Humans are biologically driven to seek out other people when under pressure. When facing danger, the brain secretes neurotransmitters that push a person to seek help from other people. “But the virus is preventing us from doing this,” said James Coan, an American neuroscientist. “We can only beat it if we stay away from other people. And that is pretty awful.”

The pandemic is a test for humanity. It is still hard to imagine what will have been damaged and destroyed when we wake up from this collective nightmare, but Covid-19 is obviously exacerbating a problem that governments and millions of people all over the world were already dealing with: loneliness.

According to an online survey conducted by the market research institute Splendid Research, one in every six people in Germany felt lonely often or constantly, even before large segments of humanity were hiding between their own four walls, before they started wearing masks and learning strange expressions like ‘social distancing.’ In many other countries, including the USA, the UK and Japan, the percentage of people who felt lonely was also into double figures.

Researchers were already talking about an “epidemic of loneliness,” caused by globalization, the individualization of society, modern life and all the technology that comes along with it. And now?

“I’m really concerned about the situation,” said the neuroscientist Coan, who normally teaches and researches at the University of Virginia in Charlottesville. On this May morning, he was sitting at home talking to his computer. Coan is afraid that the pandemic could cause long-term changes to societies. It is not only a question of how children will learn to read without lessons, he said – rather, it is the fundamental question of how people will treat each other in the future. Will they be able to seek support? Or will they hold back out of fear that other people could infect them with deadly viruses – especially the elderly and more vulnerable?

And how will society treat the elderly and more vulnerable? Will they be excluded and locked away so that everyone else can feel free again and so that the economy can start to recover?

“Many people who are alone get sick more often. Their wounds don’t heal as well, and their immune systems are weaker.” The risk of cardiovascular problems, diabetes and depression increases, they are more likely to suffer from dementia and to die earlier. “Social isolation kills, and that is a fact.”

The fact in numbers: A research team led by the psychologist Julianne Holt-Lunstad from the Brigham Young University in Provo, Utah, evaluated data from 308,849 people over a period of more than seven years and found that those with good social relationships had a 50 percent higher chance of being alive after this period – regardless of their age, sex and initial state of health. Holt-Lunstad concluded that loneliness is as damaging to health as smoking or obesity.

Normally, collective disasters bring out the best in people. After catastrophes like tsunamis or terrorist attacks, survivors come together and comfort each other.

It has always been like this, everywhere, but this time is different. What is particularly insidious about this global catastrophe is that the feeling of wanting to be close to someone can have fatal consequences. We have to keep a distance. But at what cost? “I’m worried that Covid-19 will cause a social recession that will have consequences as dire as the economic recession,” said Vivek Murthy, who was the Surgeon General of the United States under President Barack Obama, which is a type of national physician who is responsible for questions of public health.

When he took office in late 2014, Murthy set off on a “listening trip”. He wanted to know which health questions were worrying Americans. He thought it would be the opioid epidemic, or the consequences of obesity or smoking, but wherever he went, he heard problems like these:

“I feel like I have to bear the burden all alone.”

“I feel invisible.” “If I disappeared today, nobody would notice.”

According to Murthy, people were more concerned about their loneliness than anything else.

When Donald Trump moved into the White House in 2017, Murthy lost his job – and he noticed that he, too, was lonely. Things were good with his wife and family, but his years in Washington, D.C. were so intense that he had hardly taken time for his private life. Where had all his friends gone?

Murthy had found his subject. He wrote a book about loneliness, unaware of how terribly relevant it would be upon its release in late April 2020*.

“Everyone is talking about Covid-19,” he said, “but most people are just talking about the immediate effects on health and the economy.” But the virus should also be understood as a traumatic experience. “It has robbed so many of us of the opportunity to say goodbye to our loved ones, to keep in touch with family and friends, to stand by each other,” said Murthy.

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People in Lockdown
Can we use this forced break to prepare for a better life?
"It is going to take months or even years until we understand the mental health implications."

Loneliness is described academically as subjective suffering that relates to a mismatch between desired and actual social contacts. Not everyone who lives alone – almost every fifth person in Germany – is lonely. However, the risk of loneliness increases for people who live alone in particular if they are no longer allowed to leave the house or meet people.

Murthy defines three types of loneliness. The first one is intimate loneliness, when someone doesn’t have a partner or a close confidant. Relational loneliness is the second: a lack of friends that someone enjoys spending time with. And the third is collective loneliness, when someone no longer feels like they are a part of a community or a larger entity.

"Because of these three different social needs," he said, "people in a happy relationship can also be lonely."

However, this can also damage the relationship, because loneliness is contagious.

If someone feels lonely for a longer period of time, their behavior normally changes, too. They might become more reserved and reclusive, or irritable and rude. Other people feel the change and feel rejected. They no longer have the partner, friend or colleague they used to have, they miss the closeness and might behave more defensively – which can again affect their environment. Loneliness spreads, which is why a "social recession" fuelled by Covid-19 could emerge, as Murthy fears. "Think of the consequences, not only in terms of health," he said. "Loneliness affects our job performance and our children’s success at school. It affects society as a whole – our ability to talk to each other. "In times like these, the consequences are even worse."

Feeling lonely is as useful as feeling hungry or thirsty from an evolutionary point of view. Prehistoric people had better chances of survival by cooperating and sharing tasks like hunting or childcare. The further a cave-dweller strayed from the tribe, the higher their risk of starvation or being killed, so evolution favored social individuals.

In an experiment in March, scientists at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in Cambridge successfully demonstrated that loneliness actually triggers similar signals in the brain to hunger. The study suggests that closeness to others is just as much a fundamental human need as food, according to the lead author, Ivia Tomova.

Involuntary isolation triggers a stress reaction in the body that signals to the person experiencing it that something important to their survival is lacking. This feeling probably motivated cave-dwellers to look for the protection of their tribe again. In the modern world, this is more complicated: this stress reaction, which is useful for quickly overcoming an acute emergency, can become chronic and cause both physical and mental illness.

The need for closeness is not as strong for all people.

"The tendency to feel lonely is 30 to 40 percent hereditary," said Ellen Lee, a geriatric psychiatrist from the University of California San Diego. This is good news: "It means we can do something about loneliness."

Lee treats elderly patients with mental illnesses such as schizophrenia or psychosis, people who were already vulnerable and isolated before the pandemic. "Of course, it’s about hallucinations and the like," she said, "but another one of the biggest problems my patients have is a lack of drive, which is connected to their loneliness."

The only thing that can help these patients is building relationships with other people.

But how can that happen when the distance rule is still in place? Before the pandemic, Lee worked on a loneliness intervention program that was planning daily contact and visits to patients in psychiatric clinics and nursing homes. "Now we’re trying to do all of this digitally," she said, smiling uneasily at her computer. "It’s difficult, and I’m very worried about my patients. But the issues that research is tackling at the moment is really exciting, too."

This question is no longer only for loneliness researchers: Can virtual contact replace physical interactions?

Before Covid-19, it was always said that the internet and social media make us lonelier. But now, doesn’t it seem that they are actually saving us from loneliness?

James Coan, the neuroscientist from Charlottesville, can answer this question, because he has been researching the magic of holding hands for almost two decades.

He started by putting participants in a brain scanner and administering electric shocks. Some of them were allowed to hold their partner’s hand during the experience, others held a stranger’s hand, and the third group had to tolerate the pain alone.

The result: Holding hands, especially those of someone close, weakens the reaction of every brain region that is activated when a person is under stress. Touch works like a painkiller. "If we trust someone, our brain doesn’t have to strain as much," explained Coan. "The better this relief for the brain works, the better protected we are from physical and mental illnesses." Now, Coan wants to find out if this effect can be created through a screen. His hypothesis: The effects of touch can be simulated best by showing someone your vulnerable side. "You have to confide something in me, and it must take some effort," he said. "It can be a poem you’ve written, or a song. If I react to this positively and empathetically, then your brain knows it’s not alone."

A brief silence. "Okay," Coan said, "if you don’t want to, then I’ll sing. But be nice!"

Ah poor bird,
Take your flight,
Up above the sorrow
Of this dark night.

Coan was right: A moment ago, he was a sovereign expert, but now he seemed different. Defenseless. And very far away – a head on a screen.

Ami Rokach, a clinical psychologist, has a completely different perspective on what humanity is going through right now. He sees it as a blessing. He has been studying loneliness for around 40 years, and he is a lecturer at universities in Canada, the USA and Israel.

A blessing, really?

"I really think," said Rokach, "that we can use this compulsory break to prepare ourselves for a better life, to remember that we need other people, that physical contact is important. We can further develop our relationships, even virtually."

His only concern is that this period of reflection will be too short. Samiha Shafy