

The coronavirus pandemic could end hugs, shape our social habits for years

Weeks or months of social distancing and amped-up hygiene might change our behavior for a long time to come, social scientists say.

Imagine it's early 2021. The coronavirus pandemic ended months ago and life looks much like it did before any of us ever heard of social distancing. And yet, when you reach out to shake a colleague's hand at a business meeting, you get awkward hesitation and a suggested elbow bump.



The longer the coronavirus pandemic lasts, the more likely it is to change almost everything about the world as we know it -- including how we interact with other humans -- for many months, or even years.

"Handshaking may already be a thing of the past," says Pamela Paresky, an author and visiting social sciences lecturer at the University of Chicago.

Just as my 90-year-old grandmother and many of her Great Depression-era peers still fastidiously count pennies, the "COVID generation," as it could end up being called, may remain nervous about greeting acquaintances with a hug and may never again leave home without hand sanitizer.

"I think we are likely to wash our hands more, and more carefully, for quite a long time to come," Robert Dingwall, a professor of social sciences at the UK's Nottingham Trent University, told me. "I don't think physical distancing will persist," he added, "although it was already increasing as a result of #MeToo. We probably won't keep six feet away from others -- but I don't think we will hug them as often as five years ago."

By late March, over a third of the world's population -- nearly 3 billion people -- were under coronavirus lockdown, including nearly half the US population.

It's uncertain how long the current dystopia of shutdowns and social distancing will continue; estimates range from a few more weeks to 18 months. But experts agree that the longer it goes on, the more likely the adaptations we've made will stick.

If the lockdowns last less than six months, the only long-term changes in social behavior might involve increased hygiene, says Texas A&M sociologist and former American Sociological Association President Joe Feagin.

"If it lasts 18 months or more, as the more pessimistic forecasts suggest ... more substantial changes are likely in both social distancing, social interaction and hygiene," he says.

Hands are for sanitizing, not shaking

The longer we remain in a high state of vigilance against the coronavirus and COVID-19, the respiratory disease caused by the virus, the longer we'll fear the threat of germs even after the pandemic is over.

"Concerns about sanitizing surfaces might become more prevalent," Paresky of the University of Chicago says.

She thinks the kind of "extreme physical distancing and isolation" that requires us to work and learn from home while only leaving for essentials isn't sustainable.

"There is a reason babies suffer both physically and mentally when they do not experience enough physical contact," Paresky says. "Human beings need physical touch, in-person social contact and interpersonal intimacy. These things are necessary for our ongoing emotional and physical well-being."

It's essential that children and adults maintain some kind of contact with peers while social distancing, she says, whether through video chats, virtual dinner parties or just phone calls and texts. (Technology can also help you maintain your more intimate relationships.)

Paresky is especially worried about the impact on college-age students who were just getting their first taste of independence, only to be sent back home into a family setting that could be filled with stress, anxiety and uncertainty.

"Those students may never go back to school. This will have severe implications for their career and financial prospects," she says.

Just as some students may never return to a campus, perhaps opting to finish up their studies online or not at all, millions of us currently working from home may scarcely set foot in an office again.

Dingwall sees a sustained increase in home-based working beyond the end of the pandemic.

"Our media are discovering that people don't have to be able to come to studios in London, provided they have fast broadband and a decent quality webcam. However, I think there will also be losses from the conversations around the watercooler that are often the wellsprings of business innovation."

Not all bad news

The social scientists I spoke to painted a vision of a world where increased suspicion, isolation and distance from others become the new normal, perhaps for years to come.

But Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks, a member of the UK Parliament, sees a silver lining on the distant horizon.

"We are going to come through this with young people and every single individual who lives through it feeling a much stronger sense of identification with others; a much stronger commitment to helping others who need help," he told the BBC.

Sacks believes the experience of living through a global pandemic and the radical measures taken to arrest its spread could lessen the expansion of highly globalized systems in favor of more local self-reliance. He also thinks it will change how we think about major issues like health care and the environment, which is already breathing a little easier as humans withdraw to the indoors.

"I don't think anyone who thinks hard about how one tiny microscopic virus has brought the whole of humanity to its knees can be indifferent to nature anymore," Sacks says. "So this is going to make us more sensitive to issues like climate change."

Of course, when it's all over, most of us will certainly be happy to get back to the way things were. After months of interacting with one another through screens more than ever before, we may emerge from our 21st century caves desperate for the kind of actual face time that doesn't require Apple's operating system.

"It seemed so natural to text, not talk, until now," says Sherry Turkle, a science, technology and society professor at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. "Now, when lack of presence is enforced, we realize how much we got from it."

Turkle says face-to-face conversation is important for developing empathy. She thinks that when we finally begin to meet up in real life again, it might be a fearful experience at first until we become sure it's safe.

"But when we get over that, I believe we will have a new appreciation of presence," she says. "Something far deeper than we had before."

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