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Twin Cities therapists emphasize need to prepare purposeful COVID 'bubbles' before winter

Experts concerned about single individuals left out of social circles.

By Gail Rosenblum

SEPTEMBER 25, 2020 AT 2:56PM



Psychologist Leni de Mik, left, and clinical social worker Brenda Hartman coined a new term for COVID single life — SILOS: single individuals left out of social circles. (The Minnesota Star Tribune)

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Minnesotans have been blessed with an abundance of beautiful summer days this year, which have allowed us to get outside our homes, and ourselves, during the COVID-19 pandemic. But the colors are changing and the air is cooling. For many of us, already established "bubbles"

offering companionship and support are well in place. For those who are recently divorced, living alone or health compromised, the dropping temperature is creating a sinking feeling of inevitable exclusion when winter arrives. Leni de Mik, a retired psychologist, and Brenda Hartman, a practicing clinical social worker, are deeply concerned about those they call SILOS – single individuals left out of social circles. That's why they're championing the importance of using creativity and courage now to form self-preserving COVID "bubbles."

Q: The weather is still lovely but you two are seeing a worrisome future. What's occurring to you?

A: We were taking a walk around Lake Harriet in Minneapolis and talking about COVID. It was early August, but the day was chilly. We were feeling good about being outside. But we both started thinking about the days ahead: What will we do if we can no longer meet outdoors?

Q: Not just you, but your clients and your neighbors as well?

A: As clinicians, we both know that social isolation can bring depression, anxiety, despondency, withdrawal. Weeks and months without human touch or an opportunity to speak to someone in person creates a high risk for mental health issues. Our long-ago ancestors, when separated from their groups, did not survive; isolation is perceived as a survival threat by the brain. Some people are experiencing anticipatory anxiety as others' bubbles form and tighten.

Q: Your hope is that they will become proactive. What do you envision?

A: We're encouraging people who are vulnerable to isolation to create their own COVID bubbles, which are simply intentional and protective communities that meet regularly. People might post their interest on Meetup or Nextdoor. They might reveal enough about themselves – student of art, retired construction worker, movie buff – to find good matches. Once they have a group together, they can brainstorm how often to meet and how to meet, such as virtually or safely in person. In the latter case, maybe someone can offer up unused office space or a heated garage where social distancing guidelines can be practiced. Or find safe ways to bundle up and go outdoors!

Q: You've also suggested that SILOS reach out to friends to let them know they're feeling isolated. That seems like such a hard thing to do, especially if you already tend toward introversion.

A: This is not a time to wait for social relationships to just happen. The circumstances that provide community connection organically are no longer available. It's all right to be vulnerable enough to say you need someone and to ask friends to connect you with people they know who may be in similar circumstances.

Q: So, sort of like a dating profile?

A: You might e-mail something like this: "Dear friend, I am writing to ask you for help during the pandemic. I am a SILO (single individual left out of social circles) looking to create a bubble with other SILOs sharing my interests. Would you please forward this invitation to them?"

Q: You bring up a good point, though, which is that there is a downside to established COVID bubbles.

A: Individuals who work at home and home school may feel overwhelmed. When there is too much proximity, finding space to restore balance of togetherness and apartness is a good idea. Everyone is having a hard time.

Q: You both have personal stories that make you well-matched for this important time. Can you please share a bit with our readers, beginning with you, Leni?

A: My first seven years were in Holland, four under Nazi occupation and three during reconstruction from war. I later became a Canadian, then an American. My extended family lives in Canada so I do not have childhood friends or family in Minnesota. In the last six months, my social interactions have changed. There were exceptions, but most of my coupled friends or friends with children or siblings no longer invited me to social events. When I extended invitations, there were often no responses. I realized it was COVID-related. So I've created my own pod. But I started to think of people who were not so fortunate.

Q: And, you, Brenda?

A: This is a passion of mine since my own stage 4 ovarian cancer diagnosis 32 years ago. Much of that year was spent in the hospital; people walked away from me. As cancer patients today, we are discussing how COVID is similar to cancer. It is random, treatment is not certain and people are afraid of catching it. My strategy beginning this summer was to help my patients begin recognizing what they would need come winter.

Q: Yet, you both talk about the surprising upside to this challenge. Brenda, you call such experiences "twisted gifts." What do you mean by that?

A: A profound depth of relationship development occurs through the shared experience of walking with life-death challenges and the unknown. Through healing, opportunities come that could only happen through painful events.

Q: Leni, any final thoughts?

A: The crisis is apparent. Less obvious is that we are in a time of opportunity. For many, the social distancing required of us during COVID is an awakening. In a daily and new way, we are realizing how much we need each other, how much daily purpose and meaning are derived from membership in a community. We are increasingly aware that this need is not only physical but that we are emotionally and psychologically depending on each other for daily well-being. Many are feeling called to meet the challenge, to find and create safe ways to establish and maintain reliable connections, to find and create new ways to befriend each other. Caring relationships and communities formed under duress can endure long after the pandemic has run its course.

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