

Social Distancing - A Misnomer

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ABSTRACT: Corona virus or COVID-19, these are the terms which have become a part of each individual's daily conversation. First detected in Wuhan, a Chinese city, last December, it has forced majority of countries all across the world to impose total lockdowns, shut down transport systems, airports, etc. and impose strict restrictions on the movement of citizens within and out of the country. This has forced governments, communities and people to follow the so called "Social Distancing" But now the conversation is gradually shifting towards "Physical Distancing". This paper analyses the current scenario of social distancing and the need of physical distancing. The wrong messages conveyed by the term social distancing, along with the benefits of physical distancing, have been elaborated. Also, some ways of coping with the current scenario of distancing are also discussed.

Key Words: Corona virus, Social Distancing, Physical Distancing, Community, Lockdown.

I. CONCEPT OF SOCIAL DISTANCING:

It is an established fact that we, the humans of this world, are actually living the reality of the Corona virus pandemic. Everywhere we see, we find people covering their mouths, wearing masks, face shields etc. Not only this, we have been washing our hands regularly, cleaning our belongings and purchased items regularly. Similarly, there are various other "protocols" we all have been following. But, most important of them all is "Social Distancing".

For most of us, this is an entirely new term. A term which just popped up as the life threatening coronavirus arrived. This sudden rise of the term has led to some people not understand the term at all. On the other hand, some people have taken social distancing in a wrong way. Hence it becomes important to describe social distancing for what it actually means.

Social Distancing, in the current context, refers to keep a distance of atleast 6 feet between people so as to help reduce the chances of catching the deadly virus and avoid getting sick. All this to "Flatten the curve" and gradually reduce the exponentially increasing cases. Although, this description suggests that it is the right way to avoid the spread of this pandemic. This meaning, however, has not been presented or perceived the right way.

Nowadays, this term has become one of art for how pundits and politicians describe the way people contribute in eradicating this pandemic. This term has saturated almost all the conversations we hear be it among people, on news channels or in newspapers.

With our national efforts to fight this pandemic, the increasing conversation among people over this term is a proof that something is wrong with the term and action is underway. However, current scenario suggests that these efforts by people, which include social distancing, have their own flaws.

People are now becoming increasingly clear about one thing - that the term does not focus on the community social connectedness that is extremely necessary at such testing times, especially in a diverse country like India. "Social distancing" acts as a fog that blurs the difference between social and physical closeness among people.

We must understand that the term "physical distancing" must replace "social distancing" as a widely used phrase in conversations. Also, wherever apt, physical distance guidelines must be supplemented with a message to people for budding interdependence and social connectivity among them.

II. PHYSICAL DISTANCING OVER SOCIAL DISTANCING:

While the term social distancing is still very much used and is still a day to day term not

only for governments but also for general public, it may very well be sending a wrong, unhealthy message and in turn, aiding the already prevalent social isolation in India. It sounds like one must socially (and ultimately, emotionally) separate oneself from his/her friends and family.

There's no doubt that we are living in scary times where the world has turned upside down overnight. Unless you are buried in the earth, you know that people are facing serious health crisis and so people have been spending a lot of time at home. A lot of time than usual. On top of all this, the wrongly perceived term "social distancing" has open doors for a wider range of individual centric problems.

Social distancing is a misnomer that does not represent the difference between various social activities that can foster social connections while maintaining physical distance. The term actually bundles all types of social activities together. It not only refers to physical distance but also non-physical distance or what we call social distance. Usage of this term strengthens the misconception that this term promotes both physical as well as social separation, where clearly, this is not the aim of authorities.

Thus, a new term "Physical Distancing" is a better term than social distancing. We humans must stay connected socially, if not physically, at such hard times. History clearly shows that humans are social beings and one who gets isolated gets lost. Keeping all this in view, the World Health Organisation (WHO) has put aside the phrase "social distancing" and taken up the term "Physical Distancing" as a method to prevent the spread of pandemic among people. This is certainly a good move and has also been appreciated by various experts.

The WHO also said in a statement that although Physical distancing will always be essential during the times of Corona virus pandemic, it doesn't intend that we humans have to disconnect socially, disconnect from our loved ones and family.

III. HARMFUL EFFECTS OF SOCIAL DISTANCING:

Nicholas Christakis, a physician and social scientist at Yale university says, "The coronavirus spreading around the world is calling on us to suppress our profoundly human and evolutionary hard-wired impulses for connection: seeing our friends, getting together in groups or touching each other."

Social Distancing is a severe test of human capacity for socialising. This deadly disease is a very demanding test because this time its not just about helping or protecting our loved ones but also the people we don't know don't care for.

All this discussion, all this debate, all the analysis over a single phrase is not just a pastime. There actually exist various reasons which suggest that the phrase social distancing, if perceived wrongly, can lead to several harmful effects. Some of them are discussed as under:

1. PHYSICAL IMPACTS :

Social distancing, if practiced for long periods of time, can exponentially increase the risk of various physical diseases like dementia, depression, heart disease or death.

Though people of all age group are at high risk and might face the harmful effects of social distancing, old age people above 60 years and children below the age of 10 years are more vulnerable than others.

Among these two, the old age people are more susceptible that children as older people already have several health problems and once affected from coronavirus, it is very difficult for their immune system to cope with it.

2. PSYCHOLOGICAL IMPACTS:

It is a proved fact, seconded by several experts that, there are varied ways humans react too having suddenly being forced to spend more time with someone or oneself. Some people face high stress levels while other overthink unresolved issues of the past, be it with family, friends or anyone. These feelings overcome people and thus, can bring out the worst in them.

People who are alone for a long time face the disorders of "anxiety" and "depression". We all can admit that one or the other time, when we were alone, we have experienced this feeling of anxiety and the need to talk to someone and feel relaxed. This is what we don't get if we follow social distancing to its literal meaning.

Various factors such as loss of friends or family, severe and chronic illness, impairments etc. also aid the deterioration of mental health of people when following social distancing. For someone, who is already under the effects of issues like loneliness, anxiety, bipolar disorder, depression, and other problems face a lot more problems in such scenarios.

3. SOCIAL IMPACTS:

Despite all the talks about social distancing, we as Indians, shouldn't be talking of

social distancing. The concept of social distancing is the one we have faced for so long as a nation, as a culture. The so called higher caste people have, for times immemorial, made it sure to keep lower caste people away from them, at a distance. Their sources of food, their homes, their toilets etc. have always been kept at a distance, at a corner.

This concept of social distancing in a way promotes this social stigma and bad practices that we as a culture have followed for long. This, in turn, may lead to a greater level of distancing among communities and may even lead to the disintegration of our nation.

4. IMPACTS ON COMMUNITY:

Lockdowns, all over the world, have resulted in several headlines of social breakdown, being circulated at a very fast pace. Be it the sudden rise in divorce cases in various countries, people queuing up outside gun stores in the US to buy guns as they started thing other people off their community as enemy.

This shows that the impact of social distancing can also reach the community as a whole and lead to further mental, emotional distancing among them thus, leading to several unwanted unrests. Thus, there is a need of social connection along with physical disconnection.

Social connection results in a variety of benefits to the communities. For example, being socially connected helps people to support each other and reach out the each other when any community needs the other. It also promotes the feeling of pride in their own as well as other communities. Looking at the present Indian scenario, social connection can certainly create and promote resilient communities that, on their own, adapt to the changes they face, whether they are inside or outside their community, and are able to face and respond responsibly to stresses, disturbances and other threats like not following government guidelines.

The more we people, as a community, get a feeling of support through our social networks, the more likely we are to fight this pandemic together as one. Considering all this, the World Health Organization (WHO) has recently come in favour of public messaging that emphasizes the need of strengthening and maintaining social connectivity while practicing physical distancing.

IV. WHY PHYSICAL DISTANCING IS BETTER?:

Physical distancing, instead of social distancing, is a different matter. It is actually an effective way to resist the spread of virus, reduce

the contagion. Minus the bad impacts of social distancing as discussed above, physical distancing is very effective in this time of pandemic.

But the question arises - How do we follow physical distancing?

Needless to say, we are the extremely fortunate ones to have born and living in the times when we have all the technology that can aid us to easily connect with our loved ones in any part of the world, that too at a touch of a button. During these testing times, it is important that we stay virtually connected to all our friends and family.

Staying in touch with people in our lives fuels the human interaction we all need to grow as a person. We must stay socially connected throughout this pandemic.. Conveyance of feeling of togetherness, emotional connect, love etc. using technology is very good for our mental health.

Here are some of the ways one can connect with people easily but responsibly:

1. Video Chats, phone calls.
2. Game Nights.
3. Exercise
4. Yoga
5. Social Media etc.

V. PRACTICING SOCIAL DISTANCING THE RIGHT WAY:

Here are some of the guidelines that one may follow to practice physical distancing without hindering the social connection :

1. Always keep distance of 6 feet between you and others :

This can be followed in several ways. For example, some stores, banks, public offices etc. have started using ribbons or tapes to mark distances between people. But these are not the only places where one should be careful and follow distancing. People should always be mindful to keep distance among the in public places all the times.

2. Regular use of hand sanitizer and hand wash :

One must always use hand sanitizer or wash hands using alcohol based hand washes after coming from a public place such as coming out of a store or a public transport.

At stores and public places, owners must make provisions to arrange sanitizers or sanitizing wipes and people must diligently make use of these.

3. Cover Your Mouth :

Always cover your mouth when you go to a public place especially when you sneeze or cough. Use face masks, face shields or a tissue to prevent transmission of this deadly disease.

4. Limit your time of physical interaction :

Focus on social media interaction. Find digital and technological ways to communicate with people while staying at the comfort of your home. Instead of visiting public places like stores frequently, try visiting them once or twice a week.

VI. CONCLUSION:

The discussion related to harm of social distancing and instead following physical distancing has, to a certain extent, made it clear that the latter phrase is better to use, especially in the context of Indian culture. No matter how much we try, we as humans are even unable to follow the physical distancing. A lot of people would argue for continuing to use the term “social distancing.”

Yet, in this environment of life threatening pandemic, “physical distancing” as a term, offers distinct advantages and conveys the right message. Such discussions over the correctness of the phrase “social distancing” throw light on the fact that we as humans have understood the real essence of community, society, interactions with people. It is a glimmer of hope that however much we may force ourselves for social distancing among us, we, in our hearts, know that all we need is other humans, other people. And it is the interaction with them that gives a purpose and meaning to our life.

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