

Transcript: 6 Feet Apart – Social Engagement During COVID-19
Hosted by Dr. Wendy Slusser

Dr. Wendy Slusser: Hello and welcome to a special series, the LiveWell podcast called 6-feet apart. This is about how to take care of your emotional and social and physical wellbeing while physically distancing from one another. In other words, how we must act now during the COVID-19 pandemic. My name is Dr. Wendy Slusser, Associate Vice Provost at the Semel Healthy Campus Initiative Center at UCLA. I hope you can join us as I interview leaders from around the world about how we can maintain our emotional, social and physical wellbeing during these unprecedented times. Today, I'll be chatting with UCLA professor of psychology, Dr. Ted Robles. He's also the Semel HCI EngageWell Pod Co-Leader. We'll be talking about the psychological impact of quarantine and how to stay socially engaged while you are six-feet apart.

Dr. Wendy Slusser: Dr. Ted Robles, thank you so much for coming on to the LiveWell podcast, special edition around social wellbeing and the ramifications of our social wellbeing in light of our coronavirus pandemic. You're incredible leader for all of us in this subject of social wellbeing in academics and also on our campus as a co-lead of the EngageWell Pod for our Semel HCI center at UCLA. I think in light of this pandemic, our social wellbeing is critical to be cognizant of supporting. We'd like to hear your wisdom today so that all of us can manage our current social wellbeing and also our longterm social wellbeing in light of what we're experiencing, which many of us are doing self-quarantining or even being quarantined or being isolated if you are in a hospital with this and you've been diagnosed and under treatment for COVID-19.

Dr. Ted Robles: Thanks for having me on. It's just unbelievable what kind of unprecedented times we're living through. Of all the things that have brought this issue of social isolation and disconnection to public awareness, this has really brought it into sharp focus, I think, over the last couple of weeks. On one hand, none of us would like to be in this situation at all and especially the first responders and physicians and patients obviously. It's also potentially an opportunity for us to, with all difficult times, grow a little bit closer together. Figuring out how to do that is what we all have to do. I keep hearing meeting the moment, the term that our governor has been using a lot and it definitely applies in this social wellbeing space.

Dr. Wendy Slusser: I'd like our listeners to understand what precisely social wellbeing is compared to emotional wellbeing. How do you define social wellbeing?

Dr. Ted Robles: Well, the way we think of it is the number and quality of the connections that you have with other people. It's not the case that if you have a thousand followers on Instagram that you have really high social wellbeing, but if you have good quality, close relationships with people who you can talk to, who you can trust, people that you feel close to, people that can do things for you and that you can do things for. It doesn't have to be a hundred people. It doesn't even have to be maybe 50 people, but playing different roles for different

people in the world and having these mutual exchange of support in all its forms. If you have those things, you have really good social wellbeing.

Dr. Wendy Slusser: To summarize that, it's like if you have supportive relationships and love in your life, is that a good summation of what you're describing?

Dr. Ted Robles: Yeah, absolutely. People that you can do things with, people that you feel like you can trust. Not just romantically of course, but friendships, coworkers, neighbors and relatives.

Dr. Wendy Slusser: Do dogs count?

Dr. Ted Robles: Dogs definitely count. There's really interesting studies showing that if you are... Classic thing we do in psychology research is have people give speeches in front of unfriendly audiences. If you do that with your pet, you have smaller blood pressure responses compared to when you don't. So yeah, pets count, at least dogs do.

Dr. Wendy Slusser: Is that because I've heard they have compassion?

Dr. Ted Robles: One of the things that I've been thinking about a lot through all of this is the idea that we're social beings. Our brains are wired to be social, which means that we are designed to operate where we have close others, people that we can trust near us, around us, sources of warmth, sources of support. And yeah, a pet can do all those things. Because of that, that's probably one of the reasons in addition to the cardiovascular fitness that you get from walking your pet. That's one of the reasons why we think maybe pets have those benefits.

Dr. Wendy Slusser: What concerns me is the baseline, right? When we call a community resilient, it means that some people are coming in with higher social wellbeing than others. One of the parts that you described as a higher social wellbeing, people that have people you can confide in or rely on. The data that I'm aware of is like 25% or one out of four Americans don't. They didn't start out with that kind of baseline. One of the other aspects you just described about social wellbeing is being able to give to others. That gives some people a sense of wellbeing. What would you recommend if you are in a community where you know that there were some isolated people that maybe didn't have this kind of infrastructure of relationships and partnerships?

Dr. Ted Robles: Well, one of the things that has been sort of a blessing in this time is that we live in an age where you can reach out to people and connect with them more so than you ordinarily would be able to. Let's just think about neighborhoods for example. As amusing as the next door app typically is when you are reporting on neighbors that are doing unsavory things, it's also a way to reach out to people who are literally potentially just a block down from you, which we didn't really have before. In this era where it's really hard to actually get out of the house

and go up to someone's house or someone's apartment, there are now ways facilitated through technology that you can learn about someone who might be in need and then you can reach out.

Dr. Ted Robles: If there was anything that I think is the most important thing in these times. It's to find ways to think about other people and what they're going through. There's all sorts of ways we can do that now. I've seen on Twitter for instance, people saying, "I am isolated or it's my birthday and I have no one to spend it with." They are actually getting people providing support, wishing happy birthday. Maybe one out of those hundred interactions leads to something, but it's one more than there used to be the day before. We've talked a lot about the challenges and threats that come from social networking and social media. This is presenting a really interesting time where that actually is a great tool that we can make use of.

Dr. Wendy Slusser: Yeah. That neighborhood app actually helps me find my dog that had been taken from in front of CVS Pharmacy while I was printing some photographs for my husband.

Dr. Ted Robles: Oh, goodness. Oh, wow.

Dr. Wendy Slusser: I think shamed whoever had taken the dog to inform the store that the dog had been left at the shelter. But, it was a moment of togetherness because I was sobbing in front of CVS, coming out, finding, discovering my dog was gone. So many people hugged me. This is before the coronavirus epidemic or pandemic. But anyway, would I love those hugs now.

Dr. Ted Robles: Right, exactly.

Dr. Wendy Slusser: Miss those hugs. One of the things that I'm curious about is that there is research that shows, of course, that social wellbeing is one of the strongest predictors of positive health. It's paramount that all of us in this day and age where we want to stay healthy, that this pandemic is raising the bar to where health is equivalent to wealth in our country or supersedes it. What do we do in this situation that we can help promote our own personal social wellbeing and others?

Dr. Ted Robles: It's interesting because this is again another time where if we needed to think about others to preserve our own personal health, this is that time. The way I think about it is like this, there's a couple of... These are pre-prints, there's research still in the early stages where they've done surveys of individuals. These are all cross-sectional, so who knows if this would hold up? But across three different surveys, I think one in the US and two were in Germany, people who reported thinking more about others, they were more likely to endorse that they intended to stay in the house basically, that they intended to do the things that are being asked of them in terms of staying home and not going out

as much. The people who were less inclined to think about others, they were more inclined to at least report that they're not going to hid those messages as much.

Dr. Ted Robles: I think a lot of the positive, more effective messages that I'm seeing from public health departments focus on, "Let's do this together. We're in this together. Let's help stop this pandemic together." Really emphasizing that you've got to think about your neighbor who's not necessarily older but who has a chronic medical condition and what the consequences of your not listening to the orders to shelter in place or stay at home. What are the consequences for that other person? What are the consequences for your friend who's a physician who is on the frontline and is already overwhelmed. Do you want to add to that? I think really the biggest thing in terms of public health, and we can talk more about what happens in terms of when UCLA gets back into session later, but in terms of public health, keeping other people in mind is really, really critical. It's very easy to become self-interested in this time. The challenges, how do you make sure you're doing things that are for the longterm benefit of everybody? Thinking about other people is really critical.

Dr. Wendy Slusser: That's really a wise and compassionate suggestion. I'm thinking that it's almost like a checklist. My experience with Preparedness, working with California State of Maternal and Child Health Preparedness is that you have to take care of yourself and your family first and then you can take care of others. That's the advice for first responders. In light of the fact that this is a public health emergency, I think we need to be considering all of us as first responders, that we all have the capacity to make a difference to each other and so being selfless or being... As you so nicely shared with us, this wonderful quick rapid review article that I'd like us to move on and talk about, but the appeals to altruism I think is a critical piece that this group of researchers that wrote this article describes. This article is called The psychological impact of quarantine and how to reduce it: rapid review of the evidence. It was published in Lancet. Can you summarize this article and say what your thoughts are on it?

Dr. Ted Robles: Yeah, sure. This was an attempt by these researchers, who actually don't know, to look at all the available literature that exists on the psychological impacts of quarantine. In particular, they use a specific definition of quarantine, which is if you're sick being separated from others, which they distinguish from isolation, which is if you're in contact with sick people, you need to stay away from others as well. It is a very specific context where it's people who are sick and what they should do to minimize their exposure to other people. While that doesn't generalize to your experience or my experience right now, it's very similar because we're not supposed to have close contact with other people.

Dr. Ted Robles: What they did is they reviewed both the qualitative literature and then also really large studies. I was really impressed to see that there were studies of several thousand people and they wanted to see what were the impacts on

emotional wellbeing, symptoms of depression, symptoms of PTSD, and what predicts how people are going to do. Are there certain factors like demographics that matter or what we might call individual differences that matter like personality factors and that kind of thing? I think one of the takeaways was that probably the big socio-demographic factor that's important is that if you're under-resourced in some way, quarantine is going to be much more challenging, so if you're lower income, have less access to resources. Also, if you come into the experience with preexisting mental health concerns, so if you have a history of depression or previous trauma exposure. Those are going to be things that are going to put you at greater risk for more psychological harm from the quarantine experience.

Dr. Ted Robles: And then, they go through to describe factors that could potentially promote doing well, so shorter quarantines matter, having access to resources, making sure you have sufficient supplies to get you through the quarantine. But also, they do talk a little bit about the motivations for quarantine being important. If you can appeal to altruism, that might be a really important factor in helping people keep motivated to stay away from others. Even though the situation is a little bit different, these are people who are actively sick. Although not, I guess now that I realize that some of these larger studies included people who were subject to quarantine but they weren't actually sick. The broader point for all of us right now is that there are things that can make shelter in place and safer at home, more reasonable and manageable. We have to figure out ways to incorporate that in how we are, I'll just loosely use the term, quarantining ourselves.

Dr. Wendy Slusser: How do you appeal to people's sense of altruism? How would you frame that?

Dr. Ted Robles: Again, the idea being that we're doing this together, it's very counterintuitive. Right? Because one of the big reasons that we are social beings is because they're safety in numbers. If you think about way back in evolution, the way we protected ourselves from another tribe threatening us or a stampede of wild animals was we banded together literally, physically, and defended ourselves and defended our turf. That's not quite the same here because I can't huddle with you and feel safe. I can huddle with my family, but even the other people who I care about, I cannot be with them. At the same time, you can create that feeling of togetherness. I think that's what a lot of the, again, effective messaging is doing. I went to a restaurant the other day to pick up some takeout and on the door was a we're-in-this-together poster. That was the very first thing that I could see. You can still encourage people to feel a sense of togetherness even with this separateness. That's one of the big things is that everything that we're doing is for our collective benefit and that's sort of what altruism is.

Dr. Ted Robles: I guess the second thing would be, and this is where the social media I think has been really valuable, is hearing stories from physicians, from nurses, from

patients who have been directly affected and knowing what they're going through. I think that's probably been one of the most impactful things, at least for me personally this week, from the things I've been reading. It's what keeps me motivated to do the things that I'm doing is knowing that there are people who are putting their lives on the line and that I need to do something for them. One of those things is by making sure their lives don't get any more difficult. Just hearing those stories has been very important.

Dr. Ted Robles: Again, the idea of keeping other people in mind, it's much more easy to be altruistic when you know what people are going through. While we should all measure our exposure to all of the COVID-19 stuff that's happening, this is a human disaster. Knowing what human stories are, it is really important to keep us motivated to do what we're doing. I think those two things are important. They're what the public health structures can message and then just understanding the actual lives and experiences of other people. That can help create this empathy and altruism.

Dr. Wendy Slusser: That's really useful. If we had to do a checklist for people, how do you improve your social wellbeing or maintain it? One, make sure you're taking care of yourself in a healthful way and your family or close loved ones or your animals. Two would be to read or listen to stories of frontline workers or actually confronting this pandemic and what they're doing about it so that you know what they're up against. Three would be what can you do for them. This most important, simplest thing, which is also what would be for yourself, is to stay home if you can-

Dr. Ted Robles: Exactly. Right.

Dr. Wendy Slusser: ... or minimize your exposure outside.

Dr. Ted Robles: The other one I would add, which we haven't talked about, is finding ways to connect with everybody that you usually connect with. It's been adorable to do this for my children because they're not able to be with their friends at school. Right when I picked up my daughter on the last day before school closed, she was coming down the stairs and then she was taking a while with her friends and I was getting kind of annoyed. I was talking to a parent, I'm like, "What are they doing? Why are they taking so long?" And then, they all did this really big group hug, which I had never seen before. It was really touching. And so over the last couple of weeks, we've been trying to arrange Google Hangouts for my daughter and some of her friends. And then, the same for my kindergarten age son as well. Those have been adorable to watch because you or I never did anything like that. Just to see this six-year-old in front of an iPad saying, "What do you want to talk about," is really, really adorable.

Dr. Ted Robles: But, doing that is also really important, checking in. There's still ways you can do it. I know Chris, my colleague, talked about doing virtual happy hours. All of

those things are still very much available fortunately given our technological age. Imagine if this was 20 years ago or 30 years ago, it would be much tougher.

Dr. Wendy Slusser: It's true. That's very true. For our students who are coming back to classes this quarter, what would be some of the steps they could do?

Dr. Ted Robles: I tried to put myself in their shoes and it's just so hard, especially the seniors I think, have been really hard to think about because these are students where they were looking forward to their last quarter to graduation, to walking across the dice, to get their diploma. Or, these last experiences, whether it's a banquet or something, and just that will be missing and lost is really, really heartbreaking. I think I wouldn't want to underestimate it if I were many of my colleagues working with students that they've had a significant chunk of their life that they're just not going to have right now.

Dr. Ted Robles: And then, I think about other students where probably for those of us with privilege like professors, when we think about our kids coming home from college, besides the usual adolescent annoyance and stuff like that, perhaps it feels like it's going to be a reasonably comfortable experience. Right? But, that's not necessarily the case for other students where anything from limited access to internet to very different expectations about what children are supposed to do when they're at home, even if they're adults. There's a lot of students that are going to be running up against these major challenges. This is already after having to uproot themselves from their dorm or from their apartment. In some cases, fly back to the countries where they're from. I think having a significant amount of... For faculty I should say, having a significant amount of empathy again for their experiences is really critical.

Dr. Ted Robles: Now, what about for the students themselves? Just the amount of stuff that they've had to go through over the last couple of weeks is more than anyone of us at that stage of our lives would have wanted to go through in a lifetime. I think what's important for students as we come back together is... I always do this with students at the beginning of quarter where I let them know if there's anything that you think is going to be an obstacle to succeeding in this particular class, let me know upfront because maybe there's ways I can be of help. Giving study tips given a certain circumstance or just knowing what it is upfront, that's critical. I think students should feel like they can do that. Part of that is faculty need to give students a space to let us know what they've been facing and what they think they're going to face over the next three months. Students have to be willing to do that, too.

Dr. Ted Robles: I think that's probably the biggest piece of advice is to really let your faculty know what it is that you're facing now, what the uncertainties that are weighing over your head are as they relate to how you're going to do this quarter. Because I think it's very easy for us to go, "I don't want to bother my professor. He or she is still trying to figure out this Zoom thing. He or she looks really

stressed out trying to figure out how CCLA works." There's already a power differential anyway, so it can be very easy not to disclose things that would be very important factors in their academic success.

Dr. Wendy Slusser: That's very practical advice. Really appreciate it. I guess, two questions. One, what keeps you up at night?

Dr. Ted Robles: Well, that's one. What's the second one?

Dr. Wendy Slusser: How as a community in Los Angeles, what your hope is for... What's your vision?

Dr. Ted Robles: Got it.

Dr. Wendy Slusser: Like utopic vision.

Dr. Ted Robles: Right. The number one thing, we're here during spring break and I had always figured just looking at the numbers, look at these logarithmic plots that this was going to be the start of the worst week in terms of death and cases and impact to society. What scares me is what that's going to... I guess what scares me is the next week. Somebody had a really nice tweet that was like, "If you thought that this week was bad, just wait until the end of this week." What keeps me up at night is just what's going to be happening to our physicians, our nurses, our healthcare system or patients, older adults, younger adults in the next couple of weeks. Over where you are, it's just terrifying to think about what next week is going to look like. In some ways, it would be nice if time could stretch on for a long time and it already feels like it has. Right? Last week feels like a year ago. But, that's what keeps me up is I just worry about the loss of life and the impact for others.

Dr. Ted Robles: With the utopian vision, I will say one of the really... There's two things I think about, which is the air right now is really quite something here in LA. Every time I'm out walking the dog or walking the kids or running after the kids and I take a deep breath, I'm like, "Wow, it's amazing how this feels in my lungs because the air pollution has just plummeted here." Now, I'm not saying that this kind of pandemic should be what we do in order to get air like this. But, imagine a world where we slowed down just a little bit, it would be nice. Right? That sort of thing number one.

Dr. Ted Robles: Thing number two is I've seen so many more of my neighbors than I have seen in a long time because we don't have anywhere to go. I hope that being able to see neighbors have conversations that are a little bit less than six feet away, I hope that that can continue as well as for everybody. It's a shame that it takes something like this for that to happen, but maybe this is what we needed to shake ourselves from our isolation and our hustle and bustle.

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- Dr. Wendy Slusser: Those are two really lovely observations. It seems that we should all be taking on a moment in our day to think about what we find that's different and kind of the silver lining.
- Dr. Ted Robles: Right. It's hard to think about silver linings right now knowing what's coming, but we have to hold onto something. Right?
- Dr. Wendy Slusser: I know in the history of medicine, the major breakthroughs for surgery took place during war time. We might have some major breakthroughs, not just only related to medicine but other aspects of our lives that include social wellbeing, emotional wellbeing, physical wellbeing. Very, very interest... Spiritual wellbeing. I think I'd like to end this with heart of a Maya Angelou poem because it has to do with alone. Lying, thinking last night, how to find my sole a home where water is not thirsty and bread loaf is not stone. I came up with one thing and I don't believe I'm wrong that nobody, but nobody can make it out here alone. Alone, all alone. Nobody, but nobody can make it out here alone. Now if you listen closely, I'll tell you what I know. Storm clouds are gathering. The wind is going to blow. The race of man is suffering and I can hear the moan. Because nobody, but nobody can make it out here alone.
- Dr. Ted Robles: That's really something.
- Dr. Wendy Slusser: She's an amazing poet. Sums it up.
- Dr. Ted Robles: Exactly. Everybody's in this together in some way.
- Dr. Wendy Slusser: Ted, thank you for all your wisdoms, all your incredible brain power on this. We're going to be airing this, but we're also going to be sending out other BruinPost that will address some of these key points you brought up. You're just an incredible treasure for this campus and our community. Thank you for sharing your wisdom.
- Dr. Ted Robles: Well, thank you for being the hub for various wisdoms. I appreciate all the energy that you're putting into this.
- Dr. Wendy Slusser: Thank you. Thanks. Well, it gives me... As you said, when you enhance your social wellbeing, giving is one of the big steps on my end. Thanks.
- Dr. Ted Robles: Right, absolutely.
- Dr. Wendy Slusser: Thank you for tuning in to 6-feet apart, a special series of the LiveWell podcast. Today's episode was brought to you by UCLA Semel Healthy Campus Initiative Center. To stay up to date with the rest of the episodes in this special series and to get more information on maintaining your emotional, physical, and social wellbeing during COVID-19, please visit our website at healthy.ucla.edu/livewellpodcasts. Thank you and stay remote.

