

Why nature, history and American culture all make social isolation difficult

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As politicians consider ways to stem the rising number of COVID-19 cases, public spaces have become battlegrounds for those tired of the closures.

But the controversy has roots deeper than political or economic interests—[social isolation](#) is mentally and emotionally taxing. Experts from the USC Dornsife College of Letters, Arts and Sciences say you can blame lockdown fatigue on American culture, and just plain human nature.

"Isolation is not healthy for us. People have a strong need to bond with other people; it's important for our [mental health](#)," said Jonas Kaplan, assistant professor of psychology and a cognitive neuroscientist at USC Dornsife's Brain and Creativity Institute.

The human need for connecting with other humans is rooted in our psychology and evolution.

Our brains are wired to seek human interaction, including subconscious behaviors to promote bonds, Kaplan explained. For example, the brain sparks unconscious behaviors and body language to promote connections between people. And while Zoom and other [social media platforms](#) help overcome isolation, they are inadequate surrogates for real contact, he said.

But how did we get this way? The answer lies in our ancestral past, said Craig Stanford, professor of anthropology and biological sciences and researcher of primate and human societies. He sees parallels.

"Being in social groups is central to us as a species for as long as we've been a species," he said. "One of the very top things that make us human is being social."

Humans evolved while deriving great benefits from socialization, including the development of hunting and survival skills, which were passed on to children, and political skills, said Stanford.

"One of the worst things we can do to someone is to isolate them or exile them. There's an unhealthy element to it, no matter how we explain it," he said.

Conflict with American identity

Other cultural forces cause Americans to chafe at restrictions. They transcend the [economic losses](#) suffered by the world's biggest economy.

Alison Dundes Renteln, professor of political science, anthropology, public policy and law, said that the coronavirus challenges the concepts of American exceptionalism and individual liberty.

"America's national identity is about political freedom. Our identity is we don't stay still long, we go conquer things, like the American conquest of the wilderness. But now nature, and the coronavirus, control us when we are used to conquering nature, so it goes against the grain and is contrary to American mythology."

Provided by University of Southern California

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