Physical Distancing, Not Social Distancing

A long-term survivor of HIV urges all of us to stay connected during the COVID-19 crisis.

April 1, 2020 By Jesus Guillen

From the first time I heard the phrase “social distancing,” it gave me a headache. I knew something was not right, but the words kept flowing down river. That phrase is eating the spirit of the community, making us doubtful, afraid and scared.

Instead of social distancing, the phrase “physical distancing” is what we should be using. We have to rethink the concept. We have to allow the hope that comes from that rethinking to go deep into our conscious and subconscious mind.

Yes, there is the reality of COVID-19, the disease caused by the new coronavirus — the constant picture of death on television and the flood of information about this pandemic every five minutes, so much so that it has been recommended to check the news only once or twice a day.

However, humans have always been social. Through history, we created many ways to communicate — smoke signals, telegraph, telephone and then social media. Thanks to the internet, and not too long ago, smart phones became almost an extension of our hands.

For most of our time on earth, being together physically was being social. Social media has forever expanded that definition. We need to embrace establishing and maintaining connection through social media now more than ever.

Careers in music and art, even revolutions, have been fueled through social media. Having thousands of friends on Facebook or followers on Twitter and Instagram isn’t necessarily a fake thing. For many of us, having a healthy personal life includes an active social media life.

Online we can help people, especially those who are isolated or lonely. Through videos, pictures and words, we can stay in touch, even fall in love. We can chat with people we’ve never met in person or with those we’ve known for a good while. We can be social, even if we are far away.

Society is the aggregate of people living together in a more or less ordered community. Social media has created communities of all types. We can feel supported online. We can express ourselves. We can even educate ourselves with webinars and online universities.

When epidemiologists created the phrase social distancing, they didn't realize how much harm those words could have on our communities. In this time of the COVID-19 crisis, physical distancing is necessary, but we need to be socially closer than ever.

"I would argue that what we are doing right now is physical distancing, not social distancing," said Sandro Galea, MD, MPH, DrPH, during a COVID-19 tele-town hall. He is an epidemiologist and a professor at Boston University School of Public Health.

"We are creating physical distance between us to limit the spread of the virus," said Galea. "But we should be doing that in the same breath as we are maintaining our social connections and sense of community and common sense of purpose."

The World Health Organization agrees. The group is now advocating against the use of the phrase social distancing instead favoring the use of the phrase physical distancing. We must advocate for everyone to start using the phrase physical distancing.

Some officials are already listening. In a COVID-19 webinar, Philip Peters, MD, from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, kept using the phrase physical distancing. He also emphasized the importance of staying socially close to each other.

I hope we all rethink the concept. Don't allow your fear to make you act hostile. Be kind. Find ways to keep supporting each other. As one of the HIV long-term survivors who are still surviving, I know one thing about encountering another pandemic: We are all in this together!

Please use these hashtags to advance the conversation: #rethinktheconcept #physicaldistancing #sociallycloserthanever

Jesus Guillen is founder and director of the HIV Long Term Survivors Group on Facebook. He was featured in Last Men Standing, an Emmy award-winning documentary about long-term survivors.

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