How I am Finding Purpose and Connection in a Pandemic
by Aanchal Dhar

It was 5 p.m. on Friday, March 13, and I could feel myself slowly beginning to unravel.

As a millennial living alone in a small studio in San Francisco, I felt paralyzed knowing that orders to shelter in place would likely soon go into effect, trapping me in just 300 square feet for the unforeseeable future.

The coming weeks loomed bleak and lonely, a growing shadow of despair that I knew would engulf so many of us. I was at a loss for what to do next.

My first instinct was to call Kate, a friend in her 60s, who offered some of the best advice I've ever received. “Find a way to transform your anxiety into action,” she said.

Maybe it was that simple.

Indeed, research suggests that crises don’t just cause stress and suffering; they can also motivate us to help others and find new, purposeful directions in life. And amid today’s global crisis, that’s exactly what happened to me and what I see happening to many people around me.

Finding purpose in service

Searching for ways to make a difference seems to be a natural human response when we face adversity. In his book Jolt, author Mark Miller describes how unforeseen traumatic life events can actually inspire people to change and grow, putting them on a path toward purpose.

After talking to Kate, I quickly sent an email to 60 people—a diverse group of friends and local leaders in San Francisco—inverting them to talk. Within two days, 40 of us gathered via Zoom to discuss how we could support our communities during the pandemic.

Many of the projects that people dreamed up and shared following the call were designed to help the groups who have been hit hard by the crisis. Serena Bian, who works at the venture capital firm First Round, created a Slack channel—Covid-19 Community Responders—to keep others connected and engaged. The channel has attracted volunteers searching for a greater sense of purpose who’ve gone on to create resources for those in need, such as supply-chain websites for hospitals and digital design templates for mutual aid groups.

Divya Dhar (no relation), a physician and product manager at Google, helped raise over $45,000 for personal protective equipment (PPE) for local Bay Area hospitals. Photojournalist Caroline Gutman began documenting those coming together to advocate
for the homeless, who have nowhere to go in a pandemic.

And Courteney Kay, a dating coach and matchmaker, used the network she had cultivated in her professional life to support COVID-19-related projects. After observing multiple people in her community working on procuring supplies for frontline workers, she introduced them to each other and added them to various community organizing channels. It was still matchmaking, just re-framed to meet current needs.

In the weeks following our Zoom call, I was energized—and inspired to hear how creating connection in a time of crisis gave other attendees a similar charge and a renewed sense of purpose. It was a tonic for all the isolation we had been feeling.

Making meaningful connections

Besides the shortages of supplies and the health risks, loneliness is another issue that many of us are facing these days, one that can have serious consequences for our well-being and longevity. In the following weeks, as I pushed to add more connection to my days, my calendar filled up with Zoom meetings and phone dates. I started to find a sense of meaning in being a part of different communities and helping other isolated people stay connected.

Each week, I join an online event called Civic Saturday, which used to take place in-person around the country before the pandemic. As cofounders Eric Liu and Jena Cane say, it’s not church, or synagogue, or mosque, but an attempt to create the arc and feel of a service—a civic analogue to a faith gathering. At one session, people sang and read poetry. Liu delivered the civic equivalent of a sermon, designed to light a fire under us to help others in this moment of crisis. Then we broke into small groups to reflect on what we heard.

During one of Liu’s civic sermons, he raised the question, “How can I be useful?” Liu added, “If you aren’t asking yourself that question every day, I submit to you that you don’t yet fully believe that we’re all in this together.” It struck me as one of the most important questions for our time. Finding a sense of purpose in these difficult times means doing things that are not only meaningful to us, but meaningful to the broader world.

Inspired by my fellow Zoom call attendees, I soon became involved with different initiatives to help connect others in a time of physical distancing. When the cofounders of The Grand—which connects people across generations to exchange wisdom—contacted my friend Kasley and me, asking if we would lead their first remote session, we immediately said yes. Twenty strangers around the world signed up for a meaningful discussion on how we can cultivate our social well-being and nurture relationships in the midst of a global pandemic. Seeing people open up and be vulnerable with each other was so gratifying. As one attendee said afterward, “I hadn’t even verbally articulated all my emotions related to current events until last night.”

Getting involved with My Life, My Stories has been another meaningful part of my lockdown. Cofounded by millennial Brittany Bare, the nonprofit normally hosts live storytelling events and connects people across generations so older adults can share their
life legacies. I attended the first virtual My Life, My Stories event, where people of all ages and backgrounds discussed the emotional impact of loneliness on their lives.

Through the organization, I also connected by phone with Sam, an African-American veteran in his 70s originally from Louisiana. Our life experiences couldn’t be more different—I’m in my late 30s, the daughter of Indian immigrants, and grew up in Michigan. But our conversations have become a bright spot in my weeks, and I have a strong feeling our friendship will move from virtual to in-person once physical-distancing requirements ease.

A purposeful lockdown

As we’ve seen, a sense of purpose can arise from crisis—and it’s also true that purpose, as well as helping others, can help us get through crises with greater strength and resilience.

If you’re looking for ways to make a difference and connect with your communities, here are some ideas:

Connect across differences. Organizations like The Grand, Mon Ami, and CIRKEL (see sidebar above) are virtually connecting diverse groups of people for conversation and companionship in these times.

Join a mutual aid group. During this pandemic, there has been a rise in “mutual aid” groups, helping volunteers create informal networks to support their neighbors, such as by delivering groceries or medications. Find and join a local mutual aid group here.

Talk to your neighbors. How many of us have lived in a neighborhood for a number of years and not connected with those close by? Social networks such as Nextdoor allow us to stay connected to others locally, and members can also post and offer help.

Connect your small daily actions to a greater purpose. At a recent gathering, Civic Saturday fellow Shamichael Hallman delivered a stirring sermon, saying, “We’re all looking for a light at the end of the tunnel. Instead of looking for that light, we must now become that light.” He noted how our small, daily actions, like observing physical distancing, can have powerful effects.

Become an organizer. Perhaps you could try what I did—gather members of your community on a Zoom call and identify ways you can stay connected, or tap into community efforts you want to support as a group.

These days, I’m thinking about how to transform my anxiety into action at every opportunity. I know the weeks ahead won’t be easy. I’ve thought of returning to my parents’ home in Michigan for the summer, if that’s permissible. But for now, I’m still searching for meaningful ways to stay connected to others.

So when I received a text message from Julie, my landlady, checking in on all her tenants, I jumped at the chance to connect. I asked my neighbors—many of whom I’d never met—how they felt about scheduling a Zoom call to get to know one another better.

“Can the landlady join?” Julie asked. “My feelings won’t be hurt if you don’t want me. Honest!”
Of course, we said yes. During the call, virtually surrounded by neighbors, my small studio felt like it was beginning to expand—just a little. And I started to feel a bit less alone.