



Supporting our clients during **COVID-19**

How can we stay connected?

COVID-19 (Corona) is presenting unprecedented challenges for everyone, including added social and psychological stresses. We know that staying connected and maintaining social support systems can enhance wellbeing and improve our capacity to cope in times of stress.

But right now, we are being asked to keep our social distance from others to minimise the spread of the virus. Social distancing is a key way to stop or slow the spread of infectious diseases. It means less contact between you and other people. Social distancing is important because COVID-19 is most likely to spread from person-to-person. A good fact sheet explaining social distancing is available:

<https://www.health.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/2020/03/coronavirus-covid-19-information-on-social-distancing.pdf>



Many of us will be facing periods of social isolation, particularly if we have been in contact with someone with COVID-19 or have recently been overseas. Even if we appear to be healthy, it is important to practice social distancing to help protect vulnerable groups such as older people, people with disabilities and medically compromised people from becoming infected. It is important that we care for others during this time and all play our part in slowing down the spread of the disease, which will, in turn, reduce strain on the health care system.

Federal Government advice has seen the cancellation of events of 100 or more people. Many organisations have also moved to cancel regular activities, even smaller events. Many workplaces with the capacity to do so have asked their staff to work from home.

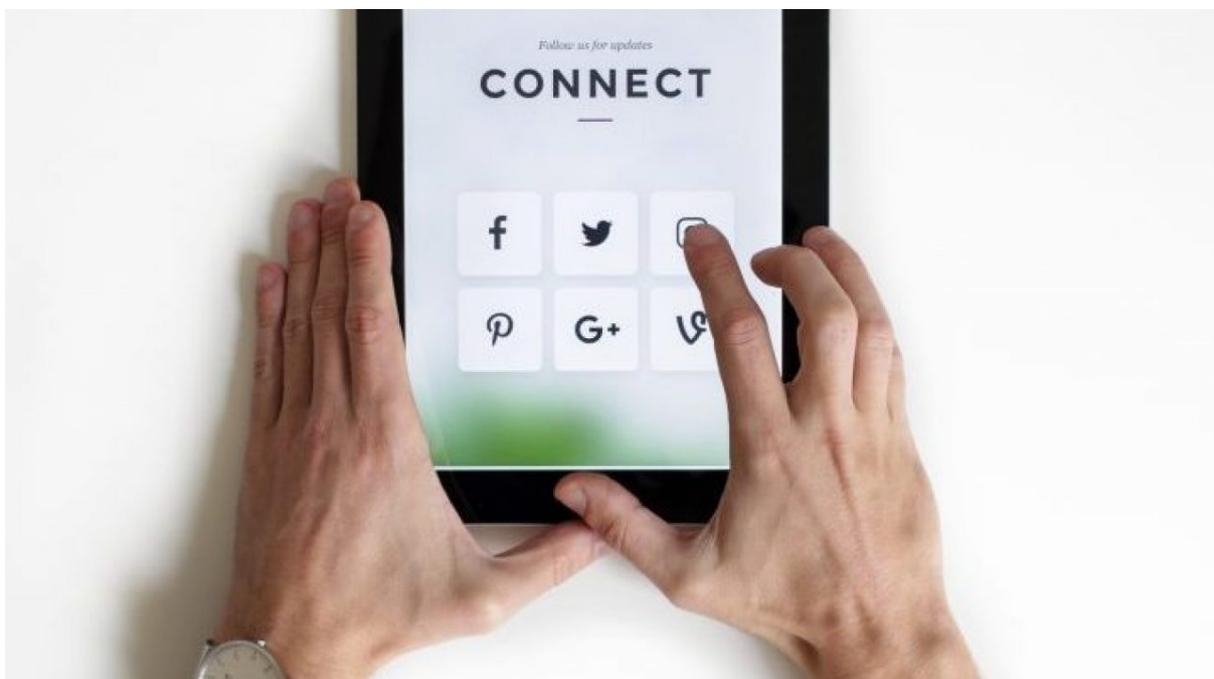
It is a time of uncertainty and a lack of control in our daily lives can lead to increased anxiety levels. It is expected that the control of coronavirus will have impacts for a period of around 6 months, however as the response is evolving day to day the timeframe could change. Social distancing will result in fewer face-to-face social interactions, potentially increasing the risk of loneliness.



How can social isolation and loneliness affect my health?

Social isolation is a lack of social interaction, contact or communication with other people and it can lead to loneliness. A feeling of not having one's social needs met, feeling isolated or feeling alone in a negative way can affect physical health and emotional wellbeing.

Some studies have linked loneliness to poorer health outcomes, including high blood pressure, obesity, and for some individuals, mental health problems such as depression. Loneliness can also impact sleep, and reduce energy levels and motivation. Social isolation will present many challenges. While we can't replace the value of face-to-face interactions, we can be creative in how we stay connected under these circumstances.



For many of us, this will be a difficult time and although it is temporary, it will be much easier if we can stay connected in some way. Many of us will also miss taking part in sports, outings, hobbies, and activities during this period.

Below are some tips to help us stay connected.

Tips for staying connected

- **Why not Facetime/video call on your smartphone**, instead of just speaking on the phone. Seeing someone's facial expressions can help increase a sense of connection. However, if a video call is not available then a voice call is always better than an email or a text.
- **Call and arrange a time to catch-up with friends and family** on a regular basis. If they don't call you, call them. This is also a great time to teach grandparents how to video call. In times like this, we need to support each other. Gather a group of people to stay in touch and connected with. Positive social support networks can improve resilience and the ability to cope with stress.
- **Check-in on neighbours and stay connected.** Think about how you can interact with others without putting your health (or theirs) at risk. Can you speak to your neighbours from over a fence or across balconies? We have seen this recently in Italy. Apps such as Nextdoor (<https://au.nextdoor.com/>) provide a social networking platform for local communities and neighborhoods. Instead of connecting you to any user across the world, Nextdoor narrows your network to those in your surrounding area.
- **Interaction and connection to community is extremely important** for many groups in society including cultural groups and Aboriginal/Torres Strait Islanders. There is a strong emphasis on the importance of connectedness. During this time trying to maintain connection may be difficult especially for the older members of cultural or Aboriginal/Torres Strait Islander and cultural diverse communities. It might be useful to set up a community roster to check in on older people. You could deliver shopping to people's doorsteps or phone people to check how they are going. You could even share resources (such as toilet paper!). Please remember that if you're feeling ill it will be important to ask someone else to check in on community members. Take the time to reassure community members that if we stay connected and support each other as much as possible, we will get through these times together.

- **Stay connected with your colleagues at work.** Host regular catch-ups via video link (e.g. Zoom, FaceTime or Skype). Facial cues, body language and other nonverbal forms of communication are important for bonding. Don't be afraid to schedule virtual catch ups; it is usually welcomed by others.
- **Set up a WhatsApp or Facebook group** with family and friends to stay connected. Use social media like Twitter to stay in touch. Use email and texting, or whatever social tools you favour, to stay connected.
- **Post updates to your favourite social feed** and share content you find inspiring. Seek out Facebook and Instagram pages that feature good news stories.
- **Try hosting virtual social gatherings** such as a digital dinner party, virtual afternoon tea, virtual games night, or a remote book club meeting.
- **Sit in the sunshine and enjoy some fresh air.** Vitamin D is great for lifting mood and easing anxiety. They are also a very easy way to boost your immune system. Take your work breaks outside if possible and even eat lunch outside.
- **Spend time connecting with the people you are living with.** If you are in a self-isolation situation, use this time to improve your existing relationships unless of course, you are in quarantine. For example, pull out a jigsaw puzzle to do together.
- **Improve your wellness** through meditation and mindfulness exercises.
- **Keep as much daily routine as possible.** For example, get dressed for work and avoid staying in your pyjamas, as this will not help your mindset.
- **Exercise and keep moving** as this can boost your mood and energy levels. Take a brisk walk around your neighbourhood or go for a bushwalk. Connecting with nature is a good way to feed your wellbeing and helps with feeling connected.
- **Be kind to yourself and others.** There is great value in kindness and the effect it has on our own wellbeing and others.
- **Selectively pick your news, social media and Internet source.** Try to limit the amount of COVID-19 information you take in. Maybe check your news feed only once or twice a day. Watching news coverage all day is depressing! When in doubt (and especially at times like these) – funny cat videos are awesome!



- **Pets can be a great source of comfort** and help in reducing stress levels, even lowering blood pressure levels. Pets are good for physical and mental health.
- **Keep planning for the future.** There have been many changes. However, it is important to remember that this difficult period of isolation is temporary, so delay or postpone rather than cancel the activities that you really enjoy.
- **Take up a new hobby** such as learning a new craft or skill – You Tube is great for this. Share your interests with others such as joining an online club or online forum. Maintain your current hobbies and interests as much as possible; many of us are a part of a social, sporting or community group and it is important to try and maintain these connections as best as you can during isolation. Many clubs/associations are starting to introduce measures to maintain a connection with their members; ask if it is an option for you.
- **Join an online community.** Social networks can help you connect with others, and there will likely be a group of people online who share your interests and would be happy to connect with you.
- **Spend quality time with your children.** If you are in isolation with children it may be a good time to teach the kids some of your family history. For some families this could include going through cultural stories, dreaming stories, or music, songs and dances. If you don't know any, many can be found online.

If you are living in home isolation, this is a useful resource:

<https://www.health.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/2020/03/coronavirus-covid-19-information-about-home-isolation-when-unwell-suspected-or-confirmed-cases.pdf>

Where to get more help after hours?

While it is great to be able to talk to your doctor, a counsellor, good friends, and family, sometimes they might not be available. Support services are available and a number of organisations provide after-hours services. Below is a list:

For children

Kids Helpline – 24/7

1800 551 800

A counselling service for kids and young people.

For adults

Lifeline – 24/7

13 11 14

A free telephone counselling service.

1800 RESPECT – 24/7

1800 737 732

24/7 National sexual assault, domestic and family violence counselling service.

Suicide Call Back Service – 24/7

1300 659 467

Sane Australia – 10 am – 10 pm (Monday to Friday)

1800 187 263

Mental health information and referral service.

MensLine Australia (men only) – 24/7

1300 789 978

Counselling and resources for men in crisis.

Family Relationship Advice Line - 8am - 8pm (Monday to Friday); 10 am – 4 pm
(Saturday)

1800 050 321

The coronavirus pandemic has reminded us that connection and relationships are so vital in supporting us to thrive. Let's take this opportunity to recognise the importance of relationships for our health and to practice leveraging technology for wellbeing. Although technology can't replace human connection, it can certainly help.