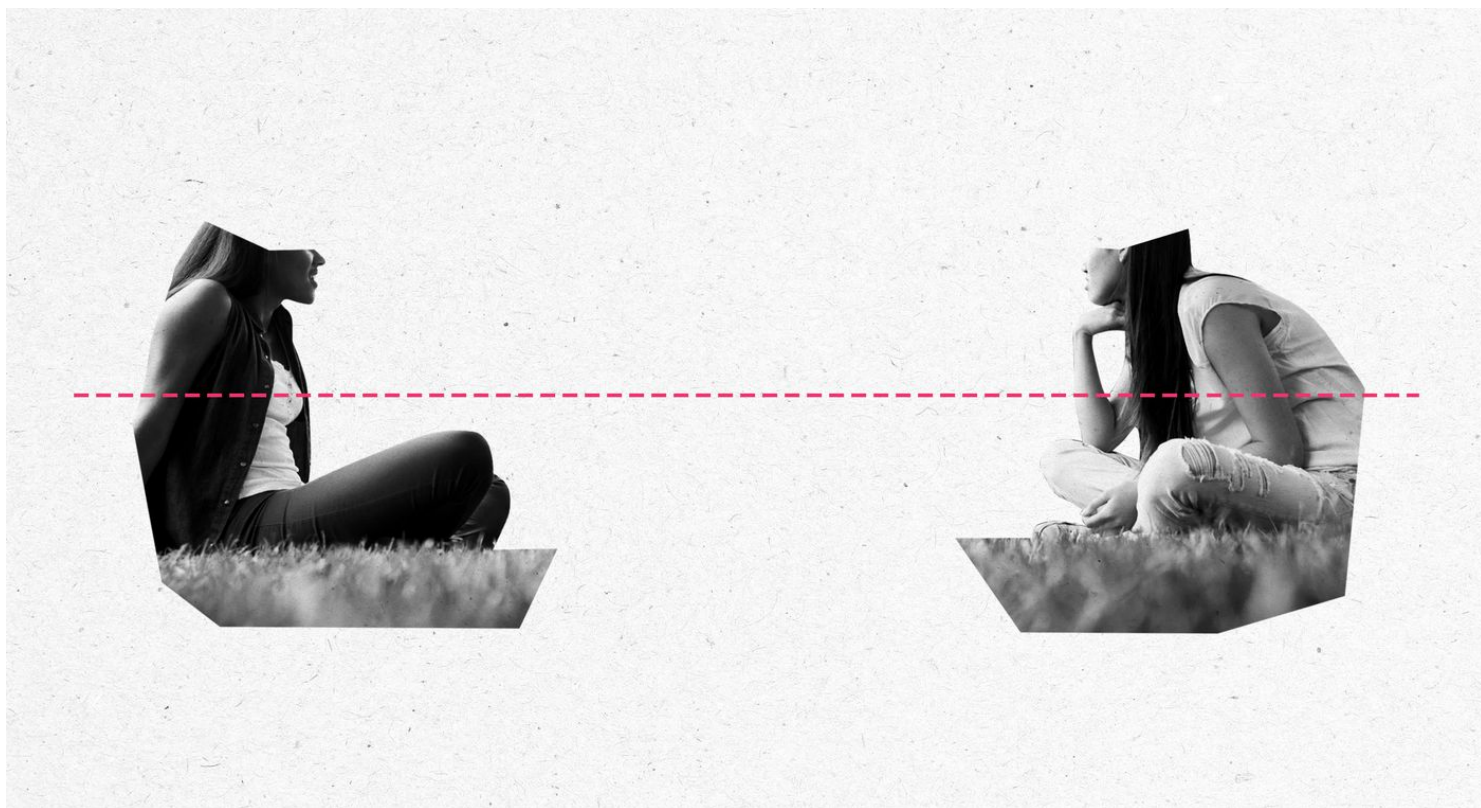




LIFESTYLE

Is it possible to safely see friends again? How to have a judgment-free conversation about it.

'We don't have a script for this'



(iStock; Lily illustration)

Caroline Kitchener • May 28

From March 16 until two weeks ago, I saw essentially no one I know in person. Two friends had stopped by — one dropping off a piece of



extended social interactions. It was just me and my husband — and, occasionally, Zoom.

My first in-person invitation arrived on May 5.

“I miss you,” my friend wrote in a text message, suggesting we meet up in a park. We would, of course, take all the proper precautions, she said: wearing masks, staying outdoors, sitting not just six but 10 feet apart.

How did that sound?

Over the last few weeks, I have sent and received a handful of these kinds of messages. They are always carefully worded, full of nervous anticipation about what the other person might say.

“It’s like asking someone out on a date,” said [June Tangney](#), a professor of psychology at George Mason University who studies shame and guilt. “You could be rejected.”

As the country starts to open up and the weather begins to warm, it can be hard to figure out how much we should be limiting our social interactions. While the scientific community generally agrees we should avoid seeing friends, rules and guidelines from federal, state and local governments can be vague and confusing, with advice changing every few days. People also have their own personal situations to consider: Maybe you’re high risk for coronavirus complications, or live with someone who is high risk. You might just



living alone and struggling with mental health issues? Social interaction can feel absolutely essential.

When friends have different understandings of safe social practices — and no way of gauging how the other might feel about meeting in person again — the ensuing conversation can be awkward, said Tangney. Throughout the pandemic, she said, there has been a lot of public shaming: How could you visit your grandparents? How could you go walking with three other people? No one wants to be judged, Tangney said — either for being too cautious, or not cautious enough.

“We don’t have a script for this.”

[[How to talk to your friends about social distancing when they’re going to bars](#)]

These conversations are particularly difficult because social distancing behaviors — wearing a mask, staying six feet apart, not meeting up at all — signal “moral superiority,” said [Paul Conway](#), a professor of psychology at Florida State University, who studies moral responsibility. By tolerating the inconveniences of social distancing, he says, you’re publicly demonstrating that you care about the health and well-being of the people around you. If you choose to wear a mask and your friend doesn’t, Conway says, the friend might get defensive or resentful, worried you might be judging them for not being more careful.



As the socially distanced hangout becomes more common, friends should be able to talk openly about the level of interaction they're comfortable with, said Tangney.

“We need to somehow be able to talk about it in a way that doesn't seem like I'm afraid of you, or that you're doing something wrong.”

If you think you might want to meet up with a friend in person — or aren't quite sure how to respond to an invitation — here's a step-by-step guide to figuring it out.

1. Decide what you value most

“I want people to ask themselves: What is most important to me in the context of this very difficult time?” said [Carolyn Cannuscio](#), a professor of community health at the Hospital of the University of Pennsylvania. Cannuscio's priority is seeing her elderly mother. When her friends suggest a socially distanced happy hour in a park, she says, it's easy for her to say no. She explains that her mother is the top priority — so she has to avoid any other social interactions outside her immediate family. For others, especially those living alone or struggling with mental health issues, seeing friends might be most important, she said. “By knowing what you value most,” Cannuscio said, “it's easier to make these decisions in a clear-eyed way.”

[[How to prevent feeling totally isolated in the time of social distancing](#)]



Ask some questions. “How are you doing with the pandemic? How are you balancing life and risk?” Tangney said. “Find out where people’s boundaries are, and then make a suggestion that’s in that ballpark.”

Jody Turpin, 28, from Marietta, Ga., recently spent a few hours with a friend, talking and playing music on his porch. Turpin, who has a chronic bacterial infection, has been strict about self-quarantine, getting all her groceries delivered. She wouldn’t have agreed to the hangout, she says, if she hadn’t known that she and her friend were “on the same page” about social distancing. “We’re both mask people.” They spent three hours on her friend’s porch, in masks, 10 feet apart.

3. Ask — and answer — the questions that will help you both assess the risks

Ask how many other people your friend has been seeing, said Cannuscio: Are they limiting trips to the grocery store? Are they using public transportation? These can be awkward questions, she said, but it helps to explain why you’re asking them. “You might say, ‘Listen, I’m being very careful because what I value most right now is seeing my mother.’”

Before they met up, Turpin’s friend told her that he’d seen his sister a few weeks before. “It meant a lot to me that he was able to say, ‘This is what I’m doing. If that’s okay with you, then let’s do this.’” If you freely offer that kind of information, Cannuscio said, you create



kind of things with you.

4. Acknowledge that this is all really confusing

“Make it clear that you’re seeking answers to murky questions, puzzling over what’s best,” said Conway. You want to avoid slipping into a parent-child relationship, he said, when one friend is telling the other — implicitly or explicitly — what to do.

[[Here are anxiety coping mechanisms that could help you during social distancing](#)]

5. Talk through logistics beforehand

Imagine having to ask your friend to move farther away, said Tangney. It’s awkward. Much better, she said, to avoid that situation altogether. Before you see each other, discuss the socially distanced parameters of the meetup: Will you stay outside the whole time? Will you wear masks? Will you sit six feet apart? (To minimize risk, Cannuscio says, the answer to all three of those questions should be yes.)

These discussions can still be uncomfortable, even if you have them ahead of time. Before Angela de Silva, 36, visited her parents in Pasadena, Calif., last week, her sister texted to make sure she was taking all the necessary precautions. “She was like, ‘Make sure you wear a mask, wipe down the bathroom.’ And I’m like, ‘You don’t think I know all this?’” De Silva was offended, she said, that her sister assumed she had to be prompted to observe proper social distancing.



It's easy to start out six feet apart but then slowly edge closer, said Cannuscio — especially if there is alcohol involved. To ward against this, Cannuscio recommends setting up “physical cues to remind you to keep your distance” — maybe set out properly spaced chairs as soon as you both arrive. Verbal cues can help too, said Turpin. When they got together, she and her friend regularly checked their spacing. “We would look at each other and say, ‘Yeah, this is more than six feet,’” she said.

7. If you later have symptoms, say something

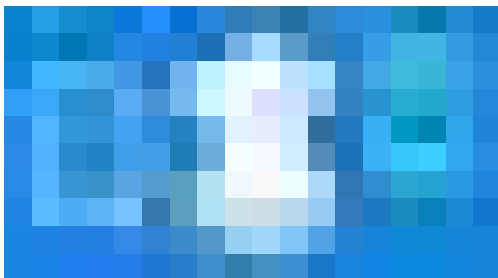
It's hard to text a friend you've seen in person to tell them you're sick. But everyone absolutely needs to do it, said Cannuscio. (If you have any symptoms before your hangout, cancel it.) If symptoms appear, people should feel comfortable saying, “Hey, I have a sore throat. I'm so sorry if I exposed you unwittingly to this virus.” Their friend needs to know, so that they can get tested and start strictly isolating. It's nobody's fault, Cannuscio said — and the friend should understand.



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