

## Friendship and Physical Distancing

*“In Aristotle’s day, friendship circles would end when people left each other’s vicinity. True friendship, he argued, requires constant connection. And that is the challenge which Covid-19 presents to us all.”*

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Tim Delaney and I co-wrote a book in 2017 entitled *Friendship and Happiness and the Connection Between the Two*, which drew upon our expertise as, respectively, a sociologist and a philosopher to look at the importance of friendship and how it connects to mental and physical health and a sense of well-being. The book begins with a review of Aristotle's three categories of friendship—friends of utility, friends of pleasure and friends of the good. Modern variations—casual friends, close friends, best friends—are then described, along with the growing phenomena of electronic virtual friendships and cyber socialization in the Internet Age. We then return to Aristotle to explore how such connections bring about what he calls *eudaimonia* (usually translated as “happiness”), meaning human flourishing and living well. His key point is that human beings are by nature social creatures and forming friendship bonds is essential to leading a good life. Our very development as humans is contingent on the proper—or natural—support given to us by other human beings, especially those we consider to be our friends.

In the past few months the world has been battling the Coronavirus crisis, which has led to a phenomenon that most of us were previously unfamiliar with: enforced isolation due to the prevalence of spreading the disease through human contact. This involves such steps as working from home unless deemed to be “essential,” maintaining a distance of at least six feet from most people, and for those who are sick to stay away

from others. Initially this was referred to as “social distancing.” But, as Tim Delaney quickly pointed out to me, that term was inappropriate. It should rather be called “physical distancing.” While keeping physically distant from other people is a prudent way to avoid catching and/or spreading the virus, to stay socially distant is both harmful and unwise. We need social connections, especially those provided to us by friends, in order to be happy.

A friendship consists of people who are bonded by expressions of harmony, accord, understanding and rapport. Friends are generally viewed as those who are attached to one another by feelings of affection or personal regard, and those who provide assistance and support to one another. Aristotle writes: “No one would choose to live without friends, even if he had all other goods.” In his book the *Nichomachean Ethics* he holds that close friendships don’t come easily, and must be cultivated. In such relationships, we reveal our innermost thoughts and aspirations to another. The trust between such friends is vital to our well-being and thus should never be given lightly. You have to get to know the other person, and that cannot be rushed. It takes time and effort. Most of all, you must maintain those ties in order to support each other.

In Aristotle’s day, friendship circles would end when people left each other’s vicinity. True friendship, he argued, requires constant connection. And that is the challenge which Covid-19 presents to us all. We cannot see our friends in person for now, just when we need them most. But fortunately we have options available to us that Aristotle didn’t. Thanks to the technological developments of recent times, we are able to stay connected with our friends through email, social networks, and increasingly via such

means as FaceTime, Zoom, and Google Meet. Electronical socialization has allowed us to remain in touch with them during this time of crisis.

As Aristotle argued long ago and as modern science continues to prove, there is a solid link between friendship and happiness. While nothing beats face to face interaction and personal proximity, having the possibility to remain in close contact with friends via the internet is helping us to maintain our social ties. Like many, I have stayed in touch with friends all over the world during these disconcerting times. It's important to note that all of us are in the same condition of living with uncertainty and fear. It's in just such times that we truly need the support of our friends. Thankfully, most of us have the technological means to do so in ways that Aristotle could never have dreamed of.