

Together Apart: Community Life in Times of Crisis



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Together Apart: Community Life in Times of Crisis
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The reality of COVID-19 is sinking in. This pandemic is likely to be a long and drawn-out one. It also is reasonable to assume that it will not be the last of its kind. Nevertheless, it is encouraging to see that critical public health messages are getting through regarding hand-washing, physical distance, limits on congregation and the need for self-isolation both as a preventive and recovery measure.

Challenges and Opportunities

It still feels, though, as if we are in pursuit of answers to questions we have not properly formulated yet. The guidance on what has been termed *social distancing* is a case in point. Humans are social creatures, and our connections with others give meaning to our lives. The evidence underpinning this advice is based on the protective effects of maintaining a *physical* distance of at least two metres from other people while avoiding large gatherings, rather than on complete social disconnection. However, we must also recognise that new evidence is emerging as we act.

Given the variation in advice in different nation states on what constitutes a safe group size and whether it's safer for people to get together outdoors, it would be extremely helpful if policy could evolve to provide some clarity here. In the meantime, it is essential that we maximise our capacity to remain present, social and civic. At the same time, though, we have to minimise the risk of contagion and to limit our exposure to the vulnerabilities that sit both within us and between us.

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As social beings, we are being challenged as never before; emotionally, socially, civically. We have to step back from each other, while at the same stepping up to contribute to the wellbeing of our communities. The question before us is how to spin those two plates at the same time and in ways that will persist over time?

It's heartening to see so many organisations play their part in response to the crisis, whether that is brewers who've started to produce [hand sanitiser](#), or education providers who are supporting the home-schooling of children in ways that will [help them understand](#) what's happening around them right now.

In our local neighbourhoods, right now, there also are signs of community mobilisation and of impactful responses being put into effect. As people self-organize, there is increasing evidence of mass local responses to this global crisis that are enabling people to stay together while being apart. There is much we can learn from their community stories, which are emerging at an accelerated pace in the face of this pandemic.

We've already seen many examples of people making creative use of the opportunity to [get outdoors](#), staying both active and socially connected, while still following current public health advice. One inventive act of safe social gathering saw residents of a Spanish high-rise community organising a game of [balcony bingo](#). This has already sparked positive contagion, with the game being adopted and adapted in [Ireland](#) and elsewhere.

There is no map to guide us through this crisis, nor will we find our way by being nudged from afar. Instead, we must depend on the common principles that surface when local insight and local action are effectively coupled to illuminate our path and keep us from the proverbial ditch. These will serve as our compass as we navigate the way ahead.

Guiding Lights

Neighbours. These are the first responders. We are all interdependent. We all have complementary knowledge, gifts and skills. Let's create an inventory of neighbourhood assets. Stop seeing people as *needy* and start seeing them as *needed*.

Language. The words we use matter. There is a significant difference between *social distancing* and *physical distancing*. Use people-centric and inclusive language. Avoid language that dehumanises or focuses on deficits or labels. We are all vulnerable in this crisis, indeed we are only as healthy as our sickest neighbour.

Stories. We are creatures of narrative. Every conversation is a story. We will learn most about how to adapt to pandemics by curating the stories of what we are doing right now during the COVID-19 outbreak.

Local resources. Our communities already contain the social fabric of associational life in local groups and clubs. They possess the recreational space needed to convene safely, enabling social connection while maintaining physical distance. Let's be creative as we explore what role these can play as we adapt to our new reality.

Strengths. We need to start with what's strong in our communities, not with what's wrong. Then we need to seek to make those strengths stronger still.

Enduring Change

As the all-consuming influences of the marketplace recede for a time, and the world self-organises, community by community, we can work together to amplify a more hopeful and sustainable story for ourselves and our planet. A better story that emphasises caring, connected and creative communities, that are also learning to walk more lightly on the planet.

The question we need to address, then, relates not just to how we survive this pandemic but also to how we sustain the community that has arisen as a consequence of it. As we shelter and seek to protect those we love, we must also look outwards and onwards. Our actions today can serve as the catalyst to enduring change in our communities.

Our response to this current outbreak should not be viewed as a singular feat of endurance that will return us back to where we were, but as a new beginning.