

Conversations We Took for Granted:
COVID-19 and the Value of Everyday Human Connection

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Whoosh.

A brief shudder ran through the plane as the tires met the ground.

Dubai. I finally arrived. I leaned closer to the window. A nostalgic view brought back all the memories from when I used to live here. For summer break, I came to visit my father who was still working there.

As I stepped through the aircraft door the July heat wrapped around my skin like a thick, scorching blanket. After hours inside the cold, the heat felt almost alive.

I noticed the shuttle to immigration waiting silently at the platform. There was no driver sitting at the front. No controls. No one behind a steering wheel. Nothing.

The doors opened. I stepped inside. The train moved. Smoothly. Silently.

I glanced towards the front again.

Still no driver.

For some reason, this small detail stayed with me. I stepped off and drifted toward the Smart Gate where rows of people stood patiently waiting.

When it was finally my turn, I stepped toward the machine and placed my passport on the scanner. A bright blue light illuminated my face. A few silent seconds later, the gate slid apart.

No questions. No immigration officer. No stamp. No voice asking where I was staying or why I had come. I simply walked through.

And just like that, without saying a single word to anyone, I entered the United Arab Emirates.

I could not help but realize the stark difference from my experience entering the country for the first time a few years prior. The immigration process felt far more personal at the time. There were rows of counters staffed by immigration officers in their white kanduras. I remember

standing before them as they looked at my passport, asked me a few simple questions, and greeted me with a warm smile before waving me through.

Back then, entering the country required speaking to someone.

On this day, I barely spoke a word.

The transformation happened so quickly and smoothly that most people did not question the change. But as I watched the final glass door open automatically in front of me, I realized that COVID-19 had been the turning point to this drastic change. In only a few years, the familiar faces behind the immigration counters had been replaced by scanners, cameras, blue lights, and automated gates.

The Dubai I remembered was still there. But, it was changing, faster than I had imagined.

Throughout the history of humankind, we have used our natural intelligence to develop new skills and discover innovative solutions. In doing so, we have created new technologies and transformed our social structure, which has led to the development of society over time. The COVID-19 pandemic is just another example of this. Faced with unprecedented challenges, we rapidly adapted by developing vaccines, expanding telemedicine, adopting remote work and online education, and introducing new forms of contactless technology. Even after the pandemic, these innovations kept developing and we continue to use our creativity to realize new possibilities. Our everyday lives are becoming increasingly convenient.

On the other hand, while these new innovations such as technology provide us with greater comfort and convenience, it can lead to the loss of human connection. We are losing the chances to initiate small talk in our everyday lives. Self-checkout counters are a growing trend in supermarkets and convenience stores. In restaurants, you can pay your bill by simply scanning a QR code. No need to wait for a cashier, no need to call for a waiter.

When I traveled to San Francisco to visit my sister, driverless cars populated the streets. While these may be safer than human-driven cars, I worry about a cold, impersonal world where we no longer have simple conversations with drivers. Brief conversations with the people we

meet by chance matter more than we think. A small, warm exchange of words with a cashier or a taxi driver might brighten their day.

Sometimes, I find myself looking forward to the small interactions that happen in everyday life. For example, when a courier arrives at my door, our interaction may be nothing more than a brief comment about the weather, but I value these moments because they are genuine and unplanned. There are times, however, when I notice that my package has already been left outside my door before I have the chance to answer. Although the convenience is undeniable, I feel a hint of disappointment because I missed an opportunity to express my gratitude and share a brief moment of human connection. These small, unintentional interactions may seem insignificant, but they are precisely the ones that I want to cherish.

Before COVID-19, face-to-face communication was normalized and people were more present. However, the pandemic limited our interactions, forcing us to socialize online. As we became more accustomed to this way of communication, we limited our interactions to only those we *choose* to have. Our face-to-face conversations became intentional, but in turn, we lost our unintentional conversations.

In today's society it is convenient to live our lives with minimal face-to-face interaction. This growing sense of isolation will hinder us from building and maintaining meaningful relationships. More than ever, it is crucial to make an effort to engage in genuine, interpersonal interactions. While technology is convenient, it must be used in moderation. Like many things in life, too much can be harmful, while a healthy balance can be beneficial.

In 1948, the World Health Organization defined the three pillars of health: “physical, mental, and social well-being” (World Health Organization, 2026). When we think about our health today, we tend to focus primarily on the first two pillars and overlook the importance of our social well-being. These three aspects, however, are deeply interconnected. Social well-being plays a significant role in our overall health because meaningful relationships and connections with others provide emotional support and contribute to a healthier lifestyle. Our social

well-being can influence both our physical and mental health, so if that pillar falls, the two others will topple along with it. Therefore, we must recognize that physical, mental, and social well-being are equally important and that each requires attention in order to maintain our overall health.

Recognizing the importance of social well-being, I hope to strengthen my own sense of human connection through my dormitory life. In a dorm, I can interact with others through small, everyday moments that cannot be experienced through a screen. It may be a casual conversation with the person next to me while brushing my teeth, talking with my roommate before going to sleep, spending time together with my friends in the lounge, or eating meals with other students. These simple interactions may seem insignificant, but they help me understand others on a more personal level and build genuine connections. Not everyone has the chance to live in a dorm, but since I have been given this opportunity to do so in such a wonderful environment, I want to make the most of it. I will actively seek face-to-face communication and meaningful social interactions. Unlike digital communication, living alongside others encourages spontaneous conversations and shared experiences that happen naturally and allow me to be physically present with the people around me. In this way, dormitory life can help me cultivate meaningful relationships and develop a stronger sense of community.

A simple conversation can be a shared step toward a healthier life. These connections nurture not only my social well-being, but also the health and well-being of those around me. Even the smallest moments of connection can bring us closer together and create a healthier, more connected community.

Works Cited

World Health Organization. *Constitution of the World Health Organization*. World Health Organization, 2026, www.who.int/about/governance/constitution. Accessed 27 Aug. 2026.