



Social Distance Doesn't Mean Social Isolation

3 important facts about staying connected during COVID-19

While the physical health impacts of Coronavirus – COVID-19 – are becoming well-understood, and the socio-economic impacts are developing, one aspect that remains under-examined is the mental health impact of how the country is responding to the outbreak. In particular – the principle of social distancing.

Stay-at-home, shelter-in-place and more stringent quarantine policies have been enacted, affecting the majority of the population across the country. While these remain in effect, some level of social distancing has become the new norm for many people – especially those with compromised immune systems or who are over the age of 60. With social distancing practices (avoiding groups, maintaining physical distance from other people, staying at home, etc.) comes the associated risk of prolonged social isolation. Isolation can be especially problematic for military veterans. Their unique experiences mean tackling social isolation can require “specific attention outside of campaigns targeted at the nonmilitary population.” ¹ **Here are three important things to know about social isolation.**

1 Social isolation has consequences

Recent studies reveal chronic social isolation is strongly connected to other physical and mental health conditions – in fact, a meta-analysis of scientific data revealed that chronic social isolation increases the risk of mortality by as much as 29%.²

2 Veterans with hearing loss are particularly at risk

Individuals with hearing loss have an increased risk of social isolation – even prior to the COVID-19 outbreak. A Dutch study of adults aged 18-70 revealed that for every decibel drop in hearing perception, the odds of becoming severely lonely increase by 7%.³ An additional challenge is that often times hearing loss is so gradual that people who experience it don't realize the breadth of its progression – in many cases, for as long as 7 years.⁴

3 There isn't a singular fix for hearing loss – or for staying connected

Almost 30 million U.S. adults could benefit from the use of hearing aids – yet only a fraction have ever used them.⁵ While hearing aids certainly help in many cases, they are only part of the picture when it comes to helping people with hearing loss stay connected to others and the world around them. Technology provides many other mechanisms that allow people to stay engaged, ranging from everyday platforms like text messaging and social media to more dedicated assistive devices like captioned telephones.

It's clear that social distancing has the potential to increase the risk of prolonged social isolation. **Regardless of how, the ability for all of us to maintain connections in our lives is important to our overall health, and whether you have hearing loss – or love someone who does – staying connected matters more now than it ever has before.**

¹ G. Wilson, M. Hill and M. D. Kiernan, "Loneliness and social isolation of military veterans: systematic narrative review," *Oxford Academic Journal of Occupational Medicine*, Dec. 2018. academic.oup.com/ocmed/article-pdf/68/9/600/27279141/kqy160.pdf

² Social Relationships and Mortality Risk: A Meta-analytic Review. Julianne Holt-Lunstand and Timothy B. Smith, *BYU*, 2010. ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2910600/pdf/pmed.1000316.pdf

³ Janneke Nachtegaal, et. al, "The Association Between Hearing Status and Psychosocial Health Before the Age of 70 Years: Results From an Internet-based National Survey on Hearing," *Ear and Hearing Journal*, 2009. journals.lww.com/ear-hearing/Abstract/2009/06000/The_Association_Between_Hearing_Status_and.2.aspx

⁴ "Guide to Adult Hearing Care," *American Academy of Audiology*, 2018. audiology.org/patients/patients/guide-adult-hearing-care

⁵ National Institute on Deafness and Other Communication Disorders, "Quick Statistics About Hearing," 2016. nidcd.nih.gov/health/statistics/quick-statistics-hearing