

# Social Distancing

Social Distancing: Stay away but I need a hug

What is social distancing? None of us knew this term or used these words on a daily basis until the recent crisis. We do know the rule of social distancing: stay six feet apart. What we do not know is what are the consequences of social distancing when acted out or how it impacts how people feel? The extreme opposite of social distancing is invading someone's space. I think all of us know someone who is unaware of others' personal boundaries. We know what it feels like when someone invades our personal space, but social distancing is a bit harder to define. We generally welcome people into our space while keeping our own boundaries. Even the home body leaves the house at some point and experiences human interactions. Each of us likes to control who we let in, when and why? The issue now is we have no control over when the virus might invade our space or how it invades our space. Lack of control is unsettling and leads to certain instinctive behaviors, actions and reactions.

A subcomponent of social distancing is the concept of "shelter in place". So now we cannot go out and we cannot interact with people. Staying in is hard. Add the notion of "contactless" interactions and we are at home, not touching or interaction with anyone other than perhaps our pets (more on pets below).

Nowadays, our ever evolving technology has modified our expectations of how we converse. Until we were told how we could and could not interact, talking on the phone, sending messages via text had become the norm. For the most part, people had become comfortable with this type of interaction and it was enough to feel connected. Long before instant connectivity was possible via technology, people used to talk to their neighbors "over the fence". How have we strayed so

far? Why have we become less social and friendly? We all go about our own business; on our phones in any setting; using headphones to tune out the world. We only reach out when we need something. Well maybe now is the time for all of us to recognize that we need something- -we need personal contact! We like to be seen and be heard. Getting outside for some human interaction can help but not if those you encounter do not make eye contact, do not smile or even worse, turn away or cross the street. It is important to be safe, but we still need to be polite and humane.

Zoom, Skype and other technology allows us to see each other, sometimes in a less formal persona but this is not enough. Since remote working has emerged, the most common complaint has been that working remotely is isolating. It is interesting that a society who uses technology all the time to communicate and interact is yearning for social contact and is having trouble with social distancing. I feel it is not about the need to see each other. It is about connecting as people. How can that take place on a zoom call? As the host of the call, take a few minutes when you start for basic social interaction. Ask each person how they are doing. Talk about non-work related topics. Think of water cooler or break room conversations. Research on emotional intelligence tells us that employees look to their managers for cues about how to react to sudden changes or crisis situations. Effective leaders need to acknowledge the fear and uncertainty while instilling confidence in their team that we will get through this and we will get through this together. They also need to establish trust and build rapport without actually being there. Hopefully as an owner, you have created a culture that will allow your team to step up in a situation and take charge, knowing that you have their back.

Once this crisis lessens, as leaders we need to enforce and abide by the new rules, figure out how to reintegrate our workforce back into the workplace all the while uncertain of

how to act. There was an adjustment period when we were forced to work remotely and there will also be a similar adjustment period when we all (or at least most of us) return to the physical space where we used to work. Take the best of the way it used to be and embrace the new norm. Use the solutions we achieved during the crisis to shape the future workplace.

Back to our pets. Why are pets used as therapy animals? They provide comfort and companionship without asking for much in return. They are our constant companions. They never judge or criticize. Pets are living, breathing touch points. We can learn a lot from them on how to re-establish our physical connections and be comfortable with people in our space and by our side.

It's the little things that bring us together and connect us.