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An introvert's plea: Let me socially distance in peace

Opinion by Sara Stewart

🕒 Updated 6:05 AM ET, Tue April 14, 2020

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Editor's Note: Sara Stewart is a film and culture writer who divides her time between New York City and western Pennsylvania. The views expressed here are solely hers. View more [opinion](#) articles on CNN.

(CNN) — Settling onto the couch for a Zoom happy hour recently, I felt a sudden tightness in my chest. I already knew that it wasn't a symptom of coronavirus -- just garden-variety social anxiety. It's been descending on me often toward the end of the day, in our current pandemic lockdown. Right about when online social time is getting started

By any measure, I should be, and mostly am, grateful for my life. My husband and I are healthy so far, we enjoy each other's company, and as a professor and a freelance writer respectively, we're used to working from home together.

I'm a true introvert; over the past six years as a home-based writer, I have missed my old office routine zero times. Still, my adjustment to life in a pandemic has been bumpy and anxiety-inducing for reasons that contradict the social media chatter and internet memes suggesting our lockdown is a forced conversion to an introvert's way of life.



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to make sure our people are all right, physically and mentally, when the specter of Covid-19 seems to be creeping ever nearer (a celebrity has it; a friend of a friend has it; an old friend has it. When will it hit your family?). I want to know that my friends and loved ones are safe. Embracing community in a time of hardship, surely, is one of the best and most universal qualities of humanity.



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years.

Our answers risk becoming rote: Yes, I'm OK but can't stop watching the news; here's the new hobby I've taken up; here are the things I've been binge-watching; here are the ways my significant other/roommate/pet/child is driving me crazy. It may seem churlish to resent answering these questions over and over, but there are limits. Actual limits. Anthropologist-defined limits.

In the 1990s, a term was coined for the boundaries of one's capabilities of social connection: [Dunbar's number](#) refers to the amount of people with whom a person can generally maintain ongoing relationships. It consists of concentric circles of numbers -- 150, the largest, is a group of acquaintances and casual friends, followed by 50 close-ish friends, 15 trusted very close friends and five key loved ones.

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burst my peace-until little bubble with a tidal wave of more extroverted friends and acquaintances newly eager to connect. Calls and texts and emails have poured in, with "How are you holding up?" becoming the new "How's it going?" (Open-ended questions are the bane of an introvert's existence.)

I'm sympathetic. We're living in a time when there are people all over the world [who would give anything](#) to be able to be with the people they love -- some are separated from family in the hospital, others are isolated by being unable to risk travel or infecting others. [Loneliness is an epidemic](#), along with this virus.

It makes complete sense that we would all want to reach out to make sure our people are all right, physically and mentally, when the specter of Covid-19 seems to be creeping ever nearer (a celebrity has it; a friend of a friend has it; an old friend has it. When will it hit your family?). I want to know that my friends and loved ones are safe. Embracing community in a time of hardship, surely, is one of the best and most universal qualities of humanity.

I also understand that even if you're lucky enough to be healthy and safe with loved ones in the same boat, if you're someone who thrives on social connection, the current state of affairs must still be driving you bananas with your own anxieties.

If you're desperate to talk to someone other than your immediate family, the idea of looking up long-distant friends or relatives must seem a fun and generous gesture, a kill-two-birds approach to alleviating your loneliness and letting others know you're thinking of them.

And yet, even in these unprecedented times, I think it's OK that we quieter types remain who we always were.

I suspect I am not alone in dreading some of the catch-up conversations with a friend or relative I've not spoken to in

For many of us, I suspect, that 15 is the key group in a time like this. They are the network of friends we keep in contact with on a daily or near-daily basis.

Personally, I have two group-text threads that go on all day, every day. These aren't people I necessarily see all the time, but each thread, running for years now, keeps us caught up.

If you're someone who thrives on in-depth connection with a handful of people rather than the constant stimuli of interactions with a wider range of them, this kind of socializing is a precious gift. It's also remarkably compatible with a stay-at-home order.

We introverts have enjoyed a heyday in recent years, with social scientists [increasingly acknowledging](#) that while some people can't get enough of spending time with large social groups, others find the experience more of a mixed bag: Initially intimidating, usually somewhat gratifying, but ultimately draining. It's been rightly observed that both types have [important, complementary qualities](#) to contribute to our world.

But the notion that introverts suddenly have it made while we're all ordered to stay in is wildly misplaced. Our home life -- traditionally a refuge for laying low and recharging social batteries -- is suddenly required to be all things at once.

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So I think now is a good time to consider making a few ground rules for how we interact in quarantine. If you have a friend or relative who's one of these quieter types, consider these things before you pick up the phone or hit the FaceTime button - and we introverts, in turn, will try to cheerfully hold up our end of the conversation.

- **Avoid overly broad questions.** "How are you holding up?" is not a query one can easily, or interestingly, answer. Better openers: "What are you making for dinner out of your dwindling groceries?" or "How long did you wait to open the

wine today?"

- **No text-bombing at bedtime** unless it's with a close friend you know is OK with night-owl communication. Swooping in out of nowhere in the wee hours of the evening is not the right time to rekindle an acquaintance.
- If you're going to reach out and text someone you don't usually talk to, **keep it short**. Recapping the last five years of your life on an iMessage is a tall order to respond to in-kind.
- **Don't pressure people to stay longer** in a virtual hangout than they want to be there. Some of us get Zoom fatigue long before others, so if a friend starts wrapping it up, just wish them well. It'll make them more likely to want to reach out again.

Remember, we're all in this together! Even if some of us introverts sort of wish we weren't quite so together so much of the time.



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