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The Critical Role of Social Capital During the COVID-19 Pandemic: Lessons from Disaster Research

Vanessa Parks, Ph.D.
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The COVID-19 pandemic is unlike any experience humanity has endured. While the pandemic is certainly biological in nature, through the transmission of the novel coronavirus, the experience of the pandemic is inherently social. Researchers may not yet conceptualize pandemics as disasters, but we are beginning to see evidence that they are playing out in some similar ways (widespread social disruption, job loss in particular industries, economic hardship, and illness and death). Disaster researchers emphasize the importance of what is known as social capital, or, the resources (social, economic, emotional) accrued through ones' social ties.¹⁻³

On the whole, research has suggested that social capital is beneficial after disasters, as it connects people with the resources and support they need to recover.⁴⁻⁵ Based on what is known about social capital, health, and well-being after disasters, here are some considerations for individuals and organizations related to COVID-19.

- **Social distancing doesn't mean no socializing!** You can think of this time as *physical distancing*, rather than social distancing. And we don't necessarily need to be in close contact with our friends and family to feel their support. What researchers refer to as "perceived social support" can be beneficial to your health and well-being.⁶⁻⁷ Having friends or family members you can talk to may

help you feel better off,⁸⁻⁹ and it has never been easier with social media and video-chatting platforms.

- **Find solidarity with your broader networks.** Your place of worship may offer live-streamed services. Your gym may offer virtual at-home workouts. Engaging in your usual activities, even if they're at home, may help you feel more connected. If you hold a leadership position in a business or organization, consider scheduling check-ins and virtual meetings so that people have a chance to connect.

However, it is possible that our social ties will put us under additional stress.¹⁰⁻¹¹

- **Those employed in affected industries, such as the service and tourism industries, face unique challenges.** Not only are people in these industries dealing with job/income loss, their coworkers and friends are as well. So, they may be struggling to make ends meet while also providing emotional support to their friends and coworkers who are also struggling, potentially compounding their stresses and taking a toll on their mental well-being.¹²⁻¹³ If you are able, support local businesses by ordering take-out or by donating to local relief funds.
- **Some demographic groups are at greater risk.** For example, evidence suggests that elderly people and

African-Americans are at greater risk for becoming seriously ill from COVID-19 because of other existing health disparities¹⁴. Communities with a large share of people at risk should diligently practice social distancing to reduce community transmission.

The literature cited here is based on the aftermath of past disasters. We are currently in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, and the extent to which the pandemic affects social and economic life like a disaster is still to be determined. Tapping into our social capital now could help offset future negative impacts.¹⁵ What we do now can prepare us and prepare our loved ones for the road ahead.

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