

As we start to move out of lockdown, talk has turned from the risks of infection to the risks associated with prolonged isolation. Our friends and families, those we love, are the ones we turn to when times are bad. One of the hardest things to accept about the COVID-19 pandemic has not been the evolving science, the catastrophic economic consequences or the disjointed politics, but the requirement to stay distant from those we would normally seek to be near. The benefits of a social isolation policy to control infection spread are now being weighed against the risks of continued denial of social interaction, which is now recognised as a very real threat to mental well-being.

Every news bulletin for weeks has been peppered with human stories of the anguish of separation and the joy of reunion. Social distancing is an alien concept to humans who are natural collaborators; we work, play, and celebrate together and our well-being and sense of identity stems from knowing our place as a valued member of a family or peer group.

A consequence of the social distancing rules has been the inability to celebrate the traditional rites of passage in our lives: special birthdays, graduations, weddings and funerals. These milestone events give structure to our existence and part of their importance is that they are experiences we share, either in celebration or for comfort. On a

THE NEED FOR INTERACTION



Sarah May, the Deputy Chief Executive of the IBMS, on the value of shared experiences.

professional level, Congress is the biggest shared experience in our calendar and a major part of its success is the opportunities it presents to interact with colleagues past and present.

The need to share experiences even extends to sharing a look or a smile with a stranger. I appreciate the infection control measures we must take, but, personally, one of the things I dislike the most is face coverings. I detest the inability to share a knowing look or smile with a fellow human in a shared situation. It brightens a daily commute knowing that a fellow traveller is equally amused or irritated by something. A look can convey a myriad of emotions, often more eloquently than words. How

terrifying it must be for those in hospital, alone and unable to see their loved ones and unable to see a reassuring smile from those caring for them due to the multiple layers of protective equipment.

If there is one single positive thing about COVID-19 it is the appreciation of those closest to us; Zoom and Teams may be wonderful for work meetings, but socially, they're no substitute for a big warm hug.

Sarah May
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