Stephen Porges: Dealing with social distancing

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Serge Prengel, LMHC is the editor the *Proactive Mindfulness* project.

Social distancing and separation are a big part of what is needed to deal with the pandemic. In this short conversation, we talk about how to counter their effects: we still need to be sensitive to our nervous system's need to socially engage and connect.

Serge Prengel (00:00):
These are really difficult times.

Stephen Porges (00:03):
They certainly are. And there's an irony going on because we have to avoid becoming infected. There's no question that the Coronavirus is a health risk, especially to those of us who are more mature. It is real. The question is related to the way that we need to behave to reduce that risk through social isolation. And this strategy creates an amazing paradox for our nervous system and our needs to interact with other people because, as humans we have a powerful need is to connect and to co-regulate with others, but now we're being told that this is not the right thing to do. There are priorities and the top priority is not to get infected, but there's also a priority of understanding the needs of our nervous system...

Serge Prengel (00:51):
So, this is a counterintuitive situation where we cannot trust our instinct, evolutionary instinct, because we have to do something different. Not from coercion, but actually from understanding that social isolation is required at this point.

Stephen Porges (01:08):
I think that is a really concise way of explaining the paradox through which our nervous system is trying to navigate. And that is, we need to socially isolate. However, our nervous system says, Hey, that's not the way we evolved, not the way we need to be. We need to co-regulate, so we need to be smart.
(01:31):
Now we need to know what the true priorities are. And the top priority of course, is to stay alive. But how can we mitigate that nervous system's demand, request, and passion, to connect? And we have to find ways to connect! We have to do that through telephone and through video chat. They are really reasonably good, and email is okay, but the value of hearing someone's voice or seeing someone's face is a powerful reassuring cue of safety to our nervous system. So we have to reach out. It's been remarkable over the past few days, because the world turned from a social to an isolated world within in a week.
(02:09):
A week ago, I was in New York city, it was elbow to elbow. I was talking at a crowded conference. And my comment was, I'll give people hugs. I'll shake their hands this month, but next month I will do something different. And within a few days, the world changed. And we realized that it wasn't a fear of a virus that was really distal in time. It was here. We need to really take care of ourselves and to really monitor our bodies' need to connect, to give others a hug, to smile, to be reassuring, to touch them on their shoulders or on their hands, to let them know that we're here to support them and be with them. What I've noticed over the past few days is my very close friends have reached out through video conferencing, through phone calls, just to connect. It's really a beautiful moment when people are reaching out to say, I'm here. How are you? What can I do for you?

Serge Prengel (03:14):
Yeah. So, we don't kill that impulse to connect . We channel it, and savor it as we find ways to do it through voice and sight - - phone and videoconferencing.

Stephen Porges (03:34):
Yes. We modify because we are a relatively intelligent species (at times we are not so sure about that). We are reading our bodily feelings. And our bodily feelings want to be held, want to be embraced, want to be safe with the people whom we trust. That's basically a neural circuit that's reaching out. We're really saying to that neural circuit: We can't do that now.
(03:59):
If we don't engage people for a period of time, we go into another state. That is, we become marginalized and we start to become too isolated. And this is really very, very bad for our nervous system. And our body will react to that with a bias of negativity. This is the other issue. As we separate, the notions of being overly concerned, or neurotic, or paranoid about the situation will increase because we are not getting sufficient opportunities to co-regulate.
(04:32):
So, being smart, we need to reach out and use the tools that we have. The internet is a useful tool. Through videoconferencing, we can talk, we can hear each other's voices and we can feel connected. Again, it's not equivalent to being in the room with a person, but it's a lot better than not having any contact.

Serge Prengel (04:54):

Then, when we connect, when we communicate this way, there is an intentionality that the communication is not just about the content. The communication is about co-regulating. It Is about that sense of connection that we crave.

Stephen Porges (05:15):
Absolutely. Because it's not the words, it's the intentionality of feelings that we're communicating with each other. We're creating a capacity co-regulate each other's physiological and emotional and behavioral state. As we co-regulate each other, we feel safer in the space and time that we're in. We become more generous to others, more welcoming and more accessible.
(05:41):
As we isolate, the separated bodies and nervous systems, become more defensive. The nervous system literally supports these feelings of isolation and defensiveness. So we have to be smart. We have to retailor or reframe what isolation is. In this situation. It's a defense, but we don't want it to blend or bleed into becoming defensive of our interactions with others. And so we need to really reach out and use the tools that are available to us and engage others. Use our voices, use our facial expressions, with video chatting.
(06:22):
It's a lot better than texting. The issue of texting and email is that you're stripping the voice and the face from the words. Our nervous systems evolved to detect the intonation. I's only through long a long period of evolution that our nervous system was able to create language, to create syntax and to extract meaning from symbols. So we want to relate to each other on a very... almost a primitive level. And that is facial expressivity and intonation of voice. We have the telephone for the voice and we have video chatting for voice and facial expressions.

Serge Prengel (07:01):
And so, maybe, we can even go one step further than simply chatting on the phone or videoconferencing. As we are in communication, we consciously pay attention to what's happening in our body. And communicate with each other that what we're doing is not just exchanging content, exchanging news, but the process of co-regulating itself. For instance, as we talk, I am feeling my energy coming down a bit. I'm feeling more settling, a sense of settling and grounding...

Stephen Porges (07:44):
You're feeling connectedness. And what you're really emphasizing is that it's not a show-and-tell. It's a co-regulation. And we have terms that we use: mirroring, attuning, or synchrony. But really it's all about co-regulating. And what you were emphasizing was to acknowledge one's own feelings. I would go a step further. That is, to monitor and acknowledge the feelings of the one that you're talking to. So you're reaching literally into their sphere, their consciousness, their nervous system. And you're really saying: I'm present. I'm here with you.

Serge Prengel (08:23):
Yeah. So that's a very good step. We're talking about reaching out. Reaching in and reaching out. Reaching inside, reaching out to the other person. Monitoring myself, monitoring each other. Having a sense of this is what connection is about. This is what we're experiencing as we're connecting.

Stephen Porges (08:44):
Yes. I think that's a very good summary of the message.

Serge Prengel (08:49):

Thanks, Steve.

Stephen Porges (08:50):
Oh, you're quite welcome. Serge. It's good to connect during this time with you. Thank you.

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