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# Astronaut Scott Kelly: Mental Health, Social Isolation And How On Earth To Survive



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Cope with social isolation by shifting your perspective. GETTY

Mental health problems are on the rise, and it is a rare day that a new study isn't released which points to increasing social isolation, depression, anxiety and even confusion. But new perspective comes from a surprising source: Commander Scott Kelly, retired NASA astronaut, who spent 340 days in space. I interviewed Commander Kelly for this story—and found his

experience inspired some key insights about what we're all going through now.

First, know if you're suffering or struggling with conditions brought about by the pandemic, you're not alone. A new national study of 2,010 people conducted by the AARP Foundation and the United Health Foundation found two-thirds of adults—across all age groups—are suffering from social isolation. Additional studies have shown negative effects of social isolation are on par with obesity and smoking.

Commander Scott Kelly had to work through the physical, cognitive and emotional challenges of social isolation during all those days in space. His observations translate to these insights:

## Perspective

***The experience in space:*** Many astronauts, Kelly included, report experiencing the “overview effect” based on the power of seeing Earth from so far away. It is awe-inspiring and puts things in a whole new perspective.

***How it helps:*** While almost none of us will have the opportunity to see Earth from space, we can imagine such a feeling of awe—looking out on powerful waves from the beach, hiking over a ridge to experience the sun hitting trees in a magical way or looking into a child's eyes. All of these can give you a perspective about things greater than us. This feeling is comforting—with problems often falling away in these “thin moments”—when the sublime and ordinary feel less separate. These moments remind us we are connected to something larger than ourselves. Look for opportunities to spend time in nature or with loved ones—when these moments are most likely to occur. In addition, look for these moments of awe in everyday occurrences. As Robert Brault said, “Enjoy the little things because one day you'll look back and realize they were the big things.”

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## Reassurance

***The experience in space:*** Looking at the Earth from space, Commander Kelly says he was struck by how much humans have accomplished. “Human beings are capable of doing some incredible things.” Certainly we can grasp this concept, but his descriptions of launches and landings are telling. Of his launches he says, “You’re being thrust into space by 7 million pounds [of force] as part of a controlled explosion.” He describes his last landing as, “... similar to going over Niagara Falls in a barrel while you’re on fire. As soon as you realize you’re not going to die, it’s as much fun as you’ve had in your entire life.”

***How it helps:*** We won’t experience these particular aspects of human ingenuity except from a distance, but we can grasp the power and capability of humans. Problems today can seem overwhelming for individuals, families, organizations and countries. But Kelly’s perspective is helpful. There is so much we’ve accomplished, and so much more we can achieve and overcome together. We have every reason for hope.

## Care

***The experience in space:*** Another perspective of Earth from space is how small it is—nothing more than a blue dot—and how fragile it is. “As a planet, we are isolated in the Universe. The environment is fragile-looking from space and the atmosphere is incredibly thin,” says Kelly.

***How it helps:*** When we realize our vulnerability, we can be reminded of our need to care for others and our environment. In fact, concern for others is very good for our mental and emotional health. One recent study showed

when we are generous and caring toward others, we feel more positively about ourselves, our work and the people around us.



A view of earth from space. GETTY

## Unity

***The experience in space:*** Kelly also points out there are no boundaries visible from space.

***How it helps:*** Here on Earth, we disagree, debate, and are divided. But a perspective from space reminds us about all that unites us—from our love for our families to our concern for our communities. This kind of outlook can be good for our mental wellbeing as well. When we feel supported and [focus on optimistic viewpoints](#), it is good for our health and longevity.

## Bonding

***The experience in space:*** Kelly says one of his best friends is the Russian cosmonaut with whom he spent time on the space station. “Doing something that is challenging, difficult or extraordinary; living in the historic time of this pandemic can bring people together. When you share a challenging experience, it does make you feel more of a kinship.”

***How it helps:*** As difficult as the pandemic has been, one positive aspect is the bonding which can result. Sociologically speaking, when we go through difficult situations together, it tends to create a bond between us. Appreciate others and remind yourself we will come through to the other side—and seek connection.

## Mission

***The experience in space:*** Kelly also says when things got tough he focused on his purpose. “This isolation I was experiencing was part of my mission. Part of the reason I was there was to be isolated and demonstrate how people could live and work in space for long periods of time,” Kelly points out.

***How it helps:*** This is not so dissimilar from our requirement to be distanced today—for reasons of public health and the wellbeing of ourselves and people around us. Our mission too is to be more isolated than we would be normally. From a [mental health standpoint](#), considering why we’re going through something and reminding ourselves about the purpose of our challenges can be very healthy.

## Getting Help

***The experience in space:*** Finally, Kelly emphasizes the need to obtain help when we struggle and reduce the stigma of doing so. When he was in space, he had mandatory meetings every two weeks with psychiatrists.

***How it helps:*** Things [shouldn’t be so different here](#). The AARP Foundation emphasizes the availability of their website [Connect2Affect.org](https://www.aarp.org/health/mental-health/2020/06/06/connect2affect.org)

through which people can seek help. In addition, there are plenty of local resources in communities. Offer help when you see others in need, and ask for help when you need it yourself.

The average non-astronaut can only imagine space travel, but we are all sharing the surreal experience of the pandemic. Keep perspective and focus on caring for what's around you. Remind yourself of what unites us and the bonds we are establishing as we endure difficult times. Keep the mission in mind. Finally offer help and obtain help—we can all give it and we all need to receive it sometimes.



Commander Kelly at his expedition 56 landing GETTY IMAGES

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