

Features & Arts

Covid-19 vs the power of people

'Unnecessary' social contact will help us defeat the pandemic, says *Noreena Hertz*

Michael Gove's pronouncements yesterday on "necessary social contact" stopped me in my tracks. While I support the rationale for limiting face-to-face interactions to slow the spread of the virus, how do we decide what is "necessary" and what is not when it comes to our social interactions?

For as the research in my new book *The Lonely Century* makes clear, social contact, forming and reforming daily bonds with people we care about, work with or simply chat to in our neighbourhoods isn't just necessary – it's vital. For our health, both mental and physical.

If you feel lonely or are socially

It is in the brief catch-ups and 'how-are-you?' that barriers break down

isolated you are more than 30 per cent more likely to die prematurely than if you are not. Even relatively short periods of loneliness can have such an impact.

A 2010 study of people who had experienced a period of loneliness found that their life expectancy was diminished, even when their experience of loneliness was less than two years long.

Researchers looking at the mental health impact of enforced periods of isolation during the 2003 Sars outbreak found that healthcare workers in Beijing who had been quarantined were more likely to be suffering serious depression three years later than those who had not been, even though Sars quarantine periods typically lasted less than a

month. Like all other primates, humans are social animals. We rely on complex, tight-knit groups to function, from the primordial, chemical bonds between mother and infant to the larger family unit to today's massive nation-states.

Indeed, in many ways the rise of humans to the top of Earth's planetary food chain can be traced to our enthusiastic togetherness: from our development of sophisticated group hunting-and-gathering techniques for food, to our collective defence strategies for protection.

Until very recently in the history of our species, a lonely human would have been quite literally at risk of death; vulnerable in a world where "the group" enabled survival. Being connected to others is our natural and, in fact, desired state – whether this desire is conscious or not.

This is why not being connected to each other has such a profound negative impact on our health. For, in order to disincentivise us from remaining alone (a state fundamentally at odds with our survival), evolution has equipped our bodies with a biological reaction that ramps up our alertness and is so physiologically and psychologically unpleasant that we are motivated to find company as quickly as possible.

Neither is it good for society when our face-to-face interactions are shut down. For it is in the brief catch-ups at our local greengrocer or the "how are you?" we exchange as we pick up a coffee, as well as in the deeper relationships we forge with those who live on our street, that barriers break down and communities are built.

Physically coming together engenders something very precious of which digital relationships and even talking on video services like Zoom can only ever be poor imitations. For it is when we can pick up on non-verbal cues such as body language or even



DEBORA ROBERTSON

'For six months, I've barely left the house'

The Government's messaging over Covid has been so inconsistent, I long ago stopped listening. I trust my own judgment far more. Since March, I have washed my hands, masked up, kept my distance, had antibac gel in every bag. But the truth is, I've barely left the house other than to walk my dogs, do shopping and, three times, to have very socially distanced drinks in the gardens of close friends. I have elderly parents with precarious health who I had to feel comfortable visiting in an emergency, so I knew I could only do that if I hadn't been in contact with others. When restaurants reopened, even the small risk of catching Covid outweighed the pleasure I could take. Being able to help my parents when they need it counts to me as essential social contact.

scent that we are best able to experience empathy and practice reciprocity and co-operation.

So while I do understand that the Government is faced with incredibly difficult decisions and am a strong proponent of mask-wearing and physical distancing, let's not pretend that forsaking social contact does not



ROWAN PELLING

'Social contact gives me energy and keeps me sane'

If you're one of nature's extroverts, who gets your energy from social situations, seeing friends isn't just jolly – it's vital for your sanity. Lack of company means lack of energy and can easily lead to depression. Even before the rules fully relaxed, I started meeting three Cambridge friends in a nearby meadow. We always sat metres apart with our own glasses and bottles, gossiping and clinging to human connection. These are the measures that kept us sane and functioning. I'm no kind of Covidiot or wanton risk taker. I miss parties and London functions, but they're not essential for my happiness. But sharing confidences and jokes with my closest women friends in person, round a wind-lashed garden table if necessary, should in my opinion be enshrined in human rights law.

have consequences. The Government needs to acknowledge this and commit significant funds to supporting the many millions of UK citizens who are already suffering from loneliness and isolation, a number likely to rise further as the nights draw in and winter leaves a chill.

Critical, too, is that it commits to



MARIA LALLY

'Being sociable at the school gate isn't just chatter – it's a life support'

Last month, Gavin Williamson urged parents not to linger at the school gates and I got a similar email from my children's school, asking parents not to approach each other to stop the spread. And I get it. But when my mother was dying in 2018, if I turned up for drop-off red-eyed, another mum would swiftly offer to collect my daughters from school that day. When a mother starts a new job, an army of us will help with lifts. I'd go as far as to say I couldn't do my own job without my school gate friends, who fill the childcare gaps.

Last year, a friend of mine even helped her school gate friend leave her abusive partner. To write off the school gate as unnecessary social contact misses the point entirely.

rebuilding our communities by actively supporting our local shops and refunding the infrastructure of community – libraries, youth centres, day centres.

And critical also is that each of us play our part – asking ourselves who in our own network might be feeling particularly lonely and reaching out.



ZOE STRIMPEL

'In lockdown, I've fallen out of love with living on my own'

Yet again the Government's coronavirus policy is blind and deaf to those like me who live alone, or who don't reside in families of loving relationships.

When you're single, for instance, there is nobody you necessarily have to see. Normally, I love my home set-up; but as the realities of lockdown round one asserted themselves, I found myself neurotically zooming friends and family.

I had finally invited friends over for two big dinner parties in the next few weeks – ecstatic at the chance to be at home with loved ones again. Now those are off. Ditto dinner this week at the house of some dear friends who I haven't seen in eight months.

The measures, however necessary to steer the ship in the short term, are depressing.



TOM OUGH

'Being part of a football crowd is social contact millions of us need'

It's now six months since I've followed with 60,000 people the word "w----!" at some poor guy in knee-high socks. Although football has re-emerged beneath an eerie, biosecure carapace, the stadiums remain empty. This is a considerable loss to millions of football fans like me. What we get out of it has been attributed to quasi-religious fervour, a simulation of tribal warfare, and an escape from our humdrum lives. Football matches provoke raw emotion of the kind that everyday life doesn't allow us to express. I miss feeling the same thing as tens of thousands of other people. I will know this pandemic is over not when the line on the graph goes flat, but when I clunk through a turnstile and take my seat in a packed stadium.

Noreena Hertz is honorary professor of economics at University College London and the author of *The Lonely Century: Coming Together in a World that's Pulling Apart* (RRP £20). Buy now for £16.99 at books.telegraph.co.uk or call 0844 871 1514

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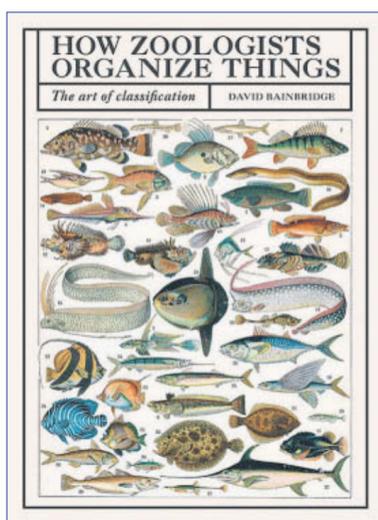
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Now I've discovered secrets to a socially distanced sex life

Nirpal Singh Dhaliwal is blown away by a new exhibition about tantra at the British Museum

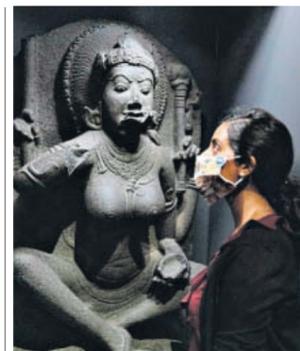
Ofall "necessary" social contact, physical intimacy is an integral part. Yet during the pandemic – and beyond, should a second lockdown come – this has, for the unattached or those living apart from a lover, sent it sailing out the window. Which makes *Tantra*, an exhibition opening tomorrow at the British Museum, a timely introduction to a philosophy that can provide a route to enjoying fulfilling, if socially distant sex.

Most Brits know of the ancient Hindu practice after Sting joked about having seven-hour-long sessions with Trudi Styler. But coming from an Indian background I'd always been vaguely aware of it as grounded in the occult, gaining much more knowledge since I began studying yoga 15 years ago, reading up on the philosophy, travelling to its spiritual destinations and meeting other soul-seekers.

Along the way, I've had conversations with supernatural beings channelled for me by dreadlocked mystics, walked with a naked skull-wielding sect beside the Ganges, and befriended priapic British hippies who boast of not ejaculating for years (despite regular sex marathons), zealously withholding their essence to ensure vitality and long life.

Commonly mistaken as a gymnastic cult of carnal ecstasy – something the new exhibition, which features ancient writings and sculptures, is at pains to correct – the millennia-old spiritual system attracts those wanting a richer life experience, using its methods to achieve everything from mindful relaxation to cosmic full-body orgasms and immersions into the divine.

Physically speaking, tantra – which in Sanskrit means "weave" or "loom" – offers ways to connect our "sex centre, our heart centre and head centres, so that our intuition, emotions, intelligence and sexuality are all fully turned on and in balance", says teacher Jan Day, "which enables us to connect in a deeper and fuller



Ancient practice: *Tantra* at the British Museum; Nirpal Singh Dhaliwal, below

way with ourselves." Even over Zoom.

As far as tantra is concerned, lockdown has been a gift. Day believes, "shaking us out of our patterns and habits" and making us more aware.

Without physical proximity, people have to raise their level of awareness – of had their own and their partner's wants and needs – to keep their communication clear and authentic, and their relationship thriving.

Online conversations should "mirror the quality of good lovemaking," says Leora Lightwoman, another tantra teacher.

"Slow down and have one person totally listen to the other with eyes closed, taking deeper breaths, tuning into the quality of their voice," she advises.

Taking turns looking into the camera so the other person feels fully seen and appreciated is another tip.

"Ask the other what appealed to them about your dating profile," she urges, "and really listen to the answer."

This intimacy can be sensualised with the use of "gentle power play" that involves asking the other to "rub a strawberry across your cheek", and if they consent, "tell me how that feels".

Checking in at every stage to stay consensual and connected, this game can go as far as both want once they've agreed a comfortable way to say no.

She advises couples to talk about their feelings – tightness in the stomach, say – when they are

reluctant to do anything. "The more you say no, the easier it is to say and receive."

While I'm not a Neanderthal in the bedroom, I admit I'd find asking a woman to methodically rub herself with soft fruit a lot more difficult than coaxing her into taking off her clothes; it's a level of slowness and intimacy that triggers embarrassment and impatience.

I have friends who are much more enlightened than me and able to play these and similar games with their other half – both in person and online – and I envy their ease with themselves and each other.

No longer interested in casual relationships, lockdown has been a monastic experience for me. But my friendships with women have significantly deepened in this time as we've enjoyed much longer conversations on the phone and shared our anxieties, hopes and histories.

It's been a celibate but emotionally reflective period, showing me that I'm finally wanting commitment.

"Sharing vulnerability creates intimacy," explains psychotherapist and intimacy coach Charlotte McLaughlin.

She suggests partners try "synchronising breathing, taking deeper, slower and more conscious breaths together, so your inhalations and exhalations match.

"You're then sharing a space, more open and able to perceive and feel the other's presence even online... Just as physical sex can have zero intimacy, online sex can be filled with it."

Bali-based tantric teacher Shashi Solluna takes things one step further by encouraging the "sounding" technique, in which couples sigh "aaaaah" in unison. "Sighing triggers the vagus nerve, calming and enlivening our nervous system... You're going to feel like you're making love."

Like all tantrics, she emphasises slowness and engagement with the experience. "Most sex is just about getting rid of an urge, but in tantra you move deeper and deeper into the feeling."

Tapping into this intuition and awareness of yourself and partner – in spite of how awkward it might at first feel – could, for those lacking in-person company, be a much-needed chance at the intimacy we all crave.

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