

How Can We Help One Another?

Please share your ideas in the comments.



By Nancy Wartik

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In many crises, people quickly come out to lend a hand. With coronavirus, however, we are being told to keep our hands to ourselves. Yet for some people, the idea of doing nothing is not acceptable.

Ilaria Nardone, 33, who lives in Venice, Italy, works at the tech startup Prontopia, which normally offers local concierge services to travelers. When Italy went into lockdown, she repurposed the platform. Young, healthy volunteers, wearing gloves and masks, deliver groceries, medications or other necessities to the homebound. They drop the purchase on the doorstep, receipt included, and the recipients pay using credit cards or apps like PayPal.

“We only see them at a distance,” Ms. Nardone says. “But they are super happy and grateful.”

It’s a common impulse to want to help. People have survived some of history’s worst circumstances by banding together. It may be harder to do at a time when social distancing, self-isolation and quarantining are watchwords of the day. But we need to listen to our better impulses.

“In disasters we talk about social networks being a primary form of resilience,” said Nicole Errett, a disaster researcher at the University of Washington and co-director of its Collaborative on Extreme Event Resilience. “Figuring out creative ways to maintain social networks can change the game for communities. It makes it so we can get through this together,” Dr. Errett said.

“Ask yourself, who in my network is most at risk? How can I make their lives a little easier, even if I can’t be in the same room with them?” Dr. Errett suggested. “Can you pick up your phone, sit by your window and wave to your elderly neighbors who don’t FaceTime?”

Paul Piff, a social psychologist at the University of California at Irvine and teacher of a University of California-wide online class on the science of compassion, agreed on the importance of altruism.

“A really basic response people have, for good adaptive evolutionary reasons, is to tend and befriend,” he said. “Social relationships are a huge source of well-being.”

He added, “In the long term, on a physiological level, you do better engaging with others and responding to suffering. You’re happier, your immune system is better.”

What are some of the best ways to pitch in? I went to Facebook and Nextdoor to ask others what they were doing.

- “I donated to a project to feed the homeless in Rome during this difficult time,” a friend wrote from Italy.
- “I [mentor two girls in South Africa](#), virtually, with weekly video meet-ups,” another person wrote. “They have many more challenges than I do, even with the CV. It’s a meaningful, constant thing in my life that really keeps me grounded.”

- “Just donated to a GoFundMe to feed kids in our school district who get free or reduced-cost school lunches,” someone else posted.
- “Buying gift certificates at favorite restaurants so they have cash flow now —and using the certificates later,” someone from my book group said.

Another Facebook friend had her talented 16-year-old son stream piano and guitar performances, while we virtually cheered him on, to raise awareness that people are in need of help.

It was eye-opening and heartening to read so many inventive suggestions. At a time with few road maps, individual gestures may be extra important.

So tell us in the comments: What are you doing for neighbors, local businesses or larger causes while following safety guidelines? Your one generous idea might inspire unknown numbers of others to do the same.