

9 Ways to Stay Connected While Social Distancing

1. Catch up with people living elsewhere.

Decreasing your in-person interactions provides a great excuse to get in touch with people who live far away from you, especially people you may have lost touch with. Use FaceTime, Skype, Facebook, or good old-fashioned phone calls to reconnect with old friends and family members.

Video chat is especially good for avoiding feelings of isolation, Dr. Zuckerman says, “This gives us the emotional connection we need via facial expressions and tone of voice.” And make a point to reach out to others who are also practicing social isolation. “Knowing you are not alone helps to significantly decrease anxiety,” Dr. Zuckerman says. “During times of crisis like this, we seek out comfort and reassurance from others, especially those who may be in similar situations to our own. Being part of a dynamic that shares a common interest or goal makes us feel more connected, safe, and understood.”

2. Plan fun activities within your home.

If you live with other people—whether that’s your family, a partner, or roommates—Dr. Zuckerman suggests scheduling activities like baking, movie nights, and board games with them. Even if you live alone, you can play online games with other people from a distance.

“This provides a sense of normalcy and structure to what seems like endless days of social distancing,” she says. “The more familiar the structure, the less anxiety one will have. This is because we, as humans, are more productive and calm when we can predict what comes next. It alleviates the guess work and ‘what if’ thinking.”

Dr. Zuckerman also suggests that fun activities—such as games, looking at old photos, movie nights, and baking—will help people engage in “non-pandemic” behaviors. “It forces you to be present in the moment rather than ruminate alone in your head,” she says.

3. Practice mindfulness and meditation.

You can use apps like Headspace (which is now free for healthcare professionals) and InScape to practice meditations if you start to feel anxious or depressed, Zuckerman says. “Meditation is an essential strategy used to decrease feelings of depression and anxiety,” she explains. “Although practicing meditation may seem like an isolating activity, its purpose is to make you more present-focused, rather than stuck in your head, as it helps to quiet the negative thoughts and feelings that can be associated with isolation.”

4. Catch up on tasks you haven't had the time for.

Being confined to your home can be an advantage. If you've been meaning to start your spring cleaning, do your taxes, or pay your bills but just haven't gotten around to it, this is the time to do that. That way, when you can go out, you won't have to think about those things anymore. "When we do things that we have on our to-do list, it helps us feel like we have accomplished something," Dr. Lori Whatley, clinical psychologist and author of *Connected & Engaged* tells HelloGiggles. And, she adds, that can be "helpful for our physical and mental help during stressful times."

Accomplishing things also "makes you feel more in control of your own sense of well-being and reinforces the idea that you are able to make yourself feel good, intrinsically, rather than depend on others to do that for you," says Zuckerman.

You can also engage in fun activities at home that you get pleasure from and haven't had time to do. For example, you might watch a movie you've been wanting to see. "This helps take you out of your head and keep you present," Zuckerman says.

5. Limit your exposure to screens.

While it may be easy to stay on your computer all day, this can expose you to potentially stressful news and cause you to neglect other activities, says Whatley. It can also isolate you if you start to use Facebook chat or Gchat as a substitute for voice or video calls.

Instead, try unplugging for a bit, reading a book, or learning a new hobby at home. "When you are on your computer, you're not doing peaceful and essential things like exercising, engaging with others in your home, reading a handheld book, playing with your pets, or being connected and engaged with the world around you," Whatley says. Even if you can't get outside, she advises at least opening a window.

If you've been forced to work from home, Whatley suggests taking a break from your computer every hour or so. "This will actually help you get more done and feel better," she says. "Too much tech burns us out in the end, so be intentional about dividing tech and non-tech activities." When you're online, don't overload on coronavirus news. "Remember, everyone manages change differently, and some online may be overreacting," Whatley says. "You don't want to expose yourself to that panic needlessly."

6. Keep in communication with your colleagues.

If you're working from home to keep your distance from colleagues in the office, Dr. Zuckerman recommends making conversation from a distance and, if need be, chatting through apps like Slack or Gchat. "This allows you to keep work related communication separate from other social communication," she says. "It maintains accountability while not being physically present." To make remote work feel more social, Dr. Zuckerman

suggests planning digital office happy hours, lunch breaks, or exercise classes for you and your team to do together.

7. Keep things light and humorous when you can.

When you get the chance to converse with others, try to keep it light and laugh as much as possible. But aside from the interpersonal benefit that humor can bring, Dr. Zuckerman says there's actual neurological and physical benefits, too. "Laughter is known to decrease various stress hormones, help our muscles relax, protect our heart function, and heighten the release of endorphins, our 'happy' chemical. Humor and laughter are also natural immunity boosters which, during the current climate, is a necessity," she says.

8. Play your favorite music.

One easy way to lift yourself up in any situation is to play music you enjoy. If you need to get out of a funk, you might even throw a mini dance party in your home, whether it's with others you live with or by yourself. Or you can throw a virtual dance party and invite people to dance with you over video chat, Whatley says. Some people are actually throwing virtual dance parties over Instagram Live. You might also look for live-streamed concerts and exercise classes, Dr. Zuckerman says.

"Listening to music is an excellent way to decrease anxiety," Dr. Zuckerman says. "Music is often used as part of relaxation strategies, as it helps to release tension in our muscles. Additionally, listening to your favorite music helps to naturally improve mood and promote happy memories associated with various songs (i.e. wedding song, prom song). It also helps boost energy, for example, during a workout."

9. Help others whenever you can.

"The reality of this pandemic is that it is a serious crisis. It is bad. It is scary. And it's okay to have all of these emotions and thoughts," Dr. Zuckerman adds. "Rather than trying to just change your thoughts, it's way more effective to change behaviors, which ultimately results in a better, positive mood."

One of the ways you can improve your mood is by reaching out to others to spread kindness and compassion, as it can give you a sense of purpose and control in an unstable situation like the coronavirus pandemic.

"It's something you can offer that doesn't require money, physical proximity, or even an internet connection. A phone call, offering your services or goods to those less fortunate or unable to help themselves, even writing a good old-fashioned letter to someone can convey compassion. Knowing you made someone feel safe, or smile, or just feel they aren't alone can be highly rewarding," Dr. Zuckerman says.

In the meantime, reassure yourself you will get through this. “Remind yourself that this social isolation period is temporary,” Dr. Zuckerman advises. “It will end. It’s not forever.” And once you get through this difficult period, your relationship with yourself and others can come out stronger.

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