

## ENHANCING PSYCHOLOGICAL WELLBEING DURING SOCIAL ISOLATION RELATED TO LOCKDOWN

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Social isolation resulting from the Corona lockdown in itself may not lead to negative psychological consequences. However, prolonged confinement with a group of people in restricted space can strain relationships which in turn can cause negative consequences. It is not social isolation per se, but the *feeling* of being alone, that is, feeling disconnected or alienated that in a significant way leads to negative consequences such as depression and anxiety.

There is robust evidence that loneliness significantly increases risk for premature mortality. Studies have shown that lack of connectedness heightens health risks as much as smoking 15 cigarettes a day and is twice as harmful to physical and mental health as obesity.

Adverse health consequences of loneliness, understood as the subjective sense of lack of desired connectedness, include besides depression and anxiety, poor sleep quality, accelerated cognitive decline which increases the risk of dementia, poor cardiovascular function, higher levels of blood pressure and impaired immunity. Loneliness heightens levels of stress which we know is at the root of most major killer diseases. It increases the activity of genes involved in causing inflammation and decreases that of genes involved in antiviral responses, which is especially relevant in this time of Covid-19.

### Relationship Strain

Relationship strain is the major contributor to loneliness. We can be lonely even when we are with a group of people, including our family members, if our relationships are strained. On the other hand, we do not feel lonely even when we are alone if we have a subjective sense of connectedness..

Hence the challenge during the lockdown is to stay psychologically connected. It is especially important to take care that relationships do not strain, the possibility for which is quite strong when we stay confined within small spaces with a group of people.

The Harvard Study of Adult Development, also known as the Grant Study, which is perhaps the longest running longitudinal study anywhere and anytime (about 80 years running) has unequivocally shown that the number one contributor to health and happiness is satisfying relationships. Strained relationships, on the other hand, take a toll. For example, a bad marriage is worse than no marriage. "The good life," Dr. Robert Waldinger, the current director of the Harvard Study declares, "is built on good relationships."

When people are deprived of social connections with those other than they live with, there is increased potential for relational friction with those they live with. When relationships are

close-binding, with little outlets for connectedness with others, conflicts within the relationship become more of a possibility. When this happens, psychological distancing from those one lives with is the result. This is a danger that one has to avoid during the imposed social isolation.

Another reason for this potential alienation is that when we live with someone with not much to do and with little interaction with those outside the inner circle, we have ample time to notice negative features in the other we may not have earlier. Along with this, our mind will tend to go back over memory lane and pull up unpleasant situations and incidents involving the other. This can lead to bickering and recrimination that strain the relationship, increasing psychological alienation. Prolonged close proximity, even within an intimate relationship, is a psychological health hazard.

Besides, having nothing much to do in the absence of the usual demands that daily life makes on us, without the option of venturing out and engaging in social intercourse, can lead to boredom which in turn can fray nerves and negatively affect the relationships within.

Hence the challenges are: 1. To take special care to avoid fault finding and negativity. 2. To maintain connectedness with those outside. 3. Create pleasant environment. 4 Fight boredom. There are multiple ways to meet these challenges.

### **Avoid Negativity**

Regarding the first: We need to make a special effort to weed out negativity and focus on the positive. Recall together the good times we have had. Leafing through the album of old photographs and commenting on them, narrating the happy times on trips taken together long time ago, as well as interesting personal anecdotes that the others may not know of are very helpful in enhancing relationships. It is important here to remember *The Rule of Four*. Before we ever mention anything negative about the other, we make sure we have said at least four pleasant or positive things about or to the person! Better still, if anything negative comes up, defer its communication to a later time. Blaming, accusations, fault-finding are especially hazardous during confinement.

Within the confined, and sometimes cramped, space we can become more sensitive to noise, loud conversations and other disruptive sounds. We will be more demanding in regard to use of common space, equipment and devices. There is potential for quarreling and fighting in regard to these.

Sensitivity to others' need is important. Just as we experience tension and irritation created by the situation, others we live with will also. We need to respond with empathy than annoyance to others' irritating words and behaviour.

### **Connect with Friends and Colleagues**

In regard to the second: studies have shown that in times of social isolation, more than connection with one's partner or family members, what helps ward off loneliness is connection

with one's friends and colleagues. Hence keeping in contact with our friends and acquaintances outside our immediate family circle is important. This can be done easily today through the means of communication available to us. An easy topic for conversation with friends and colleagues is discussion on how we are facing this imposed isolation and how we and our work are affected by it.

Even if we are not connecting in person with those outside, virtual connection through social media also helps. Besides, engagement with social media can keep us busy and ward off boredom. However, it is important to keep in mind that too much engagement with social media, especially when it distances us from those we live with is not a good thing. Fake news amply available on social media can cause fear and anxiety.

### **Create Pleasant Environment**

In regard to the third: Creating a pleasant environment in the space we are confined in is especially important. We can do this first of all by avoiding negative and critical conversations. Planning and executing celebratory events brings joy and togetherness.

Busy parents who otherwise have not had enough time to spend with children are given a golden opportunity. Play with them, do fun things with them. Read stories to the very small children.

Cooperative cleaning up the house or giving a new coat of paint to the walls also help create pleasant environment. Even re-arranging the furniture can contribute to creation of a pleasant physical space.

### **Fight Boredom**

In regard to the third: Reduced activity arising from absence from our place and the hassle of travel leaves time on our hands. Not knowing how to utilize it can lead to boredom and irritation.

The activities involved in creating a pleasant environment as described are great ways to beat boredom.

However there is something more important. Even within the closed spaces, we have to create a personal space where we can occasionally isolate ourselves and be able to do things we are interested in without interference from others.

The solitude that such personal spaces provide can also help us to devote time and energy to projects we are interested in. For example, if we are technologically oriented, we can experiment creatively. If we are inclined toward literary pursuits, this is the time to write that article that we have dreamed of, but had not found time for. We can start writing the first pages of that wonderful book we have been dreaming of writing. The time at our disposal gives us opportunity also to try out creative cooking and baking.

Settling comfortably with a favourite book can be both exciting and relaxing. When we do that from our balcony or from our garden (if we have one) we are also refreshed by nature. Sitting quietly outdoors, doing nothing important, but simply taking in the nature around us, can be very refreshing and will make the time spent within less boring.

Exercise is a great boredom buster. Moreover, it energizes mind and body, reduces anxiety and increases feelings of wellbeing. Yoga, qigong, tai-chi, and simple aerobics, besides beating boredom, help stimulate and strengthen the immune system. Acupressure is a very simple routine we can engage in when we sit alone or with others. It is as simple as pressing, rubbing or tapping some specific pressure points in the body. We can easily find these points and methods through a search on Google.

Tending to plants is a great stress reliever. Some of us may have potted plants inside the room. Some of us may be even more fortunate and have a garden to tend. Contact with mother earth and elements of nature through gardening will refresh our bodies and spirit and enliven our relationships, besides helping us fight off boredom.

The lockdown, despite the limitations and inconveniences it imposes upon us, can also turn out to be a great life-enhancer.