last weekend playing Yahtzee across 3 households. We used FaceTime with the people in a group chat

list. Each household needs Yahtzee scoring sheets for each person and 5 dice. I really appreciated this way to enjoy time with my brother's family, my parents, and my own family. We intend to keep doing this post-COVID to stay connected between visits.

Several colleagues used baking and cooking to provide a functional way to create social connection and belonging. One colleague shared (Figure 5): "I'm not able to see family this holiday season, so I've been learning how to perfect my grandmothers' Thanksgiving and Christmas recipes. I'm proud of this cherry pie, which we serve with homemade whipped cream. The secret ingredient? Love ... and lots of sugar." Home improvements to create functional outdoor space for gathering were also shared in our newsletter (Figure 6): "I suspect like a lot of people, being home more of the time has motivated several home improvements, among them hanging these lights in our backyard."

Colleagues described spending more family time on community service projects done at home. This helped increase social connection, through time together and tangible support for each other and community organizations (Figure 7):

Each year our town auctions off upcycled old chairs [for a benefit]. This year my daughters and I decided to decoupage an Ikea table and chair set they've long outgrown. We gathered magazine donations from all around town by posting on the town listserv, and then cut and Mod Podged pieces of paper to the lightly-sanded table and chairs.

Quality relationships increase social connection

Enjoying quality time outdoors with family, friends and neighbors is a frequent focus of several newsletter contributions. This highlights ways colleagues are seeking to increase the positive aspects of their social relationships. One colleague shared an essay of how she created connections to neighbors by venturing outdoors in the early stages of the pandemic:

On a typical March day in my neighborhood couples and dog-walkers stroll down the street, the occasional runner jogs by and children play in their yards. Lately this has shifted. Dogs are still walked and runners still run; but now, every afternoon, groupings of people are out walking together ... I met a woman and her child who have lived down the street from me for years for the first time. We're all likely feeling worried, confused, and uncertain as we as we grapple with a constant influx of information about COVID-19 and an ever-shifting reality. These group walks have the practical purpose of getting parents and kids out of the house after hours of home-schooling. For me they exemplify how we still find ways to "be" in the world and connect with our fellow humans, even during a time where we must separate and keep our distance from each other. As I look out my window at the passers-by, it inspires the feeling, even if only temporarily, that we're in this together.

Similarly, another colleague wrote a poem to describe how kids on her street are now getting together more often than previously, as enjoying the outdoors is now one activity that all kids can enjoy together (Figure 8):

We've lived on this street for years,
 It's quiet, it's dead, it's sprinkled
 with cars,
 Each family contained in a
 backyard.
 But,
 As confinement lingers, backyards
 shrink,
 releasing swarms on the street.
 For the first time, kids meet
 Fast friendships established
 Every day, on bike, on foot,
 on whatever comes afoot
 Our street taken by storm
 Dead end no more.

For some, artistic pursuits with family can also create a sense of community quality, thereby serving a social connection purpose. One colleague shared (Figure 9): “My kids have been painting some ‘kindness rocks’ to leave in places for other people to find. I wanted to get in on the fun, so I painted a mandala rock.”

Newsletter dissemination

Each “Creativity in the Time of COVID-19” issue is located on CHOIR’s website (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2020), and is compliant with Section 508 of the Rehabilitation Act (29 U.S.C. § 794d), as amended by the Workforce Investment Act of 1998 (P.L. 105–220), to be accessible to those with disabilities. Public dissemination through our Center’s Twitter account @VA_CHOIR is an important aspect of our research, and thus, our team decided to use this form of social media to share our pandemic communication efforts with other Centers of Innovation and organizations doing related work, using the hashtag #COVIDCreativity. This sharing proved useful. Colleagues from other VA Centers, who viewed our newsletter via Twitter, became contributors to the publication as well.

Once a week, and later, once a month, one of the editors emailed the newsletter to the entire Center. We delighted in the feedback we received in response: “Thank you! Loving each and every one of these pieces”; “Thanks for brightening up my day!”; “This brought a big smile to my face this Wednesday morning! Great way to start the day.” These statements confirm our belief that a regularly occurring, online newsletter of lived experiences during COVID-19 succeeded in keeping our research center connected during our time of telework.

Additionally, one colleague stated in their submission, “Working from home is hard for me – I usually focus better in a separate space, and thrive on contact with coworkers.” Although our mission with *Creativity in the Time of COVID-19* was to create a sense of community connection through creative expression and lived experiences during our time working from home, COVID-19 has illuminated the important function of social connection as a remedy to loneliness exacerbated by the need to physically distance.

On May 29, 2021, Massachusetts lifted all COVID-19 restrictions. COVID-19 cases continue to decline, mainly through heroic vaccination efforts. Our workplace expects employees to return to our building at least half-time by September 2021. Thus, our *Creativity in the Time of COVID-19* newsletter has run its course. Its lessons of creating community building and social connection, we hope, will remain with our colleagues for many months to come.

Acknowledgments

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Creativity in the Time of COVID-19

CHOIR is launching a collective effort for expressing and documenting our extraordinary, lived experiences

We are looking for contributions from everyone. What kind? Stories, humor, poetry, photos, essays, artwork, etc. We want to tap into your creative, thoughtful, and expressive side to build *Creativity in a Time of COVID-19*, a unique process and product of the amazing people in CHOIR. If you are interested, read on!

The rapidly evolving coronavirus pandemic is unprecedented. The situation is constantly evolving; our routines are disrupted; we receive near constant information updates and yet we don't know what to do; we may not sleep well at night. One major disruption is to our social routines, where we are being asked to cancel large events, to telework and to meet online. Yet it is exactly times like this when social connections and community matter. **CHOIR is opting not to add to the deluge of information, but instead we propose to build community.**

Thus, we propose to facilitate community building through creative, "narrative medicine" inspired approaches, inspired in part by the tweet (see box), by medical sociologist Nicholas Christakis. Narrative Medicine approaches can be used to understand the meaning and significance of stories through cognitive, symbolic, and affective means. Narrative Medicine encourages story-telling, which is known for its healing power, and its ability to increase awareness and promote empathy.



Nicholas A. Christakis
@NACHristakis

If I were a college president & was closing school for a once-in-a-century reason, in order to help build campus community & curate a historical archive, I would set up a system so students could record their experiences, as a kind of individual & collective diary.
[#PlagueYears](#)

9:03 PM · 3/10/20 · [Twitter Web App](#)

The goals of *Creativity in the Time of COVID-19* are to:

- Create community
- Recognize the unique experiences, needs, concerns and coping strategies of CHOIR members
- Create a mechanism to creatively share those experiences

We are inviting Submissions with a very general theme of experiences in the time of COVID-19:

- Short essays or stories (maximum 500 words)
- Poetry
- Photos
- Art work
- Other creative mediums welcome (though think "easy to share" electronically)

Rules:

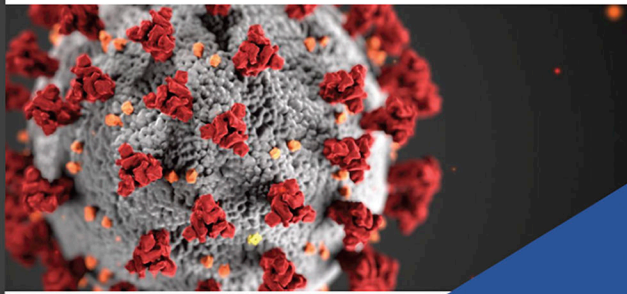
- Your submissions will be shared via email throughout CHOIR once per week, so no highly personal information please.
- No clinical advice (there are other, better venues for that).
- No profanity, and no complaints about how COVID-19 measures at Bedford or Boston VAs have been implemented.
- If you refer to others in your writing, please make sure you have their permission to do so
- If this is something that is successful, we would like make it a historical archive.
- Similarly, if this is a successful experience of sharing, sympathizing, entertaining, and comforting, we may consider sharing with VA HSR&D in the form of a report or anthology.
- Submissions (all your own original work) should be emailed to Rani.Elwy@va.gov and will be shared with **Gemmae Fix** and **Keith McInnes**, for curating our weekly CHOIR emails and creating our historical archive. Please indicate if you want us to share these anonymously or with names attached.

Thank you in advance for your participation in *Creativity in the Time of COVID-19* !

Figure 1.
Call for submissions to Creativity in the Time of COVID-19.

**CREATIVITY
IN THE
TIME
OF
COVID-19**

VOLUME 1 ISSUE 1: March 18, 2020



WELCOME

CHOIR is launching a collective effort for expressing and documenting our extraordinary, lived experiences during this unique time of a coronavirus.

The goals of *Creativity in the Time of COVID-19* are to:

- Create community
- Recognize the unique experiences, needs, concerns and coping strategies of CHOIR members
- Create a mechanism to creatively share those experiences

Send your submissions to:
Rani.Elwy@va.gov

**#COVIDCREATIVITY
@VA_CHOIR
ON TWITTER**

Editorial Team: Rani Elwy,
Gemmae Fix, Keith McInnes
Designer: Elizabeth Maguire

WITH JOY

One of the biggest challenges in this age of COVID is to keep connections to our communities and to keep our routines going. For me, this includes my weekly modern dance class that I share with an incredible group of women in Lexington. These dancers, from amateurs like me to professional performers, gather each week at the Unitarian church and share 1 ½ hours of dance, music and creativity led by an amazing modern dance teacher. This practice for me is the one time in the week when I truly let go of work and family and experience the joy of movement. Needless to say, this class is suspended for the foreseeable future. So I proposed to the class that at 6 PM on Tuesdays, we all still put on our dance clothes and go through our warm-ups and then dance with joy! As a result, I got the list of music from our dance teacher, and through the magic of Spotify was able to create a playlist for the class and share it with everyone. Tuesday at 6, I plan to turn it on, tune out all the news and anxiety, and dance with joy.

BARBARA BOKHOUR

Maybe you won't be productive as Isaac Newton was during the plague year when he was a student at Oxford. You may be more likely to consume than produce. Thus, we've cultivated a list of COVID-19 entertainment.

Books

- [Love in the Time of Cholera](#)
- [Stinky Cheese Man and Other Fairly Stupid Tales](#) (for kids)
- [Fever 1793](#) (for young adults)

PodCast

- [How Boston Reacted To The 1918 Flu Pandemic](#)

Academic Reading

- [Sociology of Health & Illness Special Issue: Pandemics and Emerging Infectious Diseases: the Sociological Agenda](#)

- [Somatosphere. A collaborative website covering the intersections of medical anthropology, science and technology studies, cultural psychiatry, psychology and bioethics.](#)
- [COVID-19 Forum: Introduction](#)

Movies

- [Boston Globe's Mini Movie Festivals](#)

Miscellaneous

- [Other historic events that led to large social disruptions](#)

**RON SPIRO
GEMMAE FIX**

A LITTLE ECHOEY

I had to conduct an unexpected interview on Friday. As my family members came home one by one in the middle of it I backed up further and further into the house until I ended up conducting it from the bathroom. So I enter this as my "Creative place to conduct interviews in the Time of COVID-19". A little echoey, but does the trick!

EILEEN M. DRYDEN




#COVIDCREATIVITY



March 9, 2020

The automated call came at 10 pm
Arlington Public Schools are closed
A parent works at Biogen; the child is symptomatic

The text from another Mom immediately followed. Could we run? Should we run?
We kept our usual routine; 6 a.m. at The Res
We maintained 3-6' between us

Our conversation oscillated; mundane, pandemic, mundane, pandemic
Saturday, she took her kids to a Birthday party; Sunday, I took my kids to the Ice Rink
What child was it? What parent was it? Is my kid in that class? Is my kid friends with that kid?

"Peent" "Peent" "Peent" emanated from the predawn meadow;
Woodcocks were putting on a show
We left the boardwalk and descended into the marsh
Melodic chirps encircled us

We lost the trail and became entrapped in briers
We giggled
The sun rose; I had to get to grant review.

GEMMAE FIX

VOLUME 1 ISSUE 1: March 18, 2020

Figure 2.
The first issue of creativity in the time of COVID-19, March 18, 2020.



Figure 3.
Creating structure for working from home.



Figure 4.
Creating structure for working at home.



Figure 5.
Functions that provide social connection.



Figure 6.
Functions that provide social connection.



Figure 7.
Functions that provide social connection.



Figure 8.
Quality relationships increase social connection.



Figure 9.
quality relationships increase social connection.