

Social Distancing Isn't the Right Language for What Covid-19 Asks of Us

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It is a remarkable thing to consider that only a few months ago, most of humanity did not know what social distancing was. The term's popularity, and the need for it, emerged as Covid-19 did. But as it has become both part of our lexicon and a defining feature of our lives, a growing group of people are calling for the term—though not the actions—to be changed. We should be physical distancing, they say, not social distancing.

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In 2010, Julianne Holt-Lunstad, a professor of psychology at Brigham Young University published research showing that people with weaker social ties had a 50% increased likelihood of dying early than those with stronger ones. Being disconnected, she showed, posed danger comparable to smoking 15 cigarettes a day, and was more predictive of early death than the effects of air pollution or physical inactivity.

"Humans need others to survive," she told me in 2018. "Regardless of one's sex, country or culture of origin, or age or economic background, social connection is crucial to human development, health, and survival."

This is precisely why this pandemic is so challenging. We exist in a moment that calls for a different social contract, one that connects us more to one another. And yet Covid-19 tells us to socially distance ourselves, to self-quarantine, to self-isolate.

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