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Finding Meaning in Social Isolation

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We humans routinely behave in ways that are motivated by altruism, by the drive to help others. Last year, in Worcester almost 5,000 people queued for hours in the rain to see if their stem cells matched those of a five year old boy battling a rare cancer. The images of fire services personnel in New York on 9/11 rushing towards the burning buildings to save others have become iconic, as have those of the White Helmets rushing into bombed buildings in Syria to save lives. Currently, the courage and kindness of our own health professionals, many returning from overseas, in putting their own health and possibly their own lives on the line is something for which we are all exceedingly grateful.

One of the peculiar features of the current situation is that our natural inclination to move towards, to help and to comfort others is thwarted by the critical requirement to maintain social distance. John Donne's proposition that no man is an island has been turned on its head – in order to save lives we must all become islands. At the present moment, hundreds of millions of us throughout the world are learning a new way of existing, one that challenges our inherently social nature.

Staying connected while distanced is particularly important at the present time. Decades of research have shown that loneliness has a significant negative impact, not only on our mental health, but also on our physical health. When lonely, our immune systems don't function as well, we respond more negatively to stressful events, we are more likely to suffer from depression and to lose sleep; there is even evidence that our lifespan can be shortened.

In the present circumstances, there are two important considerations that can help us decrease our sense of isolation and loneliness. Firstly, we are not alone – we are all in this together. This sense of shared adversity heightens our awareness of our common humanity and makes us more understanding of each other and also more compassionate with each other. This, together with our capacity for adaptation, is creating some wonderful new solutions, many of which feature balconies: singing in Italy, Kaddish in New York and bingo in Dublin! The second important consideration is that most of us have access to excellent social media technologies that allow us to stay connected. We are learning to use these technologies in new and creative ways that mimic the informality we use when we are face to face.

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The following strategies help make social isolation more bearable:

1. Consider that, as we are all in this together, we have more in common with more people than is usually the case.
2. Comforting others is one of the best ways of feeling comforted oneself
3. Controlling the amount of information about the outbreak that we are exposed to and making sure that it is reliable helps prevent spiralling anxiety.
4. Creating “worry windows” - times, perhaps half an hour in the morning and half an hour in the evening when we engage with the information and allow ourselves to worry, keeping the rest of the time as normal and as engaging as possible – helps decrease anxiety-inducing overload.
5. Learning to use social media in new and informal ways such as coffee meetings, book club get-togethers and children’s play dates helps maintain more natural social engagement.
6. Taking exercise, eating and sleeping as well as we can, learning and practicing meditation and spending time in nature, all help to maintain wellness.

Cultivating and maintaining a sense of hope is an important antidote to stress, anxiety and depression. There is much to be hopeful for: the biological structure of the virus and its means of transmission are known; the impact is mild in many people and most recover; research to find a vaccine and effective drugs is accelerating; the pattern seen in China shows a positive trajectory; the crisis is bringing about a reassessment of modern life and a greater understanding of the extent to which all of us are interlinked. The poet Emily Dickinson, in one of her poems, beautifully described hope as follows: *“Hope” is the thing with feathers - That perches in the soul - And sings the tune without the words - And never stops - at all*⁶

In his famous book *Man’s Search For Meaning*, the Austrian psychiatrist Viktor Frankl, who survived the Holocaust, distinguished between *liberty* and *freedom*. His key insight, as a prisoner in the concentration camps was that, whereas his liberty could be denied him, he was free to choose his response to what was happening to him. The same is true for all of us facing into this uncertain future in which our liberty must be significantly curtailed. We are free to choose our response and, in choosing how we respond, we can be guided by our sense of solidarity with our fellow human beings. We can express our fundamentally altruistic nature and we can learn that our deepest human meaning is to be found in doing something for the common good. By responding to what Abraham Lincoln called *“the better angels of our nature”*, we can save lives.

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