



27 July 2020 – Changing our behaviour is key to limiting transmission of COVID-19 and saving lives during the pandemic. WHO recommends a range of measures to protect yourself and others, of which one of the most important is maintaining at least 1 metre (3 feet) distance between yourself and others. COVID-19 is influencing and changing cultural norms around the world. In addition to wearing a mask when you leave your home, it is important to clean your hands regularly and thoroughly with an alcohol-based hand rub or wash them with soap and water. In an effort to physically distance, people are being forced to make daily calculations on the trade offs between their personal freedoms and the need to contribute to societal well-being and public health and safety.

Physical distancing means avoiding large public gatherings. The conducting of important social events and cultural milestones at which large groups of people attend, from weddings to funerals, has changed. Religious worship has been moved to the home and online instead of in mosques and churches. Common social and workplace greetings in the form of handshakes, hugs, cheek kissing have ceased. Socializing in homes or at coffee shops require that people maintain an adequate physical distance.

As in other countries around the world, people in Lebanon have found adapting to these physical distancing measures difficult. As the country adapts to limit community transmission of COVID-19, adherence to strict physical distancing is critical and necessitates social cultural norms to change. Governments have successfully implemented behavioural changes before to achieve public health benefits, such as wearing seat belts and banning smoking in public places and with COVID-19 recognising the need to adopt immediate societal change is essential.

## What can we do?

- Use new social greetings: alternatives have been used across the globe, such as the elbow bump, the foot tap, the hand prayer or the hand on heart.
- Do not take offense when someone chooses to physically distance: whether it's a personal greeting or turning down an invitation to a social event, etiquette needs to respect social distancing choices.
- Positively reinforce physical distancing: mocking or poking fun at those practising strict physical distancing stigmatizes social distancing when it needs to be commended.
- Help popularize the term physical distancing as opposed to social distancing: WHO has adopted 'physical distancing' in an effort to say socializing must continue under the pandemic, but we must change the way we do it.

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