

# The dangers of social distancing: How COVID-19 can reshape our social experience

Kevin Sikali 

Graduate School of Business, Villanova University, Villanova, Pennsylvania, USA

## Correspondence

Kevin Sikali, Graduate School of Business, Villanova University, 800 Lancaster Avenue, Villanova, PA 19085, USA.

Email: [ysikali@villanova.edu](mailto:ysikali@villanova.edu)

It is undeniable that the coronavirus disease has taken the world by surprise: Governments radically forced guidelines that, in a matter of days, shut down businesses indefinitely and people found themselves compelled to abide by new norms. While the hygiene measures remained the same as for previous pandemics, the social distancing norms were particularly disruptive and made the experience unique.

To society, social distancing presents the dangers of increasing social rejection, growing impersonality and individualism, and the loss of a sense of community. It negatively affects learning and growth, and it prevents people from effectively socializing, which is a fundamental human need. First and foremost, the measures carried a strong psychological message, which is the fear of others, along with the idea that others are potential carriers of deadly germs and life-threatening diseases. The alarming rate of contamination and death from the virus contributed to establishing more panic, and even paranoia among many. What is particularly concerning is the fact that this psychological effect could potentially remain in our communities, even long after the pandemic. Whether this is at work, in restaurants, or in public spaces, our society has long been characterized by physical interactions between people. We are used to working in groups, going places, meeting new people, and making conversations with them on a daily basis. As we navigate through life, much of what fulfills us are the bonds we create with other people, and more often than not, those bonds materialize through physical interactions. “Social interactions are proposed to be a basic human need, analogous to other fundamental needs such as food consumption or sleep. Indeed, feeling insufficiently connected to others is associated with profound and lasting negative consequences on physical and mental health, even leading to increased mortality” Orben, Tomova, and Blakemore (2020). Physical interactions are an essential part of human social experience, and they are particularly important for the social development of young people. By closing schools, the pandemic is preventing many children and adolescents from socializing with others. This affects their ability to make quality connections, which impacts their personal growth. Indeed, youth flourishes socially through connections and fulfilling relationships, which are also an integral part of their learning. Long-term isolation leaves these basic human needs unsatisfied and ultimately affects mental health. As Orben et al. (2020) puts it, “Human adolescents are hypersensitive to social stimuli and to the negative effects of social exclusion.”

Discussing the results of a research on adolescents' motivation to practice social distancing, Oosterhoff, Wilson, and Shook (2020) stated the following: “youth who engaged in social distancing to avoid social judgment reported more anxiety symptoms and those who were social distancing because of friends' recommendations reported greater depressive symptoms, which may reflect differences in symptomatic youth and sensitivity to social judgment or peer rejection.”

The rapidity at which the coronavirus disease stroke the world, along with assertions from many researchers who predict that the world might face more dangerous pandemics in the future, builds the ground for legitimate fear. In America, not only do shoppers in grocery stores keep the recommended 6-ft distance from others, but they are also skeptical and distrustful, looking at others as potential disease carriers. What was initially intended to be an innocuous measure to limit the spread of the disease could gradually drive avoidance and exclusion. Certain scientists have asserted that humans might have to live with the coronavirus for a long time, due to lack of vaccine, or that it might become a highly seasonal disease. If we, as a society, do not find ways to maintain physical and emotional connections when facing similar pandemics, the irreurrence once or twice every decade would only worsen their negative effects on us, and it may make people feel that being isolated and distant is safe, while being outgoing and social is risky behavior. Such an atmosphere would make it more difficult to build social bonds, and it could be the unfortunate future of our communities.

Baumeister and Leary (1995) asserted that positive social contact is essential for psychological and physiological health. They also suggest that "human beings have a pervasive drive to form and maintain at least a minimum quantity of lasting, positive, and significant interpersonal relationships." While maintaining positive interactions with our communities might seem trivial, it induces a sense of trust and acceptance that we often take for granted. Exchanging a few words with the barista when ordering our morning coffee, or having a random conversation with a stranger at the grocery store are examples of naturally occurring situations that define our social dynamics. However, self-isolation, the 6-ft distance measure, and the use of protective face masks are preventing these basic interactions from happening.

From the early days of the pandemic, it was already clear that individualism was one of the many ways that the crisis manifested in our communities. People rushed to buy items that they considered critical. Pretty quickly, grocery stores and supermarkets ran out of toilet paper rolls and hand sanitizers, often because some individuals bought much more than they necessitated, therefore, showing complete disregard for the needs of others. This individualism, nonetheless, reflects a failure of the US government to provide for citizens during troubled times. In many countries, such as Germany, procurement was centralized by the government to ensure the availability of resources for citizens. This helped prevent shortages in essential items. On a global scale, tensions arose in international relations, as certain governments allegedly diverted shipments of protective masks meant for other countries, in a Machiavellian effort to prioritize the health of their own citizens. These conflicts of interest related to the COVID-19 crisis negatively affected the relationship between leaders of the World.

The coronavirus is not the first pandemic to trigger these effects, but it is more consequential and significant than previous ones because it enforced quarantine in nearly half of the World, within days. The 1918 flu pandemic, commonly referred to as the "Spanish flu," was also particularly deadly and devastating. It affected almost every country in the world and claimed more lives than World War I. Similar to what happened with COVID-19, people were also advised to avoid large gatherings, public transportation, and to stay at home if they were sick. "During the 1918/19 Influenza A1H1N1 Pandemic, social distancing played a critical role. The pandemic which started in Spain was mild at its onset; became virulent and led to approximately 300 million cases and about 50 million deaths globally" Musinguzi and Asamoah (2020). People wore protective masks to cover their faces at work. Unfortunately, efforts to prevent mass gatherings were not very successful, particularly at places of religious worship. Moreover, technology was not nearly as advanced as in 2020, and it did not allow people to work from home as conveniently as they can today. A century ago, the number of essential workers was also considerably higher. These factors prevented people from effectively practicing isolation and social distancing. Although this contributed to a sharp spread of the Spanish flu and a rising death toll, the human social experience was not altered as significantly as it is by COVID-19: despite the measures, people gathered and physically interacted more frequently than they did during the pandemic of 2020.

While diseases such as COVID-19 spread easily by human contact, it is important to be mindful that the enemy remains the virus and not our peers. In fact, the efficiency of our response and our social experience depends on how close we remain to each other and how much care we display. Part of what allowed our society to go through

the Spanish Flu was the understanding of the suffering of others and the common effort to provide physical and emotional support. "As in natural disasters, civilians and various organizations spontaneously banded together to respond to the needs of their communities, doing what they could to care for the sick, both in military camps and in towns and cities across the nation. Responding to the flu at Camp Grant, Illinois, both Army School of Nursing leaders and citizens of nearby Chicago provided help to the military" Keeling (2020). Similarly, today we must provide outright support for our peers, and particularly the most vulnerable individuals in our communities. The emotional support that we can collectively give is vital to their well-being, and it can limit the negative effects that social isolation can have on their mental health. Although handshakes and hugs might not be appropriate behavior with this new social reality, we must find other ways to acknowledge our peers and show care and respect towards them. Bowing, nodding our heads, or waving hands seem to be suitable alternatives. Elderly people are some of the individuals that are most vulnerable to the health crisis, not just because they are physically less resistant to the virus, but also particularly because their mental well-being depends in part on the care and affection that younger individuals demonstrate towards them. For this reason, adopting new ways to live with the virus would be more effective than social isolation, and as Armitage and Nellums (2020) says: "[.] Adherence to isolation strategies is likely to decrease over time. Such mitigation measures must be effectively timed to prevent transmission, but avoid increasing the morbidity of COVID-19 associated with affective disorders. This effect will be felt greatest in more disadvantaged and marginalized populations, which should be urgently targeted for the implementation of preventive strategies."

Finally, making COVID-19 testing low cost and accessible for all could considerably lower the impact of the health crisis on our social lives. Widespread, cheap testing throughout the nation would enable people to regularly check whether they test positive or negative to the virus. People should also be able to show proof that they tested negative. In certain places in China (particularly in markets in the Yunnan Province), a system called Alipay Health Code has been used to screen people before entering crowded areas. "The Alipay Health Code creators say it uses big data to draw automated conclusions about whether someone is a contagion risk. After users fill in a form on Alipay with personal details, the software generates a QR codes in one of three colors. A green code enable its holders to move about unrestricted. Someone with a yellow code may be asked to stay home for seven days. Red means a two-week quarantine." (Mozur, Zhong, & Krolik, 2020). Implementing similar screening checkpoints at the entrances of work areas, retail stores, recreation centers and many other public spaces in the United States and in the World would help prevent mass contagion and allow people to feel safer when socializing. Indeed, one would likely feel more comfortable engaging in physical interactions with peers at work if she knows that everyone in her surroundings has passed a COVID screening. Having an effective COVID-19 screening system, encouraging people to take tests regularly, and ensuring updated reports on a mobile application would be an efficient way to live through pandemics.

The damaging effect of pandemics such as COVID-19 on global health and on the Economy is indisputable. While their impacts on human social experience have received less consideration, it is essential to acknowledge and address their harmful effects on the well-being of our communities. Socializing is a fundamental human need, and social distancing hinders it, which ultimately affects our mental wellness. While the physical distancing may appropriately be enforced when necessary, the social aspect of our relationships must be strengthened to sustain our bonds and support the most vulnerable among us.

## PEER REVIEW

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## ORCID

Kevin Sikali  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-6693-4461>

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