Social Distancing: Really Not Appropriate?

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Amid Corona virus pandemic, we have added many new terms in our vocabulary such as COVID-19, novel corona, index patient, self-quarantine, social distancing. Some of these terms, have become buzz words in our daily life, television channels, print media and government directives. The Ministry for Health and Family Welfare, Government of India has issued a comprehensive advisory on coronavirus (Covid-19) on 16th March 2020, directing states across the country to take social distancing measures as a preventive strategy. The term has gained popularity when Prime Minister Mr Narendra Modi has put emphasis on Social Distancing in his address to the nation and explaining the need of more preventive strategies. The search of the word social distancing on World Health Organisation (WHO) website has brought 33 results and one of the prominent title 'Pass the message five steps to kicking out corona virus ' says that "in terms of social interaction, take a step back, stay at least one meter (some advocates two meter) distance from others. By maintaining such social distancing, you are helping to avoid breathing in any droplets from someone who sneezes or coughs in close proximity."[1] [2]

The social distancing is defined as 'the practice of maintaining a greater than usual physical distance from other people or of avoiding direct contact with people or objects in public places during the outbreak of a contagious disease in order to minimize exposure and reduce the transmission of infection'.[3] Sociologically, the social distance is the degree to which people are willing to accept and associate with those having different social characteristics by its creator Bogardus.[4] Social distancing is a non-pharmaceutical infection

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[1] https://www.who.int/news-room/detail/23-03-2020-pass-the-message-five-steps-to-kicking-out-coronavirus
[2] https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019/advice-for-public
[3] https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/social%20distancing#h1
[4] Johnson, Allan G (2000), The Blackwell Dictionary of Sociology,Blackwell Publishers, page 289

prevention and control intervention implemented to avoid/decrease contact between those who are infected with a disease causing pathogen and those who are not, so as to stop or slow down the rate and extent of disease transmission in a community. This eventually leads to decrease in spread, morbidity and mortality due to the disease.[5]However, in the present context, the social distancing means to deliberately increase the physical space between people to avoid spreading illness. It has two distinct features: i) to minimize chances of transmission of virus to keep six feet distance from other people and ii) to avoid handshaking, hugging kissing or touching to each other. Its real application demands more measures like restricting people gathering, to avoid congregating in large groups and asking people to stay in the homes as much as possible. It also requires closing of schools, colleges, workplaces, religious places, restricting mass gathering and movement of people. This also means that all public places have to be closed and sanitized and blocked in order to minimize the chances of people coming in contacts with others as possible source of spreading infections. The methods like isolation, quarantine, self quarantine are also to be used in real sense to restrain the spread of infection.

Social distancing is not an appropriate term to describe the context in which it is being currently used, as it consists of two contradictory words. While the meaning of *social* is 'related to society or organisation or needing companionship and therefore best suited to living in communities' (used as adjective); the word *distancing* has its origin in Latin word *distare*, *distant* meaning standing apart. Both words in *social distancing* are contradictory in meaning and really not meant for the purpose it is used. However, the word *social* has its many more meaning which is related to *relationship.* The relationship is one of the six core values of social work profession and is also unique feature of professional social work. Social workers understand the dynamics between and among people is one of the most important determinants of social change. Social workers seeks to strengthen relationship among people in a purposeful manner in order to promote, restore, maintain and enhance the well being of individuals, families, social groups and communities.(para6.6, NAPSWI Code of Ethics)[6]. From last two years, International Federation of Social Workers has celebrating World Social Work Day (WSWD) and month of March as Social Work month on global theme on "promoting the importance of human relationships." Linda May Grobman mentioned that 'in recognition of this new circumstance, the IFSW made last-minute revisions to its WSWD logo (this year), to portray two people bowing in greeting to each other, instead of shaking hands (last year logo). Social workers adapt to the situation in the moment. Linda has also adopted the term physical distancing over social distancing, which she believes is more accurate and reflects the practice of maintaining human relationships

[5] https://www.mohfw.gov.in/pdf/SocialDistancingAdvisorybyMOHFW.pdf
[6] National Association of Professional Social Workers in India (2015), Code of Ethics for Professional Social Workers, New Delhi, NAPSWI, www.napswi.org

while staying at a safe distance physically.[7] In India, we have *sanatan* tradition of *Namaste* as way to greet people with folded hands which should be used to portray such physical distancing with human dignity and respect for relationship.

There are many other dangers of using the term social distancing in society like ours which is already divided horizontally and vertically in many strata. One statement of Ms Sobhana Mathew is noteworthy that "we already have separate entrances for our service staff. Now with the corona virus threat, some apartments have stopped allowing house help and maids entering the building. The belief that people from the lower strata are carriers of disease is strong among us. Even otherwise, we have a problem with spatiality. In public transport, on the streets, we don't have a sense of personal space.[8] The social distancing may ruin our progressive efforts if the caste, religion or patriarchal mindsets keep on operating our concerns. One should understand that people living with COVID19 in isolation do face many psycho social problems, anxiety, fear, insecurity, despair, guilt etc,. They will need social support, social solidarity and communication with their own people. They need not to be away from their *social*. They can be asked to be away from social life, social gathering and social mixing voluntarily. However, the distancing should be only at physical plane not otherwise. It is living separately with togetherness as a matter of fact.

Recently, the WHO has officially advocated against the phrase "social distancing" and is from here on recommending the phrase "physical distancing" instead. The idea is to clarify that an order to stay at home during the current corona virus outbreak isn't about breaking contact with your friends and family — but rather keeping a physical distance to make sure the disease doesn't spread.[9] The importance of a physical distance is "absolutely essential" to respond to global pandemic but it does not mean that socially we have to disconnect from the people who are significant and part of our day to day life. The NAPSWI, Nada India, and Young India Network for Good Health also appealed to Government authorities, public health professionals and public in general to bring a change in use of phrases "Physical distance" in place of "Social distancing", while issuing public notices, instructions, #tags, social media. It appeals to maintain physical distance as prescribed by WHO and enhance the quality of social bonding and social wellbeing by connecting with people living

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[7] Linda May Grobman (2020), The Importance of Human Relationships in a Time of Social Distancing (World Social Work Day 2020), NASW Press https://www.socialworker.com/extras/social-work-month-2020/world-social-work-day-2020-human-relationships-social-distancing/?
[8] https://bangaloremirror.indiatimes.com/bangalore/cover-story/lets-call-it-physical-distancing-instead/articleshow/74901919.cms??utm_source=contentofinterest&utm_medium=text&utm_campaign=cppst
[9] https://www.sciencealert.com/who-is-no-longer-using-the-phrase-social-distancing

with COVID19 and empower them with their rights as patients and caregivers provided in the Charter of Patients' Rights for adoption by NHRC.[10]

At present, social distancing is synonym to living separately without togetherness. It should be replaced with physical distancing or personal distancing. The present punch line of the preventive strategy *'Stay home, Stay safe'* must add '*Stay connected*' also. The physically distant but emotionally and socially bonding should be the central theme of all communication in present times. Now, our IEC strategies should be based on more on this philosophical mooring. The civil society engagement should be more pronounced in times of such medical emergencies where the relationships are crux of faster recovery and solidarity as response to isolation. The civil society organisations are the best suited option to check the spread of infections into communities.

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[10] Appeal by NADA India , NAPSWI https://radioclubindia.blogspot.com/2020/04/appeal-to-use-phrase-physical.html ; https://nadanewsupdate.blogspot.com/2020/04/napswi-and-nada-india-appeal-to-public.html?m=1;