Zoom weddings, seeing loved ones through closed windows, virtual dating, having a child without the father allowed in the room, long-distance relationships and online classes: These new “normal” ways of human interaction while remaining apart have caused more than just physical separation.

According to the Center for Disease Control and Prevention, “limiting close face-to-face contact with others is the best way to reduce the spread of coronavirus.”

Since the COVID-19 pandemic, families have been separated, friendships have become long-distance, and relationships have endured heavy strain from stay-at-home orders and travel restrictions. Not only does social distancing and days spent in isolation affect relationships, but also mental health.

According to the Kaiser Family Foundation, “During the pandemic, about 4 in 10 adults in the U.S. have reported symptoms of anxiety or depressive disorder, a share that has been largely consistent, up from one in ten adults who reported these symptoms from January to June 2019.”

Dr. Erin Smith, associate professor of psychology and director of research for the center for the Study of Human Behavior at California Baptist University also sees the negative effect social separation can have, especially on college students.

“Not all people are affected equally, to be sure, but even the cultural reverberations matter for the most shielded. There is evidence that college students, who are among the most aware of mental health challenges, are suffering and not necessarily getting the help that they need,” Smith says.

For Brooke Swenson, junior early childhood development major, attending school virtually instead of on campus affected her friendships, as well as her relationship with her fiancée.

“The stress of moving, going online and obvious distance created a divide in a lot of my friendships with people from school. My relationship experienced a lot of growth because of COVID. Because we live in the same town, we were fortunate to be able to spend a lot of time together, time that we would have otherwise not had. We were able to depend on each other through the stress of COVID. Communication became much easier and more necessary since we had so much extra time to spend together.”

As the medium of communication changed vastly in 2020, meeting in person had become rare, and everyone became an expert in the world of Zoom.

Smith says she believes this change of medium also had an impact.

“In the 1960s, Marshall McLuhan wrote a book in which he coined the phrase ‘the medium is the message.’ Essentially, his argument was that how we communicate (the medium) is part of the message itself; we cannot understand content separate from its mode of delivery. As I think about how necessary covid-19 precautions (restriction of social gathering, social distancing, etc.) have impacted our communication, we can of course say things like, ‘We ➤
talk online a lot more,” and that’s true. McLuhan would likely have some ideas about what this new form of mediation means for the nature of the things communicated. Not necessarily bad — but different,” Smith says.

Smith explains that when cameras are turned on during zoom calls, participants become exhausted because they have to consider multiple things at once. “When I have a conversation with you, I think about you, not whether I have a weird hair sticking up or spinach in my teeth. Circling back to McLuhan, might we predict that conversations are more self-focused when we are more aware of ourselves or engaging in more apparent self-monitoring? I don’t know. But it does very likely change the quality of the conversations,” Smith says.

Communication and interaction has definitely changed, and it impacts people differently. As changes like this can change people emotionally and mentally, they can also impact people physically.

“One thing that is clear in psychology and in Scripture is that our bodies, our physicality, is not a thoughtless ‘add on’ to our personhood,” Smith says. “Changing how we move and engage — our physical bodies — inevitably changes us, even in subtle ways. As a scientist, I will hold out for data in making predictions in terms of what these days will mean for us. I listened to a podcast recently that argued that digital presentations (which are so awkward!) may be helpful in teaching individuals to overcome their anxieties about speaking in front of people (in the flesh). I’ve also read articles surmising about our sudden loss of social skills due to lack of practice.”

Jillian Jarboe, junior Christian behavioral science and Christian studies major, also says COVID-19 affected how she handled relationships, even in terms of her own personality.

“COVID made it hard for me to be outgoing. People had to push themselves to go out and see people because we all got used to being hermits in our rooms, so once school opened up and things were getting back to normal, on one side we were all so excited, but it was far more exhausting because our social circles were so out of shape.”

Jarboe explains additional challenges that have occurred in terms of dating. “Even with my boyfriend, he can’t come over and watch a movie with my friends or have that community. Dating is now a lot of just one-on-one time, it’s not as community-based as I would wish because of COVID.”

Though Smith points out some of the negative effects of the social separation from COVID-19, she says she also believes there is a possibility to use this time for personal growth.

“(COVID) has also forced a lot of us to stop and slow.

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Even in the sudden frenetic fury, there is an unbearable slowness at times,” Smith says. “I think if we are wise, we will sit in that slowness. We will be uncomfortable and gaze at the unpleasant reality that many of us have created busy and distracting lives so that we don’t have to actually see the world around us. I’m hoping that people — especially college students at this pivotal crossroad in their personal and professional developments — will not hurry to the other side of this moment without thinking about what God can teach them in it. God is in the business of redemption. He can redeem this awful experience and his holy name be glorified.”

Thankfully, as the COVID-19 vaccines continue to be distributed, more and more states are opening up restaurants, movie theaters and even some nursing homes for visitors, creating space for more human interaction and meetings with missed loved ones.◆