



Now that many of us have been working from home for a period of months, scientists have had the chance to study the effects of social distancing. And one group, out of London's Global University, even decided to analyze zebrafish, a freshwater fish native to South Asia.

Why? "Most zebrafish demonstrate prosocial behavior, but approximately 10 percent are 'loner' fish who are averse to social cues and demonstrate different brain activity than their prosocial

THE DANGERS OF DISTANCING



The fact that we won't be loners is a relief because a paper published in the journal *Trends in Cognitive Sciences* shows the dangers of continued isolation on our psychological well-being and physical health. In particular, loneliness directly impairs the immune system, leaving us more susceptible to diseases and infections.

"We are social creatures. Social interplay and cooperation have fueled the rapid ascent of human culture and civilization," said paper co-author Danilo Bzdok, a McGill University associate professor of biomedical engineering and chair of Canada CIFAR Artificial Intelligence. "Yet, social species struggle when forced to live in isolation. From babies to the elderly, psychosocial embedding in interpersonal relationships is critical for survival. It is now more urgent than ever to narrow the knowledge gap of how social isolation impacts the human brain as well as mental and physical well-being."

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Fortunately, it seems our current efforts to socially distance haven't led to an increase in loneliness. According to a nationwide survey conducted before and after stay-at-home orders of more than 2,000 people by Florida State University College of Medicine, researchers found only a small increase in loneliness among older adults. These levels were overall lower compared to those experienced by younger age groups. These increases among older adults also leveled off after the issuance of stay-at-home orders.

"There has been a lot of worry that loneliness would increase dramatically because of the social distancing guidelines and restrictions," said lead author Martina Luchetti, an assistant professor at the College of Medicine. "Contrary to this fear, we found that overall loneliness did not increase. Instead, people felt more supported by others. Even while physically isolated, the feeling of increased social support and of being in this together may help limit increases in loneliness."

OVERCOMING LONELINESS

One age group particularly affected by the negative effects of loneliness are the elderly, but this group also has a lot of wisdom to share. In January of this year, researchers at the University of California San Diego School of Medicine published a study about loneliness after interviewing 30 adults ages 67 to 92 living in a senior housing community.

While they found that 85 percent of the residents reported moderate to severe levels of loneliness, and that “loneliness is subjective,” they also uncovered factors that prevent loneliness.

“One participant spoke of a technique she had used for years, saying ‘if you’re feeling lonely, then go out and do something for somebody else.’ That’s proactive,” said senior author Dr. Dilip V. Jeste, senior associate dean for the Center of Healthy Aging and distinguished professor of psychiatry and neurosciences at UC San Diego School of Medicine. “Another resident responded, ‘I may feel alone, but that doesn’t mean I’m lonely. I’m proud I can live by myself.’”

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