Alberta Doctors' Digest

Keeping our distance

It will soon be a year since we've been running from the virus, and things are getting worse, with record numbers of cases most everywhere. Field hospitals are in progress to add treatment beds, but our heroic health care workers are exhausted. Personal and governmental resources have all been drained by burgeoning demand at the same time as a resolute swath of the populace refuses to admit that anything is wrong.

In response to rocketing numbers of the afflicted, we've resumed lockdown, but this was slow in coming, given our circumstances.

We're all tired and anxious, trying to survive the tumult of a topsy-turvy world. We've moved beyond "bubbles," which once meant the folk close at hand – and instead are trying to curtail our activities everywhere in favor of safer, and often solo, home-bound existences.

Yale physician and sociologist Dr. Nicholas Christakis has attempted to explain the changes in our lives in his book Apollo's Arrow: The Profound and Enduring Impact of Coronavirus on the Way We Live (2020). Christakis reminds us that plagues have been with us throughout history, and they have generally prompted reflexive social distancing, separating the afflicted from the well. He goes on to cite Thucydides, from centuries ago, who felt that the most terrible feature of plague affliction was the accompanying public despair.

As our anxieties mount, I'd have to agree with Thucydides. We've been taken by surprise. Few oldsters are available to remember the 1918 flu epidemic; more can recall the polio scare of the 1950s. Our recent afflictions have been limited in scope and setting, so we've been lulled into thinking our technical prowess will save us and that we will prevail.

We've settled, uncomfortably, into increasing confinement, even as we know that persistent, long-standing isolation is tantamount to a death sentence. We're predisposed to react to threats, but are often irrational. Our evolved, large prefrontal lobes have given us remarkable abilities to anticipate threats to our being. We're capable of orderly thinking, but our thoughts are steeped in emotions that are reflexive in nature and commonly rule our behavior more than we would acknowledge.

The age-old handshake – not too firm, not too soft – gave way years ago, first to a cursory fist-bump, then an elbow-bump and now replaced with a half-wave from across the room. (Photo credit: Miriam Verheyden, Pixabay.com)

We'll come out of this traumatic time changed by the experience, and I'm concerned that even when it is no longer needed, we'll persist with our cautious, constrained lives. I'm recalling, for example, Holocaust survivors who endured horrific circumstances in wartime but lived the remainder of their lives in unrelieved anxiety. In similar fashion, many who lived through the Great Depression were forever affected by it, hoarding clothes or food and penny-pinching long after they were otherwise secure. More recently, we're aware that communities who've had problems with contaminated water often continue to drink bottled water even once the need is long past.

As a retired clinician, I was dependent on my tactile skills, and I'm surprised that touch has become the ultimate taboo. Circa 1990, we heard that children in orphanages – Romanian orphanages as I remember – who grew without nurturing touch went on to exhibit pronounced cognitive and behavioral changes. Our adult traditions of greetings and hugs may be more specifically beneficial than we realize. I'd argue that we, both singly and collectively, must look to replace, as soon as possible, the austere measures we've taken to insulate our lives.

There are countervailing forces at work. Centuries ago Leeuwenhoek peered down his microscope to see things he called "animalcules," likely spawning our first germaphobes. The historically male habit of shaking hands has been on a downward slide for years, predating the depredations of our novel virus. The age-old handshake – not too firm, not too soft – gave way years ago, first to a cursory fist-bump, then an elbow-bump and now replaced with a half-wave from across the room.

The #MeTooMovement has exposed the sinister misuse of touch in the past, particularly as it relates to the cost of women gaining access to opportunities in the workplace. Though it is certain that we must deal with this, I hope that one day we will be able to forego our hermetic, worried lives.

We want things to be the same as they are in memory, even as we know this to be impossible. Heraclitus warned us that it is impossible to put a foot in the same stream twice, so we're chasing shadows in this quest, and imagined ones at that. Perhaps

there’s more to learn: our salvation in this harried time has, after all, been our communication and entertainment technologies. Maybe we’d be better off – less fractious and less bellicose – if we surrendered to our digital possibilities and gave up on haptic intimacies: further integration with our technologies may be our best next step, evolutionarily speaking. Ongoing digital quarantine could become our preferred modus operandi, now that the virus has shown that the seven or eight billion of us on the planet can be mauled so easily and so thoroughly.

Hope is our new focus. We’ve heard that there are several promising vaccines and are carried away with buoyant expectations. Expect lots of potholes along the way. We’re going to have to steward our reserves of hope to keep dark cynicism at bay.

The coming months will be perilous, but it is not too early to ask, “what’s next?” It behooves us to consider prevention so that we’re at less risk of a COVID-21 or COVID-22. I trust we’re already working on this and can imagine a sort of distant early warning system that will alert us to potential perils. Given our experience to date (and kudos to the public health personnel who have guided us thus far), we’d be well advised to also revisit our public health legislation and specifically the responsibilities and powers therein.

The larger job that relates to preventing another pandemic must consider what can be done to realign those among us who have been unhelpful and even contrary to fighting our pandemic. I’m thinking of those who believe their “rights” are paramount, others who invoke mysterious, dark forces at play, and still others who seem persistently unaware of the very existence of a pandemic. This realignment will be a mammoth task, but the need to address underlying economic inequities and education, particularly as it pertains to science and evidence, points the way forward.

I’ve been much influenced thinking about our next task, battling climate change, which lurks just around the corner. The altruism that will be required of us, the coherent understanding of what’s at stake and our ability to act collectively may make our fight with COVID-19 look like a walk in the park.

Walk in the park? That’s it. This will all seem like a walk in the park.

Editor’s note: The views, perspectives and opinions in this article are solely the author’s and do not necessarily represent those of the AMA.

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