



THE “ROADMAP” SERIES

Leadership & Management Strategies

Physically Distant, but Socially Connected

Understanding Different Modes of Connection



About the Roadmap Series:

Supported by the Office of Family Assistance's Peer Technical Assistance (PeerTA), the Roadmap Series highlights responsive leadership and management practices to support the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) agencies and their partners in adapting to new ways of work and connection amid the pandemic.



The Challenge

Social or physical distancing measures across the country increased likelihood that individuals may be experiencing feelings of isolation, disconnection, and loneliness.

The Insight

Social energy levels and personal needs can fluctuate day-to-day, so it is important to cultivate different modes of connection using technology, community-mindedness, and media.

In this era of staying physically distant from one another, staying socially connected can be especially hard, whether with colleagues and co-workers, family, and friends, and even with ourselves.

Connection looks and feels different every day. Connection comes in various forms, from interpersonal interaction to feelings of community bonds to fictional worlds in books or movies that transport us outside our current realities.

Physical distancing can be especially difficult for those working hard to keep others safe, protected, nourished, and healthy, as we often long for social connection to our colleagues, friends, family, and many others. For many of us, these connections are replenishing, fulfilling, and give us a sense of belongingness as we confront the disruption, uncertainty, and overwhelmingness felt by us, our families, and the those we serve amid the pandemic.



Know what you need.

For many, the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic were laden with phone and video calls as people scrambled to connect with friends and family. As time goes on, it is important to remind ourselves that we do not have to be available, accessible, and engaged all the time.¹ Sometimes, virtually connecting

with coworkers or friends after a full workday of speaking with clients might be draining. Other times, it is exactly what you need to decompress. Your social energy levels and personal needs can fluctuate day-to-day, so it is important to cultivate different modes of connection.





On days you need external connection: Use technology in new ways.

Researchers from the University of Washington (UW), studying the real-time effects of social isolation during COVID-19, suggest using technology in a way that maximizes person-to-person connectiveness. “The closer to live [interaction], the better,” said Dr. Jonathan Kanter, a psychological scientist at UW’s Center for the Science of Social Connection.⁴ While not all individuals have access to video-chatting capabilities, phone calls and social media can similarly mimic in-person interaction. If these platforms start to feel stale, staff can reinvigorate them by intentionally using them in different ways.

K **Keep in Mind:** Your clients may be facing similar challenges with staying connected, so feel free to share these tips and encourage them to engage and connect in ways that feel right for them.



For example, try starting virtual “clubs” based on your interests, like a cooking club, book club, or movie club. Set a weekly or biweekly time to meet. For coworkers, this can supplement “water cooler talk.” For friends, it can be a dedicated space to have conversations you normally would have in person.



If it is challenging finding a time to gather peers together for a club, consider making a shared document to share with friends or colleagues where you can share a running list of TV, movie, podcast, or book recommendations.



Or, you can keep a joint “Quarantine Diary” where people can share small tidbits about their day, whether silly, sentimental, or serious. With coworkers, you can share tips you have found useful for working remotely. These documents might be shared through an online application like Google Docs, or could be emailed in rounds to add content. This is a great option for days when you want to interact with your friends but might not have the energy for a full conversation.



On days when you prefer solitude: Engage with the world through media.





Books, television, movies, and social media also provide an outlet for connection to the outside world. Since the 1950s, researchers have studied how people interact with characters in mass media like movies and television.² In a “parasocial interaction,” people feel a sense of reciprocity and engagement with a media figure or character that feels like

a face-to-face interaction.³ During times when expending energy to socialize with coworkers and friends feels exhausting, engaging with media characters can mirror human interaction and satisfy our need for interpersonal connection. You might be able to reinvigorate them by intentionally using them in different ways.



On days when you need to feel internally connected: Create shared meaning with community.

Researchers suggest that thinking and feeling like we are connected with the world around us gives us the same positive outcomes like higher self-esteem and lower rates of anxiety as if we are actually engaging with the outside world.⁵ This internal connection grows from introspective thinking that can create a sense of shared meaning with our communities, even if we are not physically together. When you or your staff are feeling physically isolated, thinking about the following prompts can foster an internal sense of shared meaning that connects us to our communities, even when we are apart:⁶

-  Think about friends, family, and loved ones who you are protecting by social distancing and remind yourself that your actions are helping people beyond your immediate circle.
-  Think about what personal and community protection mean to you. How would you describe this value?
-  Sense and feel the importance of living your community values in your mind and body.
-  Recognize and celebrate others in your community for following protective guidelines.

A Reminder About Social Boundaries: Just as you are checking in on your own capacity to interact with others, it is important to check in with your friends, families, and colleagues about their capacity and set boundaries for conversations about COVID-19. Just because someone is okay talking about COVID-19 on Monday does not mean they will be in the same frame of mind to do so on Wednesday. Make space for ongoing check-ins on comfort level. At the top of a conversation, try saying, “Let me know if you want to stop talking about this at any point and we can switch topics.”

Where Can I Find More Information?

For more information on leading with compassion during crisis, see “Compassionate Leadership: Leading with Heart.” For tips on adapting your team culture to a remote environment, see “Building Social Cohesion Among Virtual Teams.”

Harvard Business Review produced the following free e-book which includes pieces on leading through the COVID-19 crisis, managing remote teams, and communicating effectively: [Coronavirus and Business: The Insights You Need from Harvard Business Review](#).

The World Health Organization’s Department of Mental Health and Substance Use developed a series of messages to support mental and psycho-social wellbeing for groups of people affected in various ways by the pandemic: Mental health and psychosocial considerations during the COVID-19 outbreak. In addition, Advent Health shares ways to set and maintain social and mental boundaries to foster healthy communication: [Changing the Subject: Setting Boundaries about COVID-19 Talk](#).



Learn More About PeerTA

The PeerTA provides evidence-informed, direct, and timely technical assistance to state, tribal, county, and territory TANF programs and their partners. PeerTA also facilitates the sharing of timely and practical information on innovative practices, emerging challenges and opportunities, and application of lessons learned to the broader TANF field.

To learn more about the PeerTA network and the resources, publications, and tools it makes available, please visit: <https://peerta.acf.hhs.gov/>

To make a request for technical assistance, please visit: <https://peerta.acf.hhs.gov/technical-assistance>

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Jayanthi, Akanksha. (2020). "Physically Distant, but Socially Connected: Understanding Different Modes of Connection." Washington, DC: Office of Family Assistance, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.



Endnotes

- 1 Fosselin, L., & Duffy, M.W. (2020). [How to Combat Zoom Fatigue](#). *Harvard Business Review*.
- 2 Horton, D., & Wohl, R. (2016). [Mass Communication and Para-Social Interaction](#). *Psychiatry* 19(3).
- 3 Dibble, J.L., Hartmann, T., & Rosaen, S.F. (2015). [Parasocial Interaction and Parasocial Relationship: Conceptual Clarification and a Critical Assessment of Measures](#). *Human Communication Research* 42(1).
- 4 Brodeur, N. (2020, March 23). [We're in this human experiment: UW researchers study effects of coronavirus isolation](#). *The Seattle Times*.
- 5 Seppala, E. (2020). [Social Connection Boosts Health, Even When You're Isolated](#). *Psychology Today*.
- 6 Wickham, J. (2020). [Maintaining human connection in a time of social distancing](#). Mayo Clinic Health System.