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The New Norm: Socializing at a Distance During the Coronavirus Outbreak

From weddings and dinners to funerals, the first thought now might be how you decline

By Kevin Doyle
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Until recently, “social distancing” was something you might have done when you spotted a chatty neighbor or former bad date at a party. Now, with no vaccine or cure for the coronavirus, it’s one of the measures the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recommends—along with frequent hand-washing and steering clear of large crowds—to avoid exposure to the virus.

Broadway is closed, and most sporting and entertainment events have been canceled, so skipping a trip to the multiplex or the stadium isn’t the challenge it might otherwise have

been. The CDC says any event with more than 50 people should be canceled or postponed for the next eight weeks. President Trump went even further and says avoid groups of more than 10 people.

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But human beings are social animals, which means we're likely to find ourselves at least occasionally in situations where maintaining a 6-foot distance from friends, business associates, and even family could create some decidedly awkward and confusing moments.

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“All of my patients are calling to ask me if they should still be hosting parties and attending weddings, or if they should avoid being around other people in general,” says Paul T. Smith, M.D., an infectious-disease specialist at NewYork-Presbyterian Hospital in New York City.

CR talked to Smith, etiquette experts, and others for advice on how COVID-19 has changed longstanding rules on what is and is not polite, as well as how to navigate social situations without offending and, above all, without becoming infected.

The New Meeting and Greeting

The handshake is a building block of our society. It signifies welcome and respect, and can even seal a deal. It could now also seal your fate as a coronavirus statistic. Americans have it better than the French, who kiss twice—once on each cheek—for a double dose of trouble when greeting each other. But we may be more at risk than the Japanese, Thai, and other East Asian cultures, who greet each other with a respectful (and sanitary) bow. So how do you decline grasping an outstretched hand without appearing rude or even hostile?

“You step back and offer anything from a regretful smile to blowing a kiss, depending on the relationship,” says Judith Martin, who has written several books on etiquette and whose “Miss Manners” etiquette column is carried in more than 200 newspapers.

The same goes for a hug, Martin says.

“People do not have to be persuaded nowadays that it is prudent not to go around shaking hands or hugging

everybody in sight,” she says. “What in normal times would look rude is now well understood to be in the interest of public health.”

But if someone forgets and out of force of habit reaches out? “A smile and a little hand up should be enough to remind them,” Martin says. Germany’s interior minister used this approach recently with Chancellor Angela Merkel. As a video of the occasion clearly shows, the chancellor got the message.

Michelle Pappas, whose consulting firm, Potomac Protocol & Etiquette, advises clients on proper comportment, agrees.

“A warm and genuine smile and engaging with honesty by explaining that, in light of current circumstances, you’re not shaking hands, are a way to be welcoming and acknowledge someone’s presence while abstaining from a handshake,” Pappas says. “You can even clasp your own hands together in a gesture that lets the person know you’re a handshaker, just not right now.”

However you explain it, this approach is less awkward than the newfangled “footshake,” in which people touch foot to foot; bumping elbows; or any of the other many ways emerging to greet each other without pressing the flesh.

Weddings and Other Celebrations

Love may conquer all, but until the CDC announces that it also protects against coronavirus, some people are going to want to decline invitations to weddings—as well as anniversary parties and other celebrations where alcohol and a festive mood can lead people to toss precautions into the trash, along with all the used tissues the CDC is telling us to discard.

Pandemic or no pandemic, from an etiquette standpoint, you're on solid ground when you decline any invitation.

“People do not need to provide an excuse when turning down an invitation,” Martin says, explaining that declining graciously is all that's ever required.

Pappas says that if you have any guilt about not attending, you should take comfort in knowing you're not alone. “You definitely won't be the only one declining due to coronavirus concerns, and most hosts will be understanding.”

She points out that technology can provide a way for us to be with the bride and groom or other celebrants at a safe digital distance. “You could do something fun like dress up and make a brief video of yourself raising a glass to the couple, wishing them well and letting them know you're with them in spirit,” Pappas says. “They may not see it until after the event is over, but they'll know you really were thinking of them. And of course you'll also send a nice gift.”

Funerals

Tears, kisses, hand-holding, and long embraces are the norm at funerals and funeral homes, as people gather to create a human bulwark against grief. Mary McPhillips, who has owned and operated a funeral home in Middletown, N.Y., for 40 years says she knows it's not an ideal environment to steer clear of the coronavirus.

“All the things we're being told not to do happen in a funeral home,” McPhillips says. “People shake hands and hug and then wipe their tears away with their fingers. They want to

console family and friends, so they're not thinking about keeping their distance."

McPhillips says the first change she noticed came early last week, as the cases of coronavirus in New York continued to climb. "A large bottle of hand sanitizer at a funeral was almost empty by the end of the service," she says. "That's never happened before. Usually no one uses the hand sanitizer but the staff."

While she hasn't had a funeral in the past few days, McPhillips says she has heard that "some funeral homes are limiting visitation just to family. A funeral director I know in Massachusetts is limiting the number of people at visitations or funerals to 25. To be on the safe side, I think that's what we're going to do, along with reminding people that coronavirus is highly contagious and people should limit physical contact. I know it may sound drastic, but we have an obligation to protect the public, too."

Smith at NewYork-Presbyterian Hospital says that people need to weigh the risks of attending a funeral as they would any other gathering.

"I'm not saying that I wouldn't go if it were my mother's funeral, but I do think that people should have second thoughts and should weigh the risks of all activities that they're considering," he says. "It's a fluid situation, and the risk is not overblown. You need to consider whether you'll be standing on a receiving line and whether you have to fly there or take public transportation or can drive yourself."

McPhillips says that calls from people who are apprehensive about attending a funeral are commonplace.

“It’s something we’re used to,” she says. “Whether because they’re uncomfortable about coming or simply unable, people commonly ask if it’s acceptable to send a card or flowers instead of attending. I always tell them yes and reassure them that I’ll make sure the family receives whatever they send.”

Dinner Parties and Small Social Gatherings

Although some people are canceling large parties, there will always be those determined not to let anything, including a pandemic, spoil their fun. Friends of these highly social sorts may well be invited to a dinner party or other gathering (where, for better or worse, the coronavirus will likely be replacing politics as the topic of debate).

“I would not be thrilled to be going to a dinner party right now,” Smith says, noting that the virus can probably be spread by the type of close conversation you might engage in with a tablemate.

If for some reason you don’t decline the invitation, he says to keep your distance from other guests as much as possible and to wash your hands and your face when you get home (or even while you’re there).

“People know about hand-washing, but it’s also important to wash your face,” he says, explaining that doing so can eliminate viruses that land there from touching our faces or when someone nearby coughs or sneezes.

Pappas says that no matter what the situation, “You can’t go wrong by being honest and remembering that we’re all in this together.”

Smith acknowledges that the advice people are being given to avoid becoming ill may go against the norm. “But people should be able to incorporate whatever suggestions they’re being given by the medical community without guilt and without ridicule and without any judgment from anyone else.”

Now, that’s a prescription for our times.

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