

In This Time of Social Distancing, Call Your Friends

I have a friend in Virginia—I'll call him "Kevin"—who is struggling with depression. He lost his job because his company isn't an "essential" business. A part-time pastor, Kevin had big dreams about growing his young church, but now he's struggling to connect with his congregation through social media and online broadcasts.

Another friend in Texas, "Mike," is dealing with overwhelming anxiety. Daily news reports about infections and death tolls keep him up at night. This past weekend, he couldn't sleep because he was afraid he might be getting a fever. His temperature is normal, but his worries are making him sick.

Meanwhile I've received too many messages to count from foreign friends who don't know where their next meal will come from. In Uganda, police are beating people with canes if they go into the streets. In India, where there are only 9,100 confirmed cases of the virus in a nation of one billion, countless people are out of work because the government has put the whole country on lockdown.

I understand the drastic measures. Social distancing has proven to be a helpful strategy to reduce the spread of the virus. But health officials aren't talking enough about the psychological toll this crisis is having on people who are forced to stay at home. It almost seems the "cure" for the coronavirus is worse than the disease itself.

More than 17 million Americans have filed for unemployment in the past four weeks. But those mind-boggling numbers don't begin to reveal the emotional impact of closed restaurants and stores, shuttered factories and padlocked schools.

Counselors say the number of calls to suicide hotlines has

skyrocketed since the virus crisis began. Many of the calls are from young people who can't handle the fact that normal life has been canceled.

"It's so scary, it's almost like ... I would rather be dead," said Danielle Sinay, a 28-year-old writer from Brooklyn, New York, who has a history of suicidal thoughts. "I mean, I wouldn't be, but sometimes I get so scared it feels like that."

Sinay told *USA Today* last month that the disruptions in her routine and the uncertainties surrounding the pandemic have triggered previous problems with panic disorder, post-traumatic stress disorder and depression. She is not alone. People with preexisting mental problems are particularly vulnerable to thoughts of suicide.

The coronavirus has created a perfect storm. It requires us to live in isolation to stay healthy—but the isolation causes a new set of problems. The last thing a person with depression or anxiety disorder should do is hide in a house alone. Yet 28% of households in the United States are single people who live by themselves.

So I'm sending out a plea. While you are diligent to wash your hands, use hand sanitizer and stay 6 feet away from strangers in the grocery store, please make every effort to check on your friends, family and neighbors to make sure they are coping with the emotional effects of this pandemic. Make phone calls or send texts and make sure people know you are there to help them if they need support. And schedule longer calls with people who are struggling with anxiety or depression.

In the New Testament there are 59 "one another" verses that command us to take care of each other. We have been called to live in community—in good times and, yes, during pandemics. We don't have room to list all the verses here, but I picked eight that are particularly appropriate for this situation:

1. **“Encourage one another” and “build up one another”** (1 Thess. 5:11, NASB). Your words can literally spark hope in someone who is in despair. Just the sound of your voice can boost their morale.
2. **“Bear one another’s burdens”** (Gal. 6:2a). Some people are collapsing under the weight of their emotional pain. You can help them carry it. This verse is complemented by Romans 15:1, which says: “Now we who are strong ought to bear the weaknesses of those without strength and not just please ourselves.” The unselfish thing to do is to help your friends when they are struggling.
3. **“Honor one another above yourselves”** (Rom. 12:10b, NIV). You show honor when you put your friend’s well-being above your own. Instead of bingeing on Netflix every night during this crisis, reach out and be a friend. And don’t forget to show honor to those who are working in hospitals and essential jobs during the pandemic. They deserve some thanks.
4. **“May ... your love increase and overflow for each other”** (1 Thess. 3:12). It’s selfish to hide in your house during this crisis while people you know are feeling lonely or afraid. Go the extra mile and show genuine concern.
5. **“Be kind and compassionate to one another”** (Eph. 4:32). Social distancing doesn’t prevent you from mailing packages, cards, letters, gifts or food items to the people you love. What we do for each other during this crisis will be long remembered.
6. **“Greet one another with a holy kiss”** (Rom. 16:16). We can’t kiss each other in the middle of a pandemic. But a warm greeting, through text, voice call or FaceTime will spread true joy and help people feel more optimistic.
7. **“Pray for each other”** (James 5:16b). I have a friend

from India who recently became a believer in Christ. Every day during this pandemic, I've been stopping by the store where he works so I can pray with him. I've watched his fears melt each time we pray. You can do the same for friends who are struggling.

8. **"Love one another"** (1 John 3:11b). God's love is more powerful than a virus. Don't be afraid to share His love with the people around you. The simple act of a phone call could stop someone from ending his or her life. The love you spread could "go viral" in the best way by inspiring others to spread the compassion of Jesus. {eoa}