

The Surprising Power of Social Outreach

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Among the many pains associated with coronavirus is a feeling of helplessness. Even if you are sheltered in place, you can do more good than you may think by reaching out to others and connecting. But first, you have to overcome the tendency to underestimate how positively others will respond when you try.

Beyond the bodily harm that comes from getting sick is the psychological harm that comes from mandated social isolation. The sense of disconnection that follows [harms well-being](#), creates a psychological stressor that [impairs our immune systems](#), [decreases cardiovascular health](#) and [increases the likelihood of death](#). Despite the importance of social engagement, however, we can be overly reluctant to reach out because we fear how the other person will respond. Will this be awkward? Will my kindness be appreciated? Does my old friend or acquaintance really want to talk to me? We find, [time and time again](#) in behavioral science experiments, that these concerns are exaggerated, creating a misplaced psychological barrier to reaching out to others.

For instance, before the current era of social distancing, [we learned](#) that people commuting on public transportation underestimated how much they would enjoy talking to strangers rather than keeping to themselves. In these experiments, commuters whom we randomly assigned to have a conversation with the person who sits next to them on a train or bus reported a more positive commute than those we randomly assigned to keep to themselves and enjoy their solitude.

However, when we asked people to predict how positive their commute would be in these conditions, they expected precisely the opposite, thinking they would be happier keeping to themselves rather than connecting with a stranger. This misunderstanding stems, we found, from an underestimation of how interested others are in talking back to one if one tries. [When people do try](#) to reach out and connect with another person, nearly everyone reaches back. “Man is by nature a social animal,” remarked Aristotle millennia ago. The extent to which this is true seems not to have sunk into humanity just yet.

Of course, in-person conversation is temporarily suspended by physical distancing, but technology enables us to still be very close to other socially, as long as we use it to shrink our distance from others. You can do this by engaging in more [deep and intimate conversation](#), or by connecting through a more intimate medium that uses [your voice rather than text](#). You understand [others more accurately](#), and feel more connected to them, when you actually hear what another person has to say than when you read the same content. Nevertheless, we again find that people may be overly reluctant to engage more deeply with others because they misunderstand how others are likely to respond.

In [one series of experiments](#), those asked to engage in deep conversation with another person by discussing several very intimate questions underestimated how close they would feel to their partner

afterwards and also overestimated how awkward the interaction would feel, again because they underestimate how interested others would be in having this deep conversation.

In another [series of experiments](#), we asked people to reconnect with an old friend either by calling that person or by e-mailing that person. Although people expected to feel closer to their friend when they called than when they typed, they also expected to feel more awkward when calling than when typing. As a consequence, a majority of people preferred to e-mail their old friend instead of calling them. In reality, those we actually assigned to call their old friend did feel closer and enjoyed their conversation more than those we assigned to type to their old friend, without feeling any more awkward when talking to each other than when typing to each other.

The surprising power of sociality does not end with more meaningful conversation. In ongoing research, my collaborators and I find that it seems to extend to almost any act we perform to reach out and connect positively with others. Those who [express their gratitude](#) to another person who has done something meaningful for them underestimate how positively their recipient [will respond](#). People we ask to [write compliments](#)—even to those they are closest to, such as their spouse—underestimate how positively their kind words will make them feel. [When we ask people](#) in the streets of Chicago to perform a random act of kindness for another person, such as giving another person a free cup of hot chocolate, they tend to underestimate how positively their small act of sociality will make another person feel.

The same applies to those who enable others to help them by simply asking for help. [In one experiment](#), we asked people at a popular tourist attraction in Chicago to walk up to another person and ask if this person would be willing to take his or her picture in front of the attraction. Those asking for help underestimated how positive the recipients would feel after being asked to perform an act of kindness for them. Even when [we ask strangers in our laboratory](#) to reach out and express support to another person who is in need of something, people expect their efforts will make the other person feel less positive than it actually does.

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