#OpinionOfTheDay

It’s an effort but you can have a social life during a pandemic

I have been working from home for nearly two months now, venturing out only for work events and the occasional meal or film with friends. As a self-professed introvert, someone with the traits of an introvert as well as extrovert, this arrangement suits me well. I am able to enjoy time alone and go out when I need my fix of social activities.

While some of my friends complain about the monotony of working from home, I am happy writing articles without make-up on, spending time with my ageing yorkshire terrier and immediately plunging into the next episode of a Netflix drama after work. As stricter safe distancing measures kick in and entertainment outlets shutter, I find it increasingly tempting to hole up at home completely.

There are few incentives to leave my flat anyway. Gone are the options of catching a theatre show or late movie. Plans to celebrate my upcoming birthday with friends over karaoke have been shelved.

Given the escalating pandemic, the recent measures are for the best. I simply do not understand how one can enjoy a carefree time at a packed nightclub anyway, when even a coughing or sniffling commuter a seat away on the MRT train is a minor source of stress.

If the latest measures to curb the spread of Covid-19 are anything to go by, it is a good idea to avoid outings to crowded places.

But this does not mean we need to forsake all relationships and become a hermit just to keep safe. In the midst of this pandemic and dismal economic climate – where people might be increasingly worried about issues such as personal health and job safety – it is even more important to maintain and build robust friendships to stay sane.

I recently met my university friends for our monthly catch-up session, where we shared the latest episodes of our lives over cafe fare (although admittedly, we forgot to use serving spoons).

One of my friends, a teacher in training, told us about her struggle trying to manage a rowdy primary school class, while another let us in on how she was navigating a tricky relationship.

Two other friends shared that although they were weary due to long work hours, they were happy to be settling into their new jobs.

As we told one another about our joys and difficulties, I felt a little less isolated during this season of not meeting my colleagues and other friends for days on end.

Although I interview people regularly, sometimes about their life experiences, I find it especially comforting to speak to friends who are going through the same phase of life as me. It is rather easy to feel like you are facing fears and challenges alone when you do not share about these worries or listen to others relate experiences similar to mine.

Our latest seemingly regular meeting turned out to be a poignant reminder of the universality of the human experience and importance of intangible social ties, especially amid very real social distance.

I was thankful that I had friends who, beyond a meal, were just a message or phone call away if I needed to vent my frustrations, ask for advice or simply share good news.

The rendezvous also highlighted that besides keeping physically healthy, it is just as important to preserve one’s mental and emotional well-being, especially in a stressful global crisis.

Among other things such as self-care, this can be done by having a strong social support system consisting of friends, family or both.

Connecting with others is also a lesson in empathy. When we listen to friends share their concerns, we focus less on our own problems and more on their needs, even if they just require someone to pour out their heartbreak to.

National University of Singapore sociologist Tan Ern Ser said: “By definition, friends are people who care about us, and whom we care about. This reciprocity could sensitize us to be more aware of the needs of others beyond the narrow circle of the significant others in our lives.”

Associate Professor Tan also noted that people are already able to maintain social closeness despite physical distance. “We may have nothing to do with the neighbour who lives right next door, but we are in close touch every day with friends who live on the other side of the globe.”

For now, it is still possible to meet others while maintaining a safe distance but should this no longer be possible, people can simply harness digital technology more frequently to catch up, he added.

Besides the mental and emotional aspects of socialising, meeting others enables us to be intellectually stimulated and to grow creatively.

Now, working from home, I sometimes find myself missing the ease of looking over my shoulder at my colleague and asking her if she can think of a more apt way to describe something. After all, there is only a limited amount of inspiration one can get from searching the online thesaurus.

Furthermore, daily lunches with colleagues serve as good breaks from work and now, I often find myself hurting from staring at the computer screen for too long.

It is in our nature to crave company and, given the benefits of human interaction, we might find it difficult to strike a balance between having a social life outside and keeping indoors during this period.

Even Instagram, an app that thrives on the filtered images of its users’ social activities, is reminding us through stickers to “stay home”. Social butterflies in particular are likely to be restless.

Take the case of Ms Ng Xinyu, an account manager at a digital marketing agency. She said she used to go out to meet her friends six times a week – for gym sessions or dinner. The frequency of such outings has been reduced to just three times in a week.

“In general, there is just a nagging fear my friends and I have about the virus. We are still living life as per normal but we are just as motivated to meet one another, especially if we have work from home arrangements,” she said.

And when she does venture out now, she is more mindful of her surroundings and tries to avoid walking next to people who seem ill. She also practises social distancing by not standing too close to her friends, and uses an alcohol swab to sanitise her mobile phone when she returns home.

We should of course check the boxes on the usual list of things we need to do, including when we go out. Maintain good personal hygiene, don’t touch our faces... We are all probably familiar with the drill by now.

Figuring out a social life and coping in general with the challenges of this new unknown of physical distance is no mean feat. We might have to avoid our usual haunts or get used to new methods of catching up with others.

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