
Thrive

Five tips to strengthen your relationships during isolation

by AMANDA WALLIS

“The strongest among us are those who can reach for others” - Dr Sue Johnson

Feeling connected to others is an essential human need. Importantly, this connection with people can be highly protective when we are coping with difficult experiences. Researchers such as Barbara Fredrickson and Esther Sternberg have identified that our connections to others evoke emotions that affect our hormonal reactions, our nerve chemicals and our immune responses – and, through these, our resistance or susceptibility to stress and illness.

In this global health crisis, it’s particularly important to strengthen our relationships with others as a way of a) buffering stress, b) boosting our immune response, and c) providing social embeddedness during times of loneliness and self-isolation.

[Research](#) shows that, in times of disaster, romantic relationships can intensify – in both directions – with higher rates of divorce, marriage, *and* births in the aftermath. So, if your feelings towards other people have intensified in the last few weeks as the global pandemic has unfolded, you are not alone. Whether it’s lashing out at a family member, clashing with a colleague, or fighting with your spouse, it’s unsurprising if you have noticed rising tensions during times of uncertainty and change.

But, as we grow accustomed to our new routines while isolating, now is a great time to invest in our relationships to improve our own physical and mental wellbeing.

Here are five tips on getting started:

1. *Prioritise your relationships.* Even if you are currently house-bound with the people that you are close to, that doesn’t necessarily mean that your time spent together is quality time. In fact, many of us might be more distracted than ever due to the blending of work-life and home-life (as well as constantly checking the news headlines). Don’t forget to still incorporate date nights, family game nights, or whatever works for you, into your schedule to ensure that some of your time spent together is replenishing and distraction-free.
2. *Introduce novelty.* It’s easy to feel like you are in a rut – both personally and socially – when you haven’t left the house for days, so challenge this by doing something new with the people in your life. For a professional relationship, this could mean making a team and tuning into a virtual quiz night. In your personal relationships, try to learn a new skill together, or surprise each other with new games, activities, or recipes to try.
3. *Increase experiences of positive emotion together.* Experiment with different ways you can experience more joy, gratitude, appreciation, elation, excitement or calmness together. With a colleague, this could be celebrating a success together; with a friend, enjoying a drink after work over Zoom or FaceTime. Bonding over these positive emotions can boost your mood, lower your stress, and bring you closer together.

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4. *Practise appreciating one another.* If you are house-bound with loved ones, rather than nit-picking their bad habits, use this time to observe the parts about them and your relationship that you love. Tell them or show them how you appreciate them, express your thanks and pay attention to anything they do differently that you like. It may feel awkward at first, but genuine praise and appreciation can be one of the quickest pathways to human connection.
5. *Listen and take their perspective.* We all cope with stress in different ways. You might be the type to exhaustively read every COVID-19 article that you can get your hands on, while your partner, flatmate, or colleague might prefer not to know. Rather than clashing, take time to actively listen to their perspective. Truly pay attention to what the person is saying, seeing if you can reflect it back to them: *Have I got that right?* Check back also: *What can I say or do to show you I care or understand?*