

How to Meet New People, Even at a Distance

Online and offline platforms are helping strangers form social connections, which are crucial for our health, especially in a pandemic.

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Published Aug. 29, 2020

Updated Sept. 1, 2020

A retired teacher, a Midwestern minister and a mother of two teenagers all dial into a Zoom room. For the next 90 minutes, they do something their typical adult lives don't usually afford them a chance to do: listen to others' perspectives, and have others listen to them. And after three rounds of answering not-so-standard questions, like "What sense of purpose guides you in your life?", the group leaves the room, feeling deeply connected.

Or so goes the logic of "[Living Room Conversations](#)" — an online platform through which volunteer hosts help small groups of people discuss timely [topics](#) such as voting, gun rights and their vision for America. Founded in 2010 by two women on differing sides of the political spectrum, with the input of dialogue experts, Living Room Conversations have sought to show how people could have civil conversations across lines of difference. At one point, these discussions, which have always been free to join, happened in actual living rooms. But when the coronavirus mandated a strict lockdown, the conversations went online-only, and became a means for alleviating loneliness, too.

With many offices, gyms, churches and other places where people normally connect shut down, Living Room Conversations is one of several social platforms currently experiencing a surge of new interest. Since mid-March, more than 1,000 people have signed up for the discussions, and the website has had 62 percent more page views than it had at the same time last year. Joan Blades, one of the platform's co-founders, attributes the traffic spike to social isolation.

"It's a way of taking care of people," Ms. Blades said. "Maybe you're signing up for these conversations because you're lonely, or maybe you're hosting a conversation because you're worried about someone in your network who's isolated."

Research links loneliness to severe health consequences — including [chronic stress](#), [poor sleep](#), [heart trouble](#) and even [premature death](#), while studies associate meaningful social connections with [physiological well-being](#) and [longevity](#). Even in pre-pandemic times, finding meaningful social connections could be challenging. In a 2019 [survey](#) of 2,000 American adults, nearly half said they found it difficult to make new friends.

According to Dr. Arthur Aron, a psychology professor at Stony Brook University and co-creator of the popular [36 Questions that Lead to Love](#), one way to find closeness with strangers is to “do exciting things together” and share a “feeling you have things in common.” Mobile applications — like [BarkHappy](#) for dog-walkers, [Peanut](#) for moms, and [BumbleBFF](#) for anyone — can help, by allowing people to easily meet those with whom they share common interests, in-person. And platforms like [VolunteerMatch](#) can help strangers connect over shared community service activities, like tutoring, gardening or cooking for a soup kitchen. Some [research](#) finds that volunteering itself can reduce feelings of isolation.

But in the age of social distancing, meeting in-person may seem too close for comfort, especially for people in high-risk groups.

“It’s been very taxing on me,” said Paula Johnson, a retired chemistry teacher who lives alone in Houston. As an involved grandmother, avid churchgoer and active volunteer in her community, Ms. Johnson typically has an abundance of connections. But she says the lockdown has her feeling isolated, and as if her “usefulness has been curtailed.”

To cope, Ms. Johnson turned to the virtual world of Living Room Conversations, and began opening up about experiences she wouldn’t otherwise get to talk about, like the racism she’s experienced as a Black woman living in the suburbs. “People were surprised I was so vulnerable with sharing, and it felt good to hear them say, ‘Wow, I wasn’t aware of that,’ or ‘You know, I never saw it that way,’” said Ms. Johnson, who now regularly hosts conversations, too.

Marissa Verson Harrison, a mother and advocate for more humane technology who lives in Oakland, Calif., similarly craved person-to-person conversation. After learning about Living Room Conversations, Ms. Harrison joined a discussion on what it means to be “alone,” and found it a refreshing break from social media and broadcast news. “A lot of what’s happening right now is you’re either screaming into the void, or you’re responding to other people screaming into the void,” she said.

Determined to help her family and friends experience deeper connections, Ms. Harrison hosted a Living Room Conversation on “Technology and Relationships” and called the experience “magical.” “Everyone left saying, ‘OMG, I have not been able to have these kinds of conversations,’” she said. They appreciate having found a place “where people can express themselves and listen to others without any agenda.”

There’s a science to that “magic,” Dr. Aron said. “When you have questions that encourage responsiveness, it creates an opportunity to show you care, and lots of research shows that feeling you’re being heard is key to creating closeness.”

Of course, there are also ways to connect without baring your soul. Some outgoing types don’t hesitate to post fliers around their neighborhoods to organize creative, socially distant ways to meet up with neighbors the old-fashioned way — in person — such as a dog parade, curbside cocktails, a garden tour. But not everyone is inclined to be an organizer.

That might explain the popularity of a New York-based [MeetUp group](#) called “I wanted to do that ... just not alone!” Through the group’s online portal, organizers plan bike rides, park outings and other events for anyone seeking both adventure and company.

Shawn Jobe, a Queens resident and the group’s main organizer, says his involvement began 10 years ago with a revelation. “I was in school and working, and one of my bosses recommended MeetUp because he saw that I had no life,” Mr. Jobe said with a chuckle. “So by overtaking the planning of this group, it’s held me accountable to dedicate a chunk of my time to socializing.”

Mr. Jobe, who has helped the group grow from roughly 400 members to nearly 24,000, says most members are not originally from the area, or have otherwise lost their network. “Everyone is there to meet new friends, so it kind of puts everyone on equal footing,” said Mr. Jobe, who has met many of his own close friends, including a current roommate, through the group.

Since the start of the pandemic, Mr. Jobe and fellow organizers have taken extra precautions — all events are outdoors, and social distancing is encouraged. He says it’s been stressful, since the organizers feel responsible for everyone’s safety. But he adds that the group has grown significantly during lockdown and, in some ways, is more important than ever.

“Human beings are social creatures, and people have told me they rely on this group for socializing,” he said.

Mr. Jobe adds that he feels especially grateful for the way the group serves people with social anxiety, who, Mr. Jobe says, may not have many other social outlets.

Still, while these platforms may welcome vulnerability, they are not meant to replace professional mental-health counseling.

“We go places that are very deep, we often have to break out the tissues,” says Shaunelle Curry, a Los Angeles-based media entrepreneur and a regular Living Room Conversations host. “Some of these people haven’t been sleeping, or are disconnected from family members they could process their emotions with, so I always start out by saying, ‘I’m not an expert,’ and if people do have professional resources, they can share them in the chat.”

But, Ms. Curry says, even though the conversations don’t directly constitute professional counseling, they can help create self-awareness and lead some to realize they need more professional support. “Many people on the calls have said ‘I don’t have another space like this,’ or ‘I thought I was the only one who had this experience.’”