

SOCIAL CONNECTIVITY IN A TIME OF UNCERTAINTY, FEAR, PHYSICAL DISTANCING AND TOILET PAPER HOARDING.

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The world as we know it has changed. Daily, and even hourly, our news feeds are telling us about the impact of COVID-19 throughout the world. We know where it started, that Italy is struggling to cope, that many people are dying, that our most vulnerable citizens are at great risk and that a vaccine is still in the distant future. We don't know how or even if our healthcare and economic systems can cope. We have been told that social distancing is mandatory, and our government is taking drastic action to ensure that we remain apart from our fellow man.

How do we stay socially connected in such strange times? How do we ensure that people who are already physically isolated from others and who have limited social connectivity are supported, that they do not fall through widening cracks in the social fabric of our community? Now more than ever, we need to know and understand who people are in their own context. We need to practice person-centeredness, compassion and empathy; we need to ensure that we are not creating additional burden or harming people; we need to understand and support weak social networks that may become weaker in the wake of 'social distancing' practices that are being policed more emphatically as each day living in the presence of COVID-19 progresses.

In the midst of this pandemic, we need to ensure that people are cared for physically, emotionally and spiritually. We have a great opportunity to forge stronger and more resilient communities if we respond to what is happening in

our own communities by using our existing social networks and by establishing new networks.

In my research at The Hopkins Centre, we have been exploring the importance of family networks for people following serious injury such as spinal cord injury and brain injury. We know that people and networks can, and do, experience high levels of burden when the work that they are required to do is greater than their capacity. We know that it is not just one member of a network that does all the assisting, caring and helping; and that networks have unique ways of deciding who does what, when and how they do it. We also know that people belong to many different networks at the same time. Therefore, my research also explores ways of keeping people at the centre of the care and support that formal (health professional) and informal (family and social) networks provide. But, there is still a need to understand ways of increasing resilience in these networks.

We need to invite other people into our networks. We need to make links across networks so that together we ensure that everybody is cared for and supported. We must check on our neighbours, we must look out for one another, we must know where we can go for help, we must practice self-care and self-compassion, and we must not be afraid to put up our hand to both offer and ask for support.

Services, workplaces, community groups, welfare organisations, faith-based groups and all manner of community networks across society, are working hard to ensure that they are able to continue to respond, and even to increase their response in their local communities. In this time of fear and uncertainty, there are some who are asking 'What if?'—What if we could support people differently? What if we could develop stronger social connectedness in an online and virtual world? What if we could be more inclusive? What if we could

surround people with the certainty that they are loved, valued and appreciated?
What if...?

These questions are important. They help us to focus on faith rather than fear; community connectedness rather than selfishness and searching for light and opportunity rather than focusing on uncertainty and fear. The organisations, community and faith-based networks I belong to are developing and implementing strategic and considered responses that address these questions.

There are ample examples of opportunistic kindness and generosity. Even our celebrities have shared their music and entertainment. But how can we support the elderly and others in our community who cannot leave their homes? How can we prevent social isolation at the same time as preventing transmission of this virulent virus to vulnerable people? In my community, we are mobilising small groups of already connected people to move beyond their established networks and connect with other members of the community virtually and often.

We will be checking in with people regularly, making sure that important information is communicated to them and working with them to understand their needs. We are identifying escalation pathways to ensure that people are connected to services that can best help them. We are developing detailed communication plans, better understanding of the breadth and depth of our community, and ensuring that people remain socially connected. We are exploring talent and skill in our community, we are harnessing peoples' passion and enthusiasm for caring to ensure that we are neither duplicating unnecessarily nor missing something that is essential. We are wrestling with how to best support people who are disenfranchised, isolated and in need.

Most importantly, we are actively asking 'What if?'

Visit our website at: www.hopkinscentre.edu.au

[Image 1]



[Alt text: A man in wheelchair with a dog in his lap using a laptop]

[Image 2]



[Alt text: A lady on a yoga mat, connecting with others using her tablet device]

[End Images]

IMPORTANT CONTACTS AND ONGOING SUPPORT

Emergency – 000

National Coronavirus Helpline – 1800 020 080

Qld COVID-19 Hotline – 13HEALTH (13 43 25 84)

Department of Health – 1800 020 103

Community Recovery Hotline – 1800 173 349

Health Direct – 1800 022 222

National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) – 1800 800 110

Queensland Disability Network (QDN) – 1300 363 783

Carers Qld – 1800 242 636

Beyond Blue – 1300 22 4636

Lifeline – 13 11 14 or 0477 13 11 14 (SMS)

Salvation Army Australia – 13 SALVOS (13 72 58)

Vision Australia – 1300 84 74 66

Expression Australia – [AUSLAN Coronavirus updates](#)

Assistance for Hard of Hearing – 131 450

[National Relay Service Website](#)

[Translating and Interpreting Service](#)

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Research for Rehabilitation and Resilience

A joint initiative of Griffith University, Menzies Health Institute Queensland,
Metro South Health and the Queensland Government.

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