

# Why tough times can create better neighbors

By Christian Science Monitor, adapted by Newsela staff on 03.19.20

Word Count **1,059**

Level **1140L**



Image 1. Flavia, who is 8 years old, and her mother, Silvia, put a banner reading "Everything will be alright" on the balcony of their apartment in Rome, Italy, March 13, 2020. Photo: Alessandra Tarantino/AP Photo

Residents of a neighborhood in Boston, Massachusetts, emerged from their apartments for a flash mob on the morning of March 14. Staying more than 6 feet apart, the neighbors waved to each other and joined in singing the Beatles song "Let it Be." One of the residents, a professional cellist, played for a sing-along of "Lean on Me" by Bill Withers.

"Everyone appreciated the activity, which brought much-needed levity and connection," resident Minda Sanchez said via email.

The activity not only brought community members to their feet to dance in the sun, it brought many to tears.

Similar scenes are playing out in neighborhoods across the world quarantined because of COVID-19, (short for coronavirus disease 2019). The coronavirus is a flu-like illness that began in China and has been spreading across the globe since December 2019.

In Wuhan, China, whole blocks of apartment buildings chanted, "Keep up the fight." In Rome and in Siena, Italians on lockdown lean out of windows and balconies with tambourines and

accordions to sing songs. On March 14, citizens throughout Spain began clapping in unison to cheer health care workers.

### Reaching Out To Strangers

As the practice of "social distancing" burgeons, people are finding ways to meet even though they can't meet face-to-face. Social distancing is the practice of keeping away from crowds and public places to slow down the spread of a disease.

Instead, people are using video calling and social network connections. However, people aren't just staying in touch with friends and family. The global crisis has roused a sense of shared humanity that's causing people to reach out to their communities. Amid the outbreak of COVID-19, there's a surge of kindness among strangers.

"In times of great stress, helping others is a powerful way to reassert control in a moment where many of us feel helpless," said Jamil Zaki, author of "The War for Kindness: Building Empathy in a Fractured World."

"Kindness toward others actually can be a great source of healing."

One of the ways that millions of people are being kind to others right now is by practicing social distancing. For many, the motivation is that they want to protect others. There are models for that impulse, said Jill Suttie, a psychologist at the Greater Good Science Center at the University of California, Berkeley. A study demonstrated the most effective way for hospitals to motivate health care professionals to wash their hands isn't by noting the importance of safeguarding oneself from disease. It's stressing the impact it has on protecting patients.

To be sure, not everyone is acting kindly at the moment. Fights have broken out in supermarkets as people wrestle for the last remaining item on a shelf. Some are hoarding hand sanitizer, face masks and toilet paper. Many ignored pleas to practice social distancing, gathering at restaurants. In response, governors in several states, including Massachusetts and Ohio, shut down restaurants except for delivery and takeout.

### Kindness Can Go Viral, Too

Even so, instances of selflessness have become increasingly common. Professional basketball players such as Giannis Antetokounmpo and Zion Williamson have donated money to cover the salaries of arena workers affected by the suspension of the season. Other acts of kindness include providing food for children who are out of school.

Witnessing acts of kindness inspires others, said Zaki, a psychologist at Stanford University in California. In 2016, he published an article in Scientific American, "Kindness Contagion," that



included findings of studies about how people "catch" cooperation and generosity from others. This desire to help others intensifies during times of crisis and crosses lanes of class, race and other divisions.

For example, when Germans began retreating behind closed doors earlier in March, Molly Wilson realized she didn't know the elderly people in her Berlin neighborhood. Wilson, an American who moved to Germany in 2016, teamed up with a neighbor to post flyers on mailboxes and trash cans on their street. Their notes offered to go shopping on behalf of those who felt unable to go outside.

"My husband and I are both on parental leave, so one of us can absolutely go and get some noodles and beans for somebody who lives a couple streets over," said Wilson. She also posted her note on Twitter to inspire others. "We need to do something off-line in order to let old people know that it's OK to reach out for help."

When in-person activity is limited, technology can temporarily mend rips in the social fabric. Good Samaritans are using social media platforms to post offers to help strangers. For example, Jerry Xu, a tech professional in San Francisco, California, used the app NextDoor to volunteer his services. NextDoor connects members to others in their area.

### **Beyond Offering A Cup Of Sugar**

To Marc Dunkelman, author of "The Vanishing Neighbor," these responses to the coronavirus crisis are notable in their contrast to normal times. Most people's acquaintances resemble a model like the rings of Saturn, with the innermost bands representing the closest connections and each successive loop becoming more distant. Over the past 50 years, people have invested more time on the innermost ring of friends and family. People have also invested more time in the outermost rings. Those include online acquaintances they don't know personally but with whom they share interests such as sports, hobbies or politics.

People have largely abandoned rings in the middle, said Dunkelman. Those are the rings of contacts including neighbors and groups such as bowling leagues or Boy Scouts. Yet the coronavirus offers the opportunity for greater local connection.

"Could it be that in the context of this crisis, people do break through that initial barrier and say to one another, even though they're not supposed to be accosting one another or having real intimacy, 'Hello. You know, I live in apartment 2B. You must live above me?'" said Dunkelman.

The crisis will alter the way we connect socially. Even if it is online, what matters most is how we interact with others, said Suttie.

She recommends "trying to calm each other to the extent that we can and not raise panic because that helps all of us to be a bit calmer."