

Title: Terms ‘physical distancing’ and ‘emotional closeness’ should be used and not ‘social distancing’ when defeating the Covid-19 pandemic

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Abstract

Covid-19 hits nations worldwide. Social restrictions are being put in place in an effort to limit the spread of the corona virus and save lives. However, the frequently used term ‘social distancing’ evokes among many, but particularly in vulnerable groups, associations of being distanced, rejected and isolated. Instead, the correct term of ‘physical distancing’ should be used as the purpose of it is to prevent the spread of infection too quickly in the population. At the same time, empathy and emotional closeness shown in different ways by so many around the world should be underscored as none of us are immune to the infection. Therefore, we advocate the use of the terms ‘physical distancing’ and ‘emotional closeness’ and not ‘social distancing’ during this pandemic.

Letter

Thorp (2020) wrote well on Covid-19. He mentions the effects of social restrictions. Many governments have called for “social distancing” enforced through legislation (The Netherlands, France, Italy, and Spain) or social policy (Sweden and UK). The social distancing term is however easily associated with social and psychological exclusion, as well as negative attitudes. There are many groups that are directly vulnerable to the corona virus particularly the elderly. But it is also those with mental and psychosocial problems, and or severe somatic diseases, as well as those who have been rendered stateless or homeless. These groups are extremely sensitive to the language used as well as changes in resources and attitudes.

We have seen that the stigma applied to certain characteristics can be magnified by perceptions. In the UK, Chinese individuals have reportedly received abuse due to the corona crisis (Haynes 2020). It is our assertion that it is not merely that the pen is mightier than the sword, but that words can kill (Barzilay et al. 2017). It is not social distancing that is the key to reducing the spread of the corona virus but a physical distance of over 2 metres.

The change of wording to ‘physical’ distancing instead of ‘social’ distancing can help to avoid any negative connotations or perceptions towards specific groups in society, whether they may be different social classes, ethnicities, or individuals with a risk for potentially fatal infection. Social empathy and emotional closeness towards all individuals needs to be maintained and emphasized during this time as it can be a simple lifeline. Acknowledging the existence of others with a genuine gesture whilst keeping physical distance can be literally lifesaving. Promoting solidarity in society, that we are all in this together, that no group is immune, that no one is an island entire of themselves, so that feelings of being unwanted, unloved, and unaccepted are counteracted and nobody is driven to take that last drastic step of self-extinction. We all have a responsibility in this; the governments and media too.

Let us use the language of inclusiveness, let us walk together. By staying at least 2 metres apart, but emotionally as close as possible #weareoneworld.

Thorp, H. (2020) 'Time to pull together', *Science*, 367(6484), pp.1282-1282.

Haynes, S. (2020) 'As coronavirus spreads, so does xenophobia and anti-asian racism', *TIME*, 6 March [online]. Available at: <https://time.com/5797836/coronavirus-racism-stereotypes-attacks/>

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