

March 2020

## Talking Point – Neighbour Day & COVID-19

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Neighbour Day on Sunday, March 29, is Australia's annual celebration of community.

Since 2003, Neighbour Day has aimed to increase social connection and belonging in communities across the nation and has served to remind us how important it is to build strong relationships with those who live near us.

In 2020, the plan for Neighbour Day was for communities across Australia to come together for events - such as a BBQ, a picnic or a game of cricket in the park. Obviously, the Coronavirus/COVID-19 has stopped those types of events.

But the celebration of Neighbour Day this year becomes more important, perhaps more than ever before.

To reduce the spread of the virus and potential further tragedy, we have to collectively think of creative ways to stay socially connected while physically apart, particularly with those who are more vulnerable, such as the elderly.

Through the Good News Movement, we see other countries around the globe step up to this challenge in unique and inspiring ways.

A Spanish fitness instructor held a workout for his neighbours from his rooftop. In Italy, musical neighbours play instruments together from their balconies. One neighbour even took it upon himself to project a Fred Astaire music video onto his apartment block, prompting an elderly couple downstairs to dance along in tune.

Closer to home, Australians have been leaving notes in letterboxes, offering to purchase groceries, pharmaceuticals, or walk the dog for the elderly, vulnerable, or self-isolated, as well as finding other ways to let people know they care.

In the virtual world, applications such as Nextdoor The Neighbourhood Hub could come in very handy, while others are joining the many supportive Facebook groups which have sprung up (such as Coronavirus outreach groups and the Adopt a Healthcare Worker page).

But will social contact through Facebook and other virtual social media be as psychologically effective in maintaining positive wellbeing as face-to-face contact is?

Well, researchers have long been attempting to find this out for us.

Research from the University of Tasmania in 2013 looked at whether the social connectedness we get from Facebook is the same as what we get from face-to-face connection.

The level of participants' Facebook social connectedness and face-to-face social connectedness were both measured and analysed – and the data suggested that although they are different forms of connectedness - Facebook social connectedness was associated with lower depression, lower anxiety, and greater satisfaction with life, like face-to-face connectedness.

So, although we might not be able to fully replace offline connectedness with online connectedness, it will likely prove very helpful in maintaining our social connections while we physically distance ourselves.

Social media is also helpful in amplifying the reach of urgent health advice, as well as spreading well-informed health information, such as the “flatten the curve” graph.

However, we also need to be aware of the spread of panic and misinformation or “fake news”, especially in private forums or groups where it may take longer to correct itself as opposed to in a public forum.

In these trying times, there are ways for people to maintain social connections with their friends and family that don't involve being physically close. However, we should also spare a thought for those in our communities who lack these networks and think about inventive ways to reach them.

There are some simple ways of caring for ourselves, our families and friends, our neighbours and community, including:

- Be kind to yourself, and others
- Find the things in your life that you are grateful for, and remember to say thank you
- Limit your exposure to the news, and choose when and how often you catch up with news events
- Don't forget that good eating, sleeping and exercise are essential to health and wellbeing
- Try something new – new skills or practices like yoga, meditation
- Seek support from those you trust, or professionals, if you're having trouble coping

It is now more important than ever to make that effort to connect and care. Happy Neighbour Day!

**Dr Michael Kelly, CEO Relationships Australia Tasmania**



### **About Relationships Australia Tasmania**

At Relationships Australia Tasmania we provide families, couples, individuals, older people, children and communities with tools and strategies, so that they have healthy, positive lives. We help more than 8000 Tasmanian every year to transform and change their lives through counselling, mediation, dispute resolution, support and training.

#### **Our focus is on:**

- healthy relationships, discrimination, harassment, conflict resolution, parenting, cultural issues and mental health
- We offer people the services and support they need, when they need it to assist them when life presents challenges.
- Services are available to all people regardless of cultural background, family structure, economic situation, religious beliefs, gender or sexual orientation.

More information about the services and support we offer can be found on our website [www.relationshipstas.com.au](http://www.relationshipstas.com.au).

**Media Contact: A.Mark Thomas, M&M Communications, 0422 0062 732**