

Social Distancing Prevents Infections, But It Can Have Unintended Consequences

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In response to the coronavirus pandemic, public health officials are asking us to do something that does not come naturally to our very social species: Stay away from each other. Such social distancing—avoiding large gatherings and close contact with others—is crucial for slowing the spread of the virus and preventing our health care system from getting overwhelmed. But it won't be easy.

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The effects of short-term social distancing haven't been well studied, but several researchers—most of them scrambling to deal with disruptions to their own lives because of the coronavirus—recently took time to share some thoughts with ScienceInsider on the potential social and psychological impacts, and how to mitigate them. Here's what they said:

What's known about the effects of social interaction on mental and physical health?

Over long periods of time, social isolation can increase the risk of a [variety of health problems](#), including heart disease, depression, dementia, and even death. A 2015 meta-analysis of the scientific literature by Julianne Holt-Lunstad, a research psychologist at Brigham Young University, and colleagues determined that chronic social isolation [increases the risk of mortality](#) by 29%.

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Are certain people or populations more likely to be affected?

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There's enormous individual variation in people's ability to handle social isolation and stress, adds Chris Segrin, a behavioral scientist at the University of Arizona. It's important to remember that not everyone is going into this with the same level of mental health, he says. "Someone who is already having problems with, say, social anxiety, depression, loneliness, substance abuse, or other health problems is going to be particularly vulnerable."

Overall, though, people are remarkably resilient. And many have endured far worse situations. Segrin points to case studies of U.S. prisoners during the Vietnam War who were confined in tiny cells called "tiger cages," sometimes in water up to their chin. One trait that predicted their long-term psychological health was optimism: Prisoners who believed that, no matter how bad things were, they would survive and the war would eventually be won [had better mental health](#) later on in life.