The Key to the COVID-19 Pandemic

Sirens blare in New York City while tired doctors and nurses scramble to care for sick patients. The streets of Central Park are eerily empty as hospitals are on the verge of collapsing and thousands are testing positive for the novel coronavirus. Yet, many live their lives normally, oblivious to a global pandemic that has taken hundreds of thousands of lives and infected millions more across the world. The importance of social distancing is evident now more than ever as it reduces the stress on the overburdened healthcare system, slows the spread of the COVID-19 virus, and protects the vulnerable population.

Daily, new cases are reported in nearly every country in the world, and the headlines keep getting worse; however, what experts fear the most is an overwhelmed healthcare system. If no social distancing measures are in place to mitigate the spread of the virus, there would be a rapid growth in the number of cases in a short time span which would overburden the healthcare system. "If they all came in the same week, the results could be catastrophic. But if that can be spread out over 40 weeks, it's more like 50,000 critical cases a week and more within our range to handle," says Dr. Rutherford III, MD. Hospitals are running out of beds, ventilators, and other vital equipment and wouldn't be able to keep up with a sudden influx of sick patients, which could result in preventable deaths. Instead, if the escalation of the number of cases was slowed down with social distancing measures, there would be a delay and a reduction in the peak of the outbreak, giving healthcare workers and hospitals more time to prepare. More importantly, it's possible to produce more supplies, but not possible to produce more or replace healthcare workers who are on the front lines of the pandemic.

As a new virus, COVID-19 is extremely contagious and able to spread quickly without any vaccine or antiviral medicine to mitigate the spread. Moreover, researchers believe the rapid spread of COVID-19 is largely due to the movement of asymptomatic cases, people who are unaware they have contracted the virus because of mild or no symptoms at all. In a study by NIH researchers on COVID-19 cases in China, "For every confirmed case of COVID-19, there are likely another five to 10 people with undetected infections… individuals with undetected infections were so prevalent in China that they apparently were the infection source for 86 percent of confirmed cases." However, after imposing strict lockdown orders encouraging social distancing, the spread of COVID-19 slowed considerably in China which helped blunt the effects of the pandemic in the country. In the absence of a vaccine, social distancing remains one of the most effective weapons against the silent spread of the virus.

Although most people who contract the virus experience only mild to moderate symptoms, for older people and those with underlying health conditions, the disease can be life-threatening. According to the CDC, 8 out of 10 COVID-19 related deaths in the U.S were individuals 65 and older, and 11% to 31% of adults aged 65 to 84 were admitted to intensive care. Despite these frightening statistics, social distancing can help protect those who are vulnerable to the virus by limiting the opportunities where they might contract the virus from others. In an article by the Denver Post, "You might think the people around you are not at risk, but they could be. You never know who lives with their grandparents or someone who appears to be young and healthy but has an underlying health condition." For these reasons, it's essential for everyone to practice social distancing, not just those who are at risk of a serious infection.

Although the situation in New York and other megapolises around the world is dire, everyone can play a small role to help during the COVID-19 pandemic by simply staying home and keeping a distance from others. To protect those who are vulnerable to the virus, slow the spread, and help the healthcare system, it is pivotal for everyone to practice social distancing. Saving lives during the COVID-19 pandemic requires everyone to work together and social distance.

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