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27 Ways to Show Love to Others While Social Distancing



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One of the best things you can do for yourself is to serve others, especially when you're struggling. Reaching out to someone else gets us out of our heads and keeps us from focusing on our own difficulties.

The ongoing COVID-19 crisis is a perfect opportunity to think about what we can do for others. Of course, physical distancing limits some of the ways you might ordinarily reach out to others: Taking someone out to lunch is out of the question, as is going to the movies. Many people would probably be uncomfortable receiving homemade baked items or hand-delivered cards, due to concerns about infection. And you can only send so many "*thinking of you*" texts and emails.

Thankfully there are creative ways to show love, even with the physical distancing restrictions in place. I recently learned that our friends' neighbors staged a production of *Little Red Riding Hood* in our friends' backyard, so their kids could watch it from a safe distance on the porch. It thrilled the kids and also gave the parents a welcome break from constantly entertaining their children.

If you're looking for ways to lift up the people in your life, here are 27 suggestions.

For someone outside your household:

Send a gift card. Choose something you know the person likes. For a twofer, buy it from a local business that's probably struggling right now, like a restaurant or spa that could use the cash flow.

Send your favorite online yoga or exercise video. Be a curator of content for someone else and select a practice you think they'll enjoy. You could send other types of resources based on what the person is into—for example, a guided meditation, cooking video, or Pilates instruction.

Send tea. You may not be able to be there in person to make them a soothing cup of tea, but you can order them some online. Or if they're more of a coffee person, send that instead.

Send them music they'll love. It could be a link to free music online, a song or an album you buy for them, or you could purchase them a music subscription service.

Send bath supplies. Give the gift of a soothing, relaxing bath. For example, Epsom salt is made of magnesium sulfate, and magnesium is good for anxiety and sleep.

Call them on the phone or video call. Sometimes we forget about this obvious option because of how easy it is to text someone, or message them through social media. Choose phone or video based on their preference (some people can't stand being on video calls).

Send them a loving text about a favorite time with them. Let them know you're remembering a time you were together, which might be especially welcome when you're not able to meet in person for the foreseeable future.

Give them a certificate for a future date together. Treat your loved one to a dinner out, a movie together, a musical concert or sporting event—at some point in the future. It's a reminder of things to look forward to when this surreal time is behind us.

Take them to the movies (online). Pick out a movie they'll enjoy and set up a time with them to watch it "together" while you're on video conference, with each of you watching on your own TV or device.

Send a bulb or seed starter kit. Bulbs and seeds tend to be easy to grow indoors, and blooms can be a nice reminder that much of life continues on as always through this time of disruption. Or consider sending a broccoli sprouts growing kit—it's fun, easy, and a good way to get extra nutrition during a stressful time.

Send them a daily reading book to do together. Form a mini book club around a book of daily reflections. I'm partial to *A Mindful Year*, which I co-wrote with a dear friend and fellow psychologist, but there are many options available. Choose one that's likely to resonate with you and the other member of your book club.

Metta meditation. Send loving wishes to another person through prayer or meditation. Try this version, adapted from *The CBT Deck*: Sit comfortably in a quiet place. Take three slow, calming breaths. Bring the person to mind and with each outbreath, mentally send them these wishes: "May you be healthy. May you know peace. May you find ease. May you be free from suffering." Feel a glow of loving kindness radiating from inside you. Repeat as many times as you like.

For someone you live with:

Give a foot rub or scalp massage. Caring human touch is healing—it reduces stress and anxiety, strengthens relationships, and supports the immune system. It will also give you a break from reading the news or being on a screen, since your hands will be occupied. Be in the experience as fully as possible, focusing on the sensations in your hands. (If you live with a beloved animal, give them some extra brushing if that's something they enjoy.)

Make someone a cup of tea. Make the presentation as nice as possible, like using those teacups you save for "special occasions." Any occasion to share life with those we care about can be special.

Do a chore for them. Surprise your loved one by doing one of their chores—unload the dishwasher, fold a load of laundry, take out the trash. For maximum benefit, choose their least favorite chore.

Run them a bath. A warm bath is a good way to manage stress during this time, and having someone else run it feels especially nurturing. Set out a nicely folded towel for them and include whatever touches you have available—candles, Epsom salt, essential oils. Lavender can be especially calming.

Listen intently. It's easy to take this time for granted, and not really focus on the people in our lives (especially the ones we see nearly every minute of every day). The stressful news constantly vying for our attention adds another challenge. For at least one interaction today, pay full attention to the other person—their words, their facial expressions, the tone of their voice. Our attention is one of the best gifts we can give.

Make them their favorite meal. Maybe it can't be their very favorite meal, given the limitations in foods that are available now. Work with whatever you have to prepare something they'll enjoy. This one works for pets, too, if there's a special treat you can give them.

Read to them. Reading to young kids is an obvious option, but you can read to people of all ages—even adults. That might sound weird, but consider giving it a try. Years ago, my wife and I passed many cold, dark nights reading to each other in Bar Harbor, Maine, where we were living at the time.

Watch the kids while your partner takes a walk. Being with young kids all the time can wear on parents (or at least that's what my twelve-, nine-, and five-year-old kids told me). The time your partner spends out of the house will be good not just for them, but probably for everyone.

Tidy up. With your normal routine out the window, you may not be keeping your place as neat as usual. Clean up your living space, especially any areas of mess or clutter that you know tend to wear on your loved one. Or if you have extra time on your hands, tackle a more extensive decluttering project around the house. *Bonus points:* Don't mention that you did it.

Clean the fridge. A clean refrigerator can provide a little lift several times a day (we tend to forget what it looks like inside when the door is closed). Do a deep clean if possible—remove all the food, take out the shelves and wash them with soap, and put everything back as organized as possible.

Organize the (probably full) pantry. Like the refrigerator, the pantry can be a source of stress or relief when you open the door. Organize yours as a gift to the whole family. Refer to this how-to video by Alejandra Costello for some expert tips.

Make a card. Bust out your construction paper, glue, colored pencils—whatever you have on hand. Or just use a piece of printer paper and a ballpoint pen. Who doesn't like getting a custom-made card?

Offer a vagus nerve hug. A prolonged embrace (30 seconds or more) activates the calming part of your nervous system by turning on the vagus nerve, which quiets fear and anxiety. The result will be good not only for their level of stress but for yours, too.

Scratch their back to fall asleep. You can do this for your child or your partner—either way, you'll probably get sleepy, too. Try matching your breath to theirs as they fall asleep. As you do, let go of the stress of the day and the uncertainties of tomorrow.

These are just a few ideas—the only limit is your imagination, as the *Little Red Riding Hood* example shows. Keep in mind that whatever you choose doesn't have to cost a lot of money – some of the best gestures are free. The most important thing is to show the person that you're thinking of them, and that they're worth being taken care of.

About the Author



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Seth J. Gillihan, PhD, is a licensed psychologist and host of the weekly *Think Act Be* podcast. He is author of *The CBT Deck*, *Retrain Your Brain*, and *Cognitive Behavioral Therapy Made Simple*, and co-author with Dr. Aria Campbell-Danesh of *A Mindful Year: 365 Ways to Find Connection and the Sacred in Everyday Life*. Dr. Gillihan provides resources for managing stress, anxiety, and other conditions on the *Think Act Be* website.

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