

# FROM THE HEART

Newsletter from  
 **Saint Luke's**  
CARDIOVASCULAR CONSULTANTS

## Your Home Survival Guide for Boosting Immunity and Safely Weathering the Storm

By James H. O'Keefe, MD, with Joan O'Keefe, RD

Ireland's Prime Minister Leo Varadkar recently said, "We're asking people to come together as a nation by staying apart from each other. This is the calm before the storm." Varadkar then paraphrased a quote from Winston Churchill that he said during World War II, "Never will so many ask so much of so few."

If it's any consolation, the whole world is stressed by the Coronavirus crisis, but now the U.S. is on the front lines of the battle. In the World Wars, all Americans pulled together to support our young soldiers who risked everything and sometimes made the ultimate sacrifice to save our freedom, our culture, and our people. Today, the health care providers in the emergency rooms, intensive care units, and hospital wards are the ones in the trenches, fighting this highly contagious and potentially lethal virus. What can you do to pitch in and help us win this war against COVID-19?

Your main mission is to simply take very good care of yourself and hunker down at home alone or with your small circle of people. This COVID-19 crisis has drastically altered each of our lives, and the situation still



is unfolding in unpredictable ways. Nobody has a clear idea of how bad it will get, and when this nightmare will be over. Right now, we need to take it one day at a time.

Angst is inevitable. We all feel it. But, don't let it dominate your mindset. Panic and anxiety do not help anything. Take it from astronaut Chris Hadfield when he spoke about dealing with issues that arose when he was in outer space. "There is no problem so bad you can't make it worse." Today, we are dealing with another harsh and

alien environment, and we need to be especially careful to not sabotage our odds of surviving this threat.

Sitting or lying around all day in front of screens while binge-watching and snacking is not the ideal approach. Nor is freaking out and being mean or inconsiderate to people, drinking heavily, using recreational drugs, or hoarding supplies. None of this is going to improve your or anyone else's odds of getting through the COVID-19 Crisis. Neither will blaming China or adopting a "head in the sand"

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ostrich approach. These are counter-productive behaviors that take a bad situation and make it worse.

Ryan Holiday writes, “The single most important practice in Stoic philosophy is differentiating between what we can change and what we can’t. What we have influence over and what we do not.” If there was ever a time to focus on what we can control, and to not emotionally invest in what we can’t control, it is now.

When exposed to the Coronavirus (SARS CoV-2), some people come down with the COVID-19 infection and others don’t. Your immune system function is a major factor in determining whether you will be vulnerable or resistant to the infection. The information that follows will help you boost your immunity and stay safe. This article is a mixture of a “to-do” list, along with a “not-to-do” list, to help you as much as possible take control of your destiny so that together, we will safely navigate through these perilous times.

### A Mask: Don’t Leave Home Without It

One of the simplest strategies for protecting yourself from getting COVID-19, or spreading it to others, is to wear a mask whenever you are around other people. Many people who have the virus do not have symptoms, so the best strategy is to assume everyone has COVID-19.

The mask should fit tight, so that the air you breathe goes through the fabric, not around the sides of the mask. We need to take a lesson from China, wearing a mask is a low-tech and powerful way to get this pandemic under control.



*Two of our pets, Sunny the cat and Frances the French bulldog, are a great comfort.*

### Check Your Gut

Your microbiome is the collective genetic material from all the microbes—viruses, bacteria, fungi, protozoa—that live on and inside your body. Up to 70% of your immunity arises from the interaction between the gut microbiome and white blood cells (WBCs) in the walls of your small intestine.

For example, this interaction between the gut microbes and immune system develops some WBCs that remain vigilant to any dangerous intruders, and trains other WBCs to be killer T-cells that seek out and destroy pathogens, like the Coronavirus, before they can get a foothold.

So, making sure our digestive system has a diverse and hardy mix of microbes can help to optimize our immunity. To grow a healthy garden of friendly microbes in your GI tract, you should be consuming multiple naturally fermented foods like unsweetened yogurt, sauerkraut, kimchi, kombucha, and pickles. Joan and I do this every day, but you could instead consider taking a probiotic supplement.

### Pet Your Pets

These days my family and I are especially appreciative of our dogs, Frances and Coco, and our cats, Lola and Sunny. They are lifesavers for us right now. Hugs and kisses that you share with your furry family members can give you warm-fuzzies almost like those you get being physically affectionate with your human loved ones, but without the risk of transmitting COVID-19.

Dogs and cats are also great for your immunity by diversifying your microbiome and reducing stress. Our leafy green friends underfoot and overhead in our yards and neighborhoods are also particularly valuable to our well-being today. Nurturing plants and trees and working with the soil can melt stress away, lift our spirits, and also improve one’s microbiome. And, like with our pets, these plant friends won’t give you COVID-19, even if you cozy up next to them.

### Vitamin D

Maintaining normal vitamin D levels can help to support a strong immune

system. It's super easy to boost your vitamin D with sunshine. Anytime the sun is at least halfway up from the horizon (or  $>45^\circ$  from the horizon) to straight overhead ( $90^\circ$ ), the UV light in the sunshine will stimulate your skin to crank out massive amounts of vitamin D.

As little as just 15 minutes of the sun's rays hitting your hands, face, and arms two or three times a week usually is enough to make a difference. You can also find vitamin D naturally in mushrooms and fatty fish like salmon, sardines, and herring, or fortified foods including milk and cereal.

### Get Your Nutrients

Pay close attention to your diet. Higher intakes of some nutrients have been shown to strengthen the immune system and reduce susceptibility to infection. Specific nutrients that may support the immune defense system include zinc, selenium, iron, and vitamins A, C, D, E, B6, and folate.

Whole foods such as broccoli, Brussels sprouts, kale, spinach, onions, garlic, mushrooms, avocados, bell peppers, green tea, berries, and citrus fruits are good for your immunity. Cook the produce if possible, otherwise wash it thoroughly. Other nutrients like omega-3 from fish and curcumin may help to reduce excess inflammation that can occur in severe lung infections. Ideal protein foods include fish, shellfish, nuts, seeds, and legumes (beans). Products with added sugar should be avoided like the plague. These kinds of highly processed foods make you more vulnerable to diseases of all sort.

### Invest in Your Relationships

This pandemic is a unique, serious stress on our relationships, but we

need each other more than ever right now. Cut your family and loved ones some slack. Listen more. React less. A few of my friends and patients have texted me saying how much they appreciated me, and it made a huge difference in cheering me up and brightening my day. Now more than ever, it is very important for us to tell our loved ones, friends, neighbors, and co-workers how much we love and appreciate them. Do it safely, without hugs, kisses, handshakes, or even elbow bumps. By necessity, these days it will often be via electronics or the phone, but it's your sincere expression of gratitude for having them in your life that they need to hear.

### Be Active

Stay physically active—exercise boosts immunity. Besides, being sedentary tends to make us sad, anxious, irritable, and unhealthy. But don't overdo the exercise either; excessive strenuous physical activity can temporarily lower resistance to infection. You won't have access to a gym for a while, so be creative.

Put on upbeat music and dance (no touching involved). And walk, jog, bike ride, garden, scoot, etc. Just avoid coming within 6 feet of anyone else and shun groups of people that might be in crowded parks or busy sidewalks and trails. Be much more cautious than usual about injuring yourself. Now more than ever, the Emergency Room and/or hospital are to be avoided if possible.

### Hydrate, Hydrate, Hydrate

Stay well hydrated. Choose mostly water, sparkling water, tea, and coffee. You should be drinking at least 64 oz. (two quarts) daily. But cut off the caffeine intake by about noon or 2 p.m.

to ensure you'll be drowsy at bedtime. Sleeping soundly is already challenging enough what with all the scary news and frightening images swirling through our minds.

### ACE-inhibitors and ARBs

If you are on an angiotensin-converting enzyme inhibitor (ACE-inhibitor) such as lisinopril, ramipril, benazepril, or enalapril, or an angiotensin receptor blocker (ARB) such as losartan, valsartan, olmesartan, irbesartan, or telmisartan, you don't need to change to another medication. These drugs are very commonly prescribed for the chronic treatment of high blood pressure or heart failure.

According to an article published April 2, 2020 in the New England Journal of Medicine, experts have concluded that neither ACE inhibitors nor ARBs are problematic for getting COVID-19 or worsening the symptoms of the infection. More research into this important issue is needed, but continue these blood pressure medications as prescribed without interruption. The ACE inhibitors in general tend to have more side effects like cough or rash than ARBs, but the two classes of medications are otherwise quite similar for lowering blood pressure and reducing cardiovascular risks.

### Take Your Temperature

If you feel chilled or feverish, take your temperature. A definite fever is over  $100^\circ$  F. To treat the fever and body aches of COVID-19 use Tylenol or its generic, acetaminophen. Try to avoid using NSAIDs like Advil or Motrin, (generic = ibuprofen), or Aleve (generic = naproxen), or high-dose aspirin (325 mg or more).



### COVID

People with pre-existing cardiovascular disease, such as those with prior coronary stents or coronary bypass surgery, previous heart attack, carotid or peripheral artery disease, should continue to take their low-dose aspirin (81 mg per day).

If you have other symptoms like night sweats, body aches, loss of taste and smell, or cough, get tested ASAP. We need to find everyone with this virus and keep them as isolated from other uninfected people for about two weeks. Saint Luke's of Kansas City now has multiple options to test for COVID-19 with prompt turn-around time (less than 24 hours) on the results. A physician referral and appointment are needed for testing.

#### Wash Your Hands

This novel Coronavirus (SARS CoV-2) is highly contagious and predominantly spread via droplets, usually when an infected person coughs, sneezes, wipes their nose or eyes, and then touches a surface that you subsequently touch. So, wash your hands frequently and thoroughly after coming in contact with surfaces others might have also touched. And keep your fingers and hands away from your nose, mouth, eyes, and ears. The virus can live for up to 48 hours on common surfaces, so wash your clothes daily; and keep your home environment very clean, ideally with disinfectants and/or soap.

#### Don't Smoke or Vape

Smoke from tobacco or marijuana, or fumes from vaping inflame the lungs, which increases the chances of getting a respiratory infection. Too

## The one who stayed away saved all the rest.



much alcohol, even from one binge-drinking session can suppress immunity. If you drink alcohol at all, make sure to keep it to one drink a day for women, or one to two drinks per day for men. Ideally, a good general rule is to limit alcohol to not more than about 10 drinks per week.

#### Hang In There

We are all in this together and we need to band together, by staying apart. One easy and valuable way to do that is with phone calls and social media. Do what you can, with what you have, where you are, and we will overcome this together.

At Saint Luke's Cardiovascular Consultants, we are doing virtual visits either via phone calls and/or video connection. We also are continuing to do cardiac testing such as nuclear stress testing, but we are prioritizing the patients who need to be tested urgently. For less acute symptoms we are deferring the echo, ECG, and stress testing until the quarantine restrictions are able to be relaxed.

The physicians at Saint Luke's are on the cutting edge of the therapies for treating this Coronavirus pandemic. Infectious disease specialist Dr. Joseph Brewer here at Saint Luke's is one of the most widely read and quoted experts in the U.S. on emerging therapies for treating or preventing COVID-19. Also, we will be participating in randomized controlled trials testing promising drugs for treating COVID-19 patients.

American ingenuity and grit saved the world 75 years ago when we rallied together and came up with game-changing breakthrough technologies to win WWII. I'm optimistic that America will come to the rescue this time too, but it will take some time.

In the meantime, follow this advice and have faith that we will safely navigate this storm. Some people wonder, "What's the meaning of life?" An existential crisis like the one we are facing now makes it clear, at least to me, that our collective survival and continued progress as a species is the meaning of life.

# Sunshine is the Best Disinfectant

By James H. O'Keefe, MD

**W**e evolved as outdoor creatures who were exposed to the sun on a daily basis, so it makes sense that some sun exposure is good for us.

A study from the *Journal of Internal Medicine* correlated the health of 30,000 Swedish women with risk of death over a 20-year period. The researchers found that the risk of death from all causes doubled for the Swedish women who tended to avoid the sun compared to women who got the most sun. This was a dose-dependent benefit, meaning that the more sun exposure a woman got on a regular basis, the lower her risk of death during the two decades-long study.

This sunshine-related health benefit remained significant even after the study authors adjusted the data for income, obesity, tobacco use, and exercise. According to this study, completely avoiding the sun might increase your risk of premature mortality as much being a pack-a-day cigarette smoker.

The idea that sunlight is good for our immunity and our hearts makes a lot of sense. Both in the United States and in Europe, deaths from infections and heart disease peak in winter and bottom-out in summer, and the swing is not subtle. The benefit may be in part due to vitamin D, but there are other factors at play. Studies have shown sun exposure on the skin triggers the release of large quantities of nitric oxide in the blood, which lowers blood pressure and improves immunity. Sunlight also leads to boosts in the levels of serotonin, which brightens mood and prevents depression.



If you're blonde haired and blue-eyed with northern European ancestry, it doesn't make sense to go lie out for hours in the Miami sun. Evolutionarily, it's not something your skin was designed to deal with.

But all of us need some sun. To hide inside like a mole shunning all sun exposure is a recipe for sadness and poor health, particularly during the Coronavirus pandemic. The benefits of getting a modest daily dose of non-burning sunshine far outweigh the skin cancer risks. And to mitigate the aging and skin cancer risks, put sunscreen on your face, neck, shoulders, and hands.

## It's Amazing Out There

While it's important to stay home, you don't need to stay indoors. In fact, take this as "Doctor's Orders." Get outside multiple times every day to get some exercise and breathe in the fresh, clean spring air.

One silver lining of this pandemic is that air and water quality are suddenly better than they've been in decades. Another unexpected advantage is that as devastating as the arrival of the

Coronavirus tsunami is, it's coinciding with the blossoming of springtime—the most exhilarating and rejuvenating season. If you want to bolster your immune defenses, brighten your mood, and raise your vitamin D levels, get some sun on your skin. Not enough to burn, but enough to bask in the warmth.

Gardening is one of the very best things you can do to save yourself and the world right now. This morning, I got up with the sun and went outside with Frances, my French bulldog. While I was pulling weeds and trimming the bushes, Francie was digging in the dirt.

Your microbiome is the collection of microorganisms on and inside you; and it is a fundamental component of a powerful immune system. Getting intimate with the soil is one of the best ways to diversify and reinforce your microbiome. There is nowhere in the country that is prettier than Kansas City in the springtime, and it's the best season for working in the yard. It's never been more important to spend some quality time with your green friends outdoors.

# COVID's Quarantine: An Opportunity That You'd Never Ask For

By Evan L. O'Keefe, MD

"No one ever promised you this life was going to be easy." Those are the eternal words of my late grandmother, Kathleen Olsen. A wonderful woman, she was shrewd and realistic. If you called with a report that all was well, she'd respond with a, "Well, just wait."

So, now the entire country is facing stay-at-home orders, which at first glance for many is tantamount to a glorified house arrest. As we adapt to life at home, and begin to create more concerted routines, I'm recalling the many times I've said, "If I just had a bit more time for exercise and family." We now have to play the hand we are dealt, and looking at this quarantine from a slightly altered perspective, many of us have the ironic opportunity to focus on health and longevity during this pandemic.

Last month a study of 4,080 adults taken from the National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey attached sound data to the anecdotal mantra, get your 10,000 steps a day.

Pedro Saint-Maurice, PhD, and colleagues found an exponential decrease in mortality from 2,000 through 12,000 steps per day. As compared to 4,000, those getting 8,000 steps had about half the risk of mortality over the 10-year study period, and those obtaining 12,000 steps per day had a 65% decreased risk of dying. Eight thousand steps a day is a very reasonable goal, bestowing striking longevity benefits across all ages, genders, and races. In regard to those over 65, the difference between 4,000 and 8,000 steps a day was a 62% risk reduction in mortality over the span of a decade.

For many, achieving this benchmark would entail only minor changes to their daily routine, and in an era where few people don't have smart phones, tracking your steps has tangible value. In my opinion, the most fool-proof method to consistently achieving this goal is welcoming a dog into the home, and if there was ever a time to raise a puppy—this is the moment.

Owning a dog is known to increase physical activity and exposure to the outdoors, both of which are strong predictors of overall well-being. Dogs, too, are a strong source of companionship and such interconnectedness is a major health determinant to the extent that single-person households with a dog have a 33% decreased risk of mortality and improved survival after a heart attack.

Another recent study showed that people who routinely spend more time in "green spaces" (areas with natural vegetation such as urban parks and public open spaces, as well as streets lined with trees and greenery) have risk reductions of 28% for Type 2

diabetes and 31% for all-cause mortality. Moreover, dogs, physical activity, and time spent outdoors are all known to decrease psychosocial stress, and if your family is anything resembling mine, having outlets to defuse tension during a mandated quarantine is not just important, it's a necessity.

This is an especially trying time for those affected by COVID-19 and all the essential personnel who are out on the front lines tasked with ensuring our besieged cities remain operational for the coming weeks to months, all the while bracing for a possible roaring second wave of infections. For these groups, we extend our hats and hearts, for their struggles right now are no small burden to carry, but this too shall pass.



*That's Evan O'Keefe, MD, and his beloved dog Lady on the front steps of their apartment in New Orleans.*



# Time-Restricted Eating: Working with Your Body's Rhythm for Optimum Metabolic Health

By Laura A. Amos, RN, APRN

In today's modern world, the "normal" for most people is eating upon waking until just before we go to sleep, with an evening snack or late dinner. Perhaps, we are making healthy choices at mealtime. We have consciously cut out refined sugar and some highly processed foods. We feel better overall eating a diet of whole foods. However, could we manifest even better health outcomes by condensing when we eat? Is the secret not only WHAT we eat, but WHEN we eat? The answer is an astounding YES!



Time Restricted Eating (TRE) is the practice of eating during a set window between 8 to 12 hours daily. This may seem like a new concept, but our ancestors practiced TRE during their hunting and gathering days.

They would typically consume two meals a day during daylight hours. Humans and animals are designed to consume their caloric intake within an optimal feeding window in conjunction with our circadian rhythm.

The Salk Institute conducted a study with mice and TRE. The first group of mice were given a high-fat, high-sugar diet and 24-hour access to food; and the second group of mice were given the same diet, but with an 8-hour feeding window.

After 100 days, the first group of mice developed obesity, high cholesterol, elevated blood sugars, and fatty

liver disease. The second group of mice on the TRE weighed 28% less and developed no other negative health outcomes. These results are similar when applied to humans. When overweight individuals who were eating more than 14 hours per day changed their feeding window to around 10 hours a day, they lost an average of 7.2 pounds and reported feeling better. They did not overtly change what they ate, only when they ate. Participants who continued to practice and adopted TRE into their routine after 12 days reported fewer cravings and felt more satisfied after eating.

Genes for digestion are more active earlier in the day and genes for cellular repair are active later in the day. The body's circadian rhythm helps regulate metabolic homeostasis by maintaining a balance between the fasting and fed state, the balance between nutrient utilization and cellular rest and repair. Time-restricted eating allows your body to digest and process food at a time when we are metabolically designed to do so.

Benefits of time-restricted eating are numerous and include lower blood sugar levels, improved insulin sensitivity, reduced inflammation, improved

ketone body production (fat burning), improved liver function, lower cholesterol, lower blood pressure, and increased lean muscle mass.

How to practice time-restricted eating:

- Start by choosing a time that works for your schedule. Choose an 8- to 10-hour feeding window. For example: 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. or 8 a.m. to 4 p.m.
- Consume carbohydrate-rich whole foods (fruit, complex grains, starchy vegetables, and legumes earlier in the day when insulin sensitivity is the highest).
- Stay consistent! Utilizing this approach daily will help align your circadian rhythm and optimize metabolism.
- During your feeding window, consume a whole food diet with adequate protein, omega-3 fats, and complex carbohydrates.

When we listen to our bodies and work with their natural rhythms, we can enhance our health and prevent chronic, metabolic disease states. Often, less is more, especially when it comes to our dietary patterns and consumption.

# Through Service, Gratitude, and Taking Care of One Another, We Will Survive

By James H. O’Keefe, MD

*“We make a living by what we get, but we make a life by what we give.”*

*Winston Churchill*

**C**lementina was a 70-year-old lady who lived alone in a lean-to made of cardboard, wood, and metal sheets on a steep hill on the outskirts of Montemorelos—a town in northern Mexico. To make matters worse, she had diabetes with multiple complications.

Noel was a medical student who befriended her after seeing her as a patient and learning about her desperate circumstances. He started visiting her every Saturday afternoon to bring her medications and food. Her little hut was very difficult to get to, so Noel had to park at the bottom of the hill and then hike uphill for about 20 minutes to deliver supplies and visit with her.

Noel personally looked after Clementina from 2008 to 2013 throughout medical school and during his first two years of training as an intern/training physician in Mexico. In one instance, Noel had to carry Clementina on his back down the hillside to bring her to the hospital to get needed medical attention.

On one of his weekly visits during the rainy season, he found that she had narrowly survived a mudslide that caved in the back wall of her lean-to and deposited mud 5 feet deep on her floor.

That same afternoon he enlisted 20 of his med school classmates to help to dig out the hut, but he realized that this was a very unsafe place for her to



*Noel Torres-Acosta, MD, and his wife, Ana, with son, Andreas.*

live. He and his classmates sent a letter to the mayor of the town asking for help to relocate her. Within a year, she was moved to a small house with running water and electricity in a much safer area.

Noel was born and raised in Cuba and dreamed of coming to America, but the only foreign language his school offered was Russian. When he was 17, he fled Cuba and came to Kansas City to live with his uncle.

Noel studied for 2 years at Penn Valley Community College where he learned English and took pre-med classes. Then, Noel went to medical school in Mexico. When he arrived

back in Kansas City in 2015, we hired him to work as a medical assistant in our Cardio Health and Wellness (CWC) Center.

Since being here in Kansas City, nearly every weekend Noel helps out with his 90-year-old grandmother. She has dementia and lives with his uncle, who is not physically capable of caring for her. During the week, she has a homecare aid helping her, but on the weekend, Noel takes over.

Last summer Noel completed his three-year internal medicine residency at the University of Missouri — Kansas City School of Medicine, Kansas City, Missouri. In July 2019, I accepted him as my preventive cardiology fellow. As in his other roles, Noel has quietly excelled in this position and has been accepted to the three-year cardiology training program at University of Kansas starting July 1, 2020.

Noel is a brilliant young man who has a modest and humble demeanor. Our patients almost uniformly tell me how much they are impressed with him—his listening skills, his soothing and gracious nature, and his genuine compassion.

As his mentor, I am grateful that I have been able to work closely with him for the past five years. Noel has taught me as much as I have taught him. I will be enthusiastically recommending that he be hired here at Saint Luke’s in 2024, when he will be a full-fledged cardiologist.



## What Does Life Want from You?

David Brooks, in his enlightened book *The Road to Character* writes, “You don’t ask, What do I want from life? You ask: What does life want from me? Start your work from where you live, with the small concrete needs right around you.

Help ease tension in your workplace. Help feed the person right in front of you. We each have a deep personal obligation to live simply, to look after the needs of our brothers and sisters, and to share in the happiness and misery they are suffering.”

Brooks goes on to write, “Joy emanates unbidden and unforced. Joy comes as a gift when you least expect it. At those fleeting moments you know why you were put here and what truth you serve.

You may not feel giddy at those moments, you may not hear the orchestra’s delirious swell or see flashes of crimson and gold, but you will feel a satisfaction, a silence, a peace—a hush. Those moments are the blessings and the signs of a beautiful life.”

Brooks states, “Self-respect is not the same as self-confidence or self-esteem. Self-respect is not based on IQ or any of the mental or physical gifts that help get you into a competitive college. It is not comparative.

It is not earned by being better than other people at something. It is earned by being better than you used to be, by being dependable in times of testing, straight in times of temptation. It emerges in one who is morally dependable. Self-respect is produced by inner triumphs, not external ones.”

## The Power of Gratitude

***“When you arise in the morning, think of what a precious privilege it is to be alive—to breathe, to think, to enjoy, to love.”***

**Marcus Aurelius**

In these frightening times, I have found that thinking grateful thoughts automatically chases negative emotions like worry and fear from my mind. A growing consensus from scientific studies shows that being thankful and expressing gratitude will predictably increase one’s sense of well-being. Try it for yourself. The next time you’re feeling some unpleasant emotion like fear, gloom, anxiety, inadequacy, resentment (these days, you probably won’t have to wait long for one of these emotions to pop up), call to mind a few of your countless blessings, from the ones that are most dear to you, to the day-to-day joys we usually take for granted. It is virtually impossible to feel toxic emotions while you are actively thinking grateful thoughts.

By human nature, we tend to take all of the things that are going well in our life for granted, and then ruminate on a few of the negatives. I’m not suggesting you ignore your problems or minimize the gravity of the Coronavirus crisis. Yet, taking time to remind yourself of what you are most thankful for can change your perspective, and make our challenges seem more manageable.

Expressions of gratitude are great for everybody involved. So, when you catch someone providing needed help, complement them on it and tell them how much you appreciate their service. As you turn out the lights and snuggle into your bed, recall three good things that happened during

the day. Or, keep a gratitude journal to help focus on all the things that are right in your life, rather than the few that are wrong.

## By Helping Others, You Help Yourself

***“It is one of the most beautiful compensations in life, that no person can sincerely try to help another without helping himself or herself.”***

**Ralph Waldo Emerson**

I lived with my grandmother Dorothy O’Keefe when she was 74 to 78 years old, while I was going to college and medical school. I found it almost comical how much time and energy she put into community service work.

She regularly volunteered to serve food and clean up at a local church, helped out at a soup kitchen for the poor, cut and styled hair at the nursing home down the block (many of the ladies whose hair she was doing were younger than she was), and even had me help her set up a disaster station in her garage for the Red Cross during a devastating flood in 1979. Dorothy was also one of the most joyous and enthusiastic people I’ve ever known. She lived to be 102 years old.

Studies consistently show that volunteering is one of the best things a person can do to improve their own well-being. Volunteering is linked to a longer life, a more optimistic mood, a better sense of control, and higher rates of self-respect and happiness.

The Harvard Help Guide states that individuals who invest their time and energy into supporting others live longer than people who do not regularly help other people. Moreover, there seems to be a dose-response effect, whereby the more you help others around you, the happier and healthier you are likely to be.

# A Pesco-Mediterranean with Intermittent Fasting Diet: The World's Healthiest Cuisine

By Noel Torres-Acosta, MD, James H. O'Keefe, MD, Joan O'Keefe, RD, and Emilio Ros, MD, PhD

**W**hat you consume is among the most important determinants of your health—and unlike many other things that we currently are dealing with, this one is something that largely is under your control. You can go a long way toward keeping your immune system strong, and avoid ending up in the hospital, by paying close attention to what you do or don't choose to eat and drink.

## Mediterranean Diet—The Gold Standard for Health

The Mediterranean diet is so named because it was the cuisine adopted by many of the cultures living on or near the shores of the Mediterranean Sea. In the words of Elizabeth David, the Mediterranean diet comes “from the blessed lands of sun and sea and the olive trees.”

The natural abundance of fruits, vegetables, legumes, tree nuts, olives and olive oil, fish and seafood made it easy for the Mediterranean peasants down through the centuries to eat this way. They also tended to consume moderate amounts of dairy products (particularly yogurt and cheese) and eggs, as well as modest amounts of alcohol (ideally red wine with the evening meal), but very little red meat and processed meat.

Many studies demonstrate that adherence to a traditional Mediterranean diet promotes longevity, and reduces risks for heart attack, stroke, and cardiovascular death. It also lowers risks for diabetes, Alzheimer's disease, depression, breast and colorectal

cancers. What's more, a Mediterranean diet, especially supplemented with olive oil and nuts, appears to improve immunity, which should help to prevent infections, and dampen down harmful chronic inflammation.

This diet was studied in the *PrevenCIÓN con Dieta Mediterránea (PRE-DIMED)* study, which in our opinion is the most important and impressive diet study ever done. PREDIMED was done using 7,500 volunteers in Spain, who were randomly assigned to eat a Mediterranean diet supplemented with extra virgin olive oil or nuts versus a low-fat diet. The subjects who followed the Mediterranean diet had a lower rate of the combined endpoint of heart attack, stroke, or cardiovascular death.

The cardiovascular benefits of the Mediterranean diet have been recognized and recently the American College of Cardiology, as well as the American Heart Association, have endorsed it as the ideal diet to follow. Moreover, it has been ranked for three consecutive years as the #1 recommended diet for overall health by U.S. News & World Report.

## Key Components of the Mediterranean Diet

### Fish and Seafood

Omega-3 fatty acids found in fish and seafood are fundamental components of the Mediterranean diet. Fish and seafood are rich in omega-3 fats, zinc, iodine, selenium, B vitamins, calcium, magnesium, and high-quality protein. The cardioprotective properties of omega-3s have been linked to

a reduced risk of fatal and non-fatal heart attacks, heart failure, metabolic syndrome, and stroke. For example, in the Adventist Health Study 2 including 96,000 individuals, the pescetarians (plant-rich diet with fish as main source of meat) had the lowest risk for all-cause mortality, heart disease, and death from other causes when compared to non-vegetarians, semi-vegetarians, vegans, and lacto-ovo vegetarians. Other studies have found similar results with pescetarians having the greatest cardiovascular benefits of all vegetarians' groups.

Despite the rich nutritional properties found in seafood, attention should be paid to the mercury content found in some fish. Examples of low-mercury/high-omega-3 content fish include salmon, trout, sardines, herring, and anchovies. Other good options include scallops, shrimp, lobster, and clams, which are not as high in omega-3, but are still low in mercury. The 2015 - 2020 Dietary Guidelines for Americans and the American Heart Association recommend at least 2 seafood meals per week. This amounts to 8 to 10 ounces or more per week of seafood.

### Extra Virgin Olive Oil

Extra virgin olive oil (EVOO) is another integral component of the traditional Mediterranean diet. The polyphenols (micronutrients that have potent disease-fighting and antiaging properties) found in EVOO are obtained through cold pressing olives, equivalent to pure olive juice. The abundance of polyphenols in EVOO can be recognized by a throat-burning sensation when swallowed.

# Pesco-Mediterranean Diet



Artwork by Shaun Hamontree.



# A Pesco-Mediterranean with Intermittent Fasting Diet: The World's Healthiest Cuisine

These bioactive polyphenols reduce the levels of “bad cholesterol” (LDL) and increase the levels of “good cholesterol” (HDL). Also, EVOO was used in one of the Mediterranean diet arms of the PREDIMED, proving its remarkable cardiovascular benefits.

## Tree Nuts

Nuts are one of the best foods to promote robust health and great longevity. They are packed with wholesome nutrients, including unsaturated fats, fiber, proteins, polyphenols, phytochemicals (plant molecules related to cholesterol that lower LDL-C), vitamin E, and minerals.

A diet rich in nuts has been shown to lower bad cholesterol, insulin, and inflammation. Moreover, nut consumption reduces your chances of developing diabetes, dying of cardiovascular disease, getting dementia or having atrial fibrillation. In the PREDIMED study, the group assigned to a Mediterranean diet plus nut consumption had a 28% reduction in cardiovascular disease, again providing high-quality scientific evidence of the cardioprotective properties of tree nuts.

## Legumes

Legumes are also a central component of the Mediterranean diet as they provide vegetable protein, folate, magnesium, polyphenols, and fiber. Similar to fish and nuts, they are an excellent substitute for red meat and processed meat, while improving blood sugars, cholesterol, blood pressure, and body weight.

## Dairy and Eggs

Eggs provide an excellent source for proteins, essential amino acids, multiple minerals, and a wide variety of vitamins (A, D, B2, B12). Even though the egg yolk is rich in cholesterol, recent studies have not shown eggs increase cardiovascular risk. Generally, we recommend you not consume more than 5 egg yolks per week, but you can eat all the egg whites you want.

Regarding dairy, fermented low-fat yogurt, kefir and soft cheeses are preferred over butter and hard cheeses. There is no consensus whether there is an increase or decrease in cardiovascular risk, but fermented dairy was an integral component of most traditional Mediterranean diets. Dairy provides vitamin D, probiotics, minerals, and proteins, and is a good replacement for sugary drinks and unhealthy snack food.

## Grains

Historically, Americans have regarded pasta, pizza, and bread to be essential components of a typical Mediterranean diet. Homemade pizza, pasta, and rice dishes, such as paella, are genuine Mediterranean dishes.

Despite being a refined carbohydrate, pasta does not raise blood sugars significantly and there is no evidence that it increases obesity or cardiovascular risk when prepared in the context of the Mediterranean diet. Whole grains such as barley, whole oats, rye, buckwheat, and brown rice are preferred over refined grains as they provide fiber, antioxidants, and B vitamins. White rice in moderation also is a healthy component of this diet when home-cooked with veg-

etables and olive oil. The predominant beverage in this diet should be water. Sparkling water, as long as it has no sugar or artificial sweeteners in it, is a healthy beverage. Unsweetened tea and coffee are rich in antioxidants, and naturally calorie-free. These are encouraged in the Mediterranean diet, but it's best to avoid sweeteners in the coffee or tea. If alcohol is consumed, dry red wine should be the choice, with no more than 1 glass for women and 2 glasses per day for men.

## Intermittent Fasting

Our ancestors did not have the luxury of 3 meals a day plus snacks. They had to undergo periods of intermittent fasting while engaged in the daily struggle to gather food which made them more resistant to stress. Time-restricted feeding, a type of intermittent fasting, is the practice of limiting caloric intake to a window of 4-12 hours out of the 24-hour period.

During fasting periods, our body switches from sugar to fat as the main fuel to produce energy which reduces free radical production (molecules that damage our DNA and cells). Over time, restricted feeding has shown benefits by improving blood pressure, heart rate, cholesterol, blood sugar, and inflammation, in addition to burning off intra-abdominal fat and reducing cancer risk.

The integration of the Mediterranean eating patterns with fish and seafood as its main animal protein, combined with intermittent fasting, make it the ideal cardioprotective diet.

*Disclosures: James O'Keefe is founder of CardioTabs, and Joan O'Keefe is CEO of CardioTabs.*

**Table 1 - Summary of Pesco-Mediterranean Diet Recommendations**

Recommended	Goal	Caution	Goal	Avoid
Fish/seafood	≥ 3 times/wk	Lean fresh red meat	≤ 1 time/wk	Processed meats (e.g. bacon, sausage, hot dogs, ham, deli meats, cold cuts)
Vegetables	≥ 3 servings/d	White meat	≤ 2 times/wk	Sweets
Fresh fruits	≥ 2 servings/d	Eggs	≤ 5 yolks/wk	Butter and margarine
Legumes Whole grains	≥ 3 servings/wk ≤ 3 servings/d	Dry red wine	≤ 6 oz/d ♀	Most refined carbohydrates such as products made with added sugars and/or white flour (e.g. commercial bakery goods, cookies, cakes, pies, candy, mashed potatoes, rolls, tortillas, and chips)
Tree nuts	≥ 1 servings/d		≤ 12 oz/d ♂	
EVOO	≥ 4 tablespoons/d	Soft Cheeses		Soda drinks and sweetened fruit juices
Sofrito*	≥ 2 servings/wk	Dark chocolate	> 50% cocoa	Artificially sweetened beverages and foods

\*A sauce made with tomato and onion, typically including garlic and aromatic herbs, slowly simmered in olive oil.

## Strategies to Help You Sleep

In these unprecedented times, it is normal to feel anxious and have difficulty sleeping. So, focusing on maintaining a healthy sleep routine is more important than ever right now. High-quality sleep enables us to better cope with stress and also fortifies our immune system.

- Follow a consistent routine. Get out of bed at the same time every day. Also, try to adhere to a regular schedule for meals and other activities. Find a rhythm that works best for you and your co-inhabitants.
- Expose yourself to bright morning light. Light is the chief controller of your body's natural clock, and daily exposure to bright morning light helps to set the body's circadian rhythms. Outdoor sunlight is best, and even cloudy days bathe you in more light intensity than indoor lighting. When you are outside getting your daily

doses of sunlight and fresh air, keep at least 6 feet away from others at all times.

- Stay physically active during the day. When you are physically tired from a day with plenty of exercise, you will sleep better at night. Exercise reduces stress and improves mood.
- Don't take refuge in your bed during the day. An afternoon nap is OK, but keep it to 30 minutes or less.
- Avoid caffeine after 2 p.m. If you want to drink coffee or tea later than this, choose decaf versions or herbal teas.
- Be helpful to others. While continuing to maintain physical distance, see if you can help to take care of your little corner of the world. Check in frequently with your neighbors, friends, and loved ones and be helpful in any safe way possible. Doing altruistic acts

can give us a sense of purpose and reduce anxiety and insomnia.

- Turn off all the news and avoid using electronic devices for at least one hour before bedtime.
- Minimize alcohol consumption. Though alcohol can help some people fall asleep faster, it keeps you from getting into the deep rejuvenating stages of sleep. Try to leave 4 hours from the time you drink alcohol till when you go to bed to allow adequate time to metabolize it out of your system.
- Create an ideal sleeping environment. Make sure your bedroom is cool, dark, and quiet.
- If you need a sleep aid, use melatonin, 2 to 5 mg at bedtime, or a magnesium supplement before bed. Avoid prescription medications. Most of them are addictive.

# Close Your Mouth!

## Nasal Breathing is Key to Well-Being

By James H. O’Keefe, MD, with Daniel E. Rome, DDS

**Y**ou take 26,000 breaths every day without even giving it a single thought. But we want you to start paying a bit of attention to “how” you breathe. The default mode of breathing for humans is through the nose, and when we do nasal breathing rather than mouth breathing, we tend to feel better and stay healthier.

It’s been said that breathing through your mouth makes about as much sense as trying to eat through your nose. Mouth breathing is generally only necessary when you have nasal congestion from issues like allergies or a cold, or when you are exercising vigorously and need to drastically ramp up oxygen delivery to your muscles.

I’m sure you will agree that a chronically stuffed-up nose can make life miserable, interfering with your ability to sleep well and function at a peak level. Yet, many people mindlessly do way too much mouth breathing, predisposing them to bad breath, gum disease and tooth decay—and that’s just the tip of the iceberg.

Daniel Rome, DDS, is my dentist and he’s also a good friend. I actually look forward to going to see him every six months to get my teeth cleaned. We always have fascinating conversations about the latest breakthroughs in our respective fields.

Who knew dentistry and cardiology would share so much in common? For example, recently Daniel texted me: “At an airway/apnea lecture in

Scottsdale right now. Nasal breathing is associated with health; mouth breathing associated with disease. Nitric oxide release from nasal breathing is important for many reasons, and even more so now with the COVID-19 pandemic.”

### Nasal Breathing Confers Health, Mouth Breathing Causes Disease

As beautiful as your nose is, it’s more than just a hood ornament. It’s your first line of defense against viruses and bacteria—but only when you breathe through it. Cilia, the tiny hairs lining the inside of your nose, work in combination with mucus to trap pathogens, and decrease the risk of coming down with nasty lung infections like COVID-19, influenza, and pneumonia.

A healthy body continually produces a lot of nitric oxide, which is a natural chemical that’s a potent vasodilator, relaxing blood vessels and keeping them soft and supple, while at the same time improving blood flow to organs.

Simply closing your mouth and breathing deeply through your nose stimulates your blood vessels to produce more nitric oxide. The nitric oxide released from the blood vessels lining the nasal passages has antiviral, antibacterial, antifungal, antiparasitic effects—helping the immune system fight off infections.



Dr. O’Keefe



Dr. Rome

Nitric oxide is also a signaling molecule that turns on genes, helping to maintain our youthful well-being. In contrast, a diminished capacity to produce nitric oxide is a fundamental cause of heart disease, diabetes, and erectile dysfunction.

What’s more, the moist nasal passages warm and humidify the air as it flows down into the airways, helping to prevent dryness in the bronchial tubes and lungs. Breathing through your nose also adds airflow resistance to your inhalations and exhalations, slowing down your respirations, and improving the lungs’ ability to extract oxygen from the inhaled fresh air, and unload carbon dioxide from the venous blood into the exhaled air.

Mouth breathing is a vicious cycle—breathing through your mouth makes your nasal passages stuffy, making it harder to breathe through your nose. On the other hand, nasal breathing is a virtuous cycle—breathing through your nose clears your nasal passages, making it easier to keep your mouth closed.

So, nasal breathing is a habit that each of us needs to cultivate. Nasal breathing also will help to maintain normal drainage from the sinuses and





middle ear via the eustachian tubes. By breathing through your nose, you can help prevent sinus infections and nasal congestion, as well as middle ear infections.

## Nasal Breathing Improves Memory and Sleep

While I was going to college and medical school, I lived with my grandmother Dorothy O'Keefe. Lush hedgerows of lilac trees grew on two sides of her backyard. During May in Grand Forks—home of the University of North Dakota—the lilacs burst into fragrant light-purple blossoms. This is a glorious time of year way up there near the Canadian border, when the days get longer and warmer and the earth turns green.

Dorothy would ask me almost every other day to break off a few sprigs of lilac and bring them inside. Then she would put them in a vase that sat on a small kitchen table next to an east-facing window overlooking the backyard. I would eat breakfast and chat with Dorothy while the morning sun streamed in through that window, and the scent of lilacs filled the tiny room.

Even today, decades later, the smell of fresh lilacs evokes fond, vivid memories of Dorothy—who taught me by example the most important lessons of life. Here in Kansas City, years ago I planted a hedge of lilacs in our backyard. It blooms every April. While the lilacs are in bloom, I make a point of keeping several sprigs in a vase on our kitchen table. The fragrance of fresh lilacs never fails to make me smile and remember my dear “Granny O'Keefe.”

For most creatures in the wild, recognizing odors is critical to their survival, to help discern poison from food, friend from foe, danger from security. Thus, via evolutionary adaptations, we are hard-wired with over-riding neural connections linking odors with long-term memory. Studies have shown that when mice sniff, even the flow of odorless air, it triggers brain activity in the olfactory bulb (the part of the brain that recognizes smells), which then stimulates the hippocampus—a key part of the brain that is integral in the creation and storage of memories.

Slow, deep nasal breathing predictably lowers heart rate and blood pressure, improves elasticity of the lungs, and reduces the flight-or-fight stress hormones in your system. Breathing through your nose calms your thoughts by generating alpha waves and coherence in the brain—a synchronized pattern of slow brain waves characteristic of a meditative, relaxed state of mind.

On the other hand, mouth breathing triggers the brain to produce beta waves—typically associated with a flight-or-fight stress response. Thus, when you breathe through your mouth, your system automatically shifts into stress mode, placing an unnecessary burden on your heart and brain.

Study volunteers show improvements in memory when they are allowed to breathe through their nose, rather than being forced to mouth breathe by subtly obstructing their nostrils. Researchers hypothesize that nasal breathing may boost memory consolidation. All this seems

to confirm the ancient wisdom that mindful breathing is an effective way to change mental states and improve brain function.

Over 10 years of sleep studies now show that while sleeping, mouth breathers have fewer REM cycles (less dreaming), higher levels of the stress hormone cortisol, and a more stressful sleep pattern.

Mouth breathers are also prone to develop sleep apnea, with a higher apnea-hypopnea index, meaning they stop breathing frequently while sleeping, causing their oxygen levels to plummet. Sleep apnea is a very common and dangerous condition that predisposes to high blood pressure, atrial fibrillation (AFIB), stroke, and dementia.

## How to Do More Nasal Breathing

By nature, infants have a strong sucking reflex—babies often suck their thumbs or fingers even before they are born. Sucking tends to have a comforting, calming effect on infants, which is why Joan considered a pacifier an essential parenting tool, and we used a “binky” for each of our four children when they were newborns.

Admittedly, there are pros and cons to pacifiers, though most pediatricians now say they're OK for a baby, at least for the first several months of life. What I know for sure is that pacifiers soothed our babies when they were fussy, distracted them when they got their shots, settled them down when they were on an airplane, and helped them fall asleep at naptime/bedtime.

## Close Your Mouth!

I hate to admit it, but I still need a pacifier—it's called a bite splint. Though I never realized I was doing it, I tend to grind my teeth when I sleep. So, Dr. Rome took an impression of my upper teeth, from which he molded a custom-fit mouth guard to protect my teeth while I sleep. I wear my bite splint every night—it works like a pacifier, allowing me to fall asleep easier and sleep like a baby. A bite splint also helps me to keep my mouth closed while I sleep, encouraging nasal breathing and making snoring less likely.

### Your Homework Assignment

Like many of the most important things in life, breathing through your nose is simple—but not easy. Your mind is focused on a million other issues; the last thing you have time to do is pay attention to your breathing. After all, that's why we have an auto-pilot system—to free up our consciousness to solve life's problems.

But here's the thing ... you need to stop catastrophizing in a monkey-mind frenzy, and pause just for a moment to breathe. Close your eyes, and mindfully notice the cool air streaming into your nostrils, and the warm humid air flowing out your nose while you exhale slowly.

This will settle down your whole system. I have learned to do this frequently during my day, and I find it remarkably calming. One thing each of us can do to help transform this COVID-19 pandemic-induced dead-time into alive-time is simply to work on becoming better at breathing.

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Dr. O'Keefe

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## How to Weather Life's Ups and Downs

"I like to think of life as an adventure, like a roller coaster. It helps with the ups and downs."

**Eddie Izzard**

"Let everyone sweep in front of his own door, and the whole world will be clean."

**Johann Wolfgang von Goethe**

"My favorite thing to do is to do nothing with you."

**Chelsea Cutler**

"How does it help ... to make troubles heavier by bemoaning them?"

**Seneca**

"Success is not final; failure is not fatal. It is the courage to continue that counts."

**Winston Churchill**

"I'm not perfect, but I'm good enough."

**Frances Arnold**

"If you're going through hell, keep going."

**Winston Churchill**

"I have learned to make difficult decisions with my heart. Almost always, that turns about to be the right decision."

**Vincent Lem, MD**

"Life isn't about waiting for the storm to pass. It's about learning how to dance in the rain."

**Vivian Greene**

"If an egg is broken by outside forces, life ends. If broken by an inside force, life begins. Great things always begin from inside."

**Jim Kwik**

"Nothing in life is to be feared, it is only to be understood. Now is the time to understand more, so that we may fear less."

**Marie Curie**

"Well-being is realized in small steps, but it is no small thing."

**Zeno**

"Unlike politics, where changing your mind or admitting mistakes is tantamount to career suicide—a sign of weakness—in science, it's actually a sign of integrity and high-level thinking."

**Peter Attia**

"The adventure of life is to learn. The purpose of life is to grow. The nature of life is to change. The challenge of life is to overcome. The essence of life is to care. The opportunity of life is to serve. The secret of life is to dare. The spice of life is to befriend. The beauty of life is to give."

**William Arthur Ward**



# Becoming Like a Little Child to Overcome Loneliness

By Dimitri Baklanov, MD, PhD

**A**merican writer Flannery O'Connor once said something about the age of childhood that captured my attention. "Anyone who survived childhood has enough information about life to last him the rest of his days. If you can't make something of a little experience, you probably won't be able to make it out of a lot."

Memories may last for the entire life and reshape it. Sometimes, it takes a major illness or crisis to look back at our life story, examine it. I frequently see cardiac patients who struggle with feelings of loneliness and even despair. Returning back to our childhood memories can be very helpful in the examination of life and restoration of the positive vision of reality.

A modern English dictionary defines the word "lonely" in two ways. The first means sad for lack of company; and the second is to describe a remote place. Some people liken loneliness to hunger, not only because we can feel it physically, like an ache or a sense of coldness, but also because these physical sensations might be the body's way of telling us that we are missing something that's important to our survival and flourishing.

I was born and raised in Russia. I completed medical school and post-graduate training in St. Petersburg (former Leningrad Pavlov Medical Institute) and practiced cardiology there for several years. My wife, Elena, and I immigrated to the U.S. in 1997.

I subsequently completed training in internal medicine at Yale and finished clinical cardiology and



*Dr. Baklanov, far right, with his family, Anna, Andrew, Leah, and his wife Elena.*

interventional cardiology fellowships at Dartmouth-Hitchcock Medical Center in Lebanon, New Hampshire. I am board-certified in cardiology and interventional cardiology, and came to Saint Luke's to help train our team in how to perform interventional cardiology procedures via the radial (wrist) artery. Now this technique has become the standard of care here.

It took me years of scientific training, immigration, speaking, and thinking in two languages to begin to understand the wonder of human language. Most striking is the enduring presence of nursery rhymes and fairy tales. In a paradox, they make language relate to the fullness of reality, its intelligibility and its beauty. I think that reading fairy tales was the best gift my parents gave to me.

Until about 200 years ago, the English word for being on one's own was "oneliness," a term that connoted solitude, and this was generally considered a positive, reasonable, and necessary experience. Individuals back then generally thought that even if there were no people around, God was with them, so they weren't alone. The meaning of words may change over time, but the realities signified by them do not change much. Sometimes, the words get "stuck" behind the times and create opportunities for humorous, almost whimsical twists.

The political bandits who captured and kept the power in Eastern Europe 100 years ago continued to use common phrases and terms from the old society. The irony was that godless dictator Lenin would still have to say

“Resurrection Day” - “Voskresenie” - the name of the first day of the week, because there was no other term to use for Sunday in his language.

From the very dawn of consciousness, I remember traveling in public transportation: on a bus, trolley, or metro. This was a daily experience when I was growing up. There were always lots of people waiting, standing or sitting in very close proximity to each other. There was little or no private space; community or “common unity” was thrust upon you. There was a rule of inviting a pregnant woman or an elderly person to take a seat. A stern voice over the speaker would announce this, but the real, unspoken enforcement was mediated by the looks and attitude of the family members and friends, making this a matter of honor. Even unruly teenagers and drunkards had difficulties violating it. This was a formative experience of virtue, a habit of acknowledging other persons, putting their interests above yours.

Lastly, childhood is a natural state of play, of leisure, and therefore of culture. When I think about being little, I think of being interested in the outside world first and foremost. It is later, in grade school and teenage years, that we begin to think about ourselves, whether our friends like us or not, or if we “have what it takes.” We pursue ideas and idealized examples of liberty and success. The eagle has no liberty though; he only has loneliness. Life in modern America can be very lonely. Social isolation can be associated with intense suffering and can be viewed as a major health hazard.

What is the solution? I have to admit I do not have one, because loneliness, as with any other suffering, is fundamentally a mystery. It has been suggested, however, that the angels can fly because they take themselves lightly. Perhaps, we too can begin to be more like children—not to take ourselves too seriously, to look at the outside world first, to smell the flow-

ers, to take interest in the lives of other people. Starting with our own family members, including estranged ones, seems fitting.

Some studies report that social media can heighten feelings of loneliness, but this may only be the case when the online activity is not supplemented by real-life activities. During the social distancing mandated today, social media, phone calls, and videophone chats with our family, friends, and co-workers help us feel more connected, and this is profoundly reassuring for many.

This crisis today can remind us that life is a comedy, a divine comedy perhaps, but a comedy nevertheless. We may never understand the humor and sheer bliss of existence itself or return to the innocent merriment of childhood, but we can try and ask for this gift. We are commanded to forgive our enemies and to love our neighbors. And who knows? Maybe it is precisely because they are the same people.

### 3 Ways to Connect While Keeping Your Distance

**A** little more than 100 years ago, another pandemic swept across our country as soldiers returned home from World War I. The resulting Spanish influenza epidemic lasted from 1918 to 1920.

Compared to today’s standards, communication then was primitive. There were no cell phones, no internet, no Snapchat or Facebook. But today, we have technology on our side.

So even though you might be feeling alone, there’s no need to be lonely. Use the technology at your fingertips to connect with those you care about. There’s never been a better time to do it!

**1** Phone a friend! Most of us have a network of family and friends we care about, so make the effort to reach out and connect with them. A simple phone call may be all it takes to brighten someone’s day. Hearing a friend’s or family member’s voice is more comforting than ever. Make a schedule and call someone every day. It will make them feel better, and you will, too!

**2** Connect face to face. If you have a smartphone, download apps that can help you connect like Facetime, Zoom, and Skype. Even though your family or friends may be halfway across the country, this is a great way to see how they are doing, and reconnect.

**3** Send a message. For routine communications, texting works great. Send photos or short videos, too. Other apps that can help you stay in touch include Facebook, Snapchat and Instagram. These are wonderful ways to connect across the miles and the generations.



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