



A Project of The Institute for the Study of Human Knowledge

Social-Distancing Discussion Guide: Creating the World We Want

“In every country, however, there are many examples of the power of the human spirit—of doctors, nurses, political leaders, and ordinary citizens demonstrating resilience, effectiveness, and leadership. That provides hope that men and women around the world can prevail in response to this extraordinary challenge.”

Nicholas Burns, Harvard Kennedy School of Government professor,
Former U.S. State Department undersecretary for political affairs

The coronavirus crisis presents a defining moment for humanity.

People all over the world are sharing their experiences online. We are all made more aware of our global interconnectedness and of the fragile nature of life on our finite planet. Let’s use this time of self-isolating to think seriously about the kind of world we want.

This is a guide for just such a discussion – in families, among students and teachers, in “virtual” study groups, book clubs, blogs, forums – wherever thinking people gather.

It poses open-ended questions about who we humans really are: What shapes our reactions, beliefs and behavior? What does history, as well as our response to the current pandemic, reveal about the way we think and the choices we make? What strengths do we have to help us forge new attitudes, insights and solutions? What’s already working? What isn’t? Why?

The guide is divided into three focus areas for discussion: empathy and connection, income equality, and global sustainability. **BEFORE YOU START:** Links to science-based information from the Human Journey website and other sources are included with each focus area to help participants prepare for meaningful, informed dialogue.

Sign up for the Human Journey Newsletter to stay informed.

Go to [HumanJourney.us/updates](https://www.humanjourney.us/updates)

Discussion #1: Empathy and Connection

From reading the materials linked below, you'll now understand that our innate capacity for empathy and the ability to cooperate and act on the needs of the larger group were key drivers of our success as a species. Social neuroscience research also reveals that our need to connect with other people is even more fundamental, more basic, than our need for food or shelter.

Under normal circumstances, how does our innate capacity for empathy and cooperation and our need for social connection serve us?

How might that endowment become compromised and hinder our ability to identify and implement solutions?

Where do you see empathy and social connection or the lack thereof playing out in the world's response to the coronavirus epidemic so far?

What role have empathy and social connection played in the ability of various countries and states to respond effectively to the crisis?

We also inherit tribal instincts, seeing the world as “us” and “them.” What are the advantages and disadvantages of these instincts in the world today and in this current situation?

What might be positive and negative effects of sheltering in place and social distancing – on us individually and as a society?

How effective has “digital” connection been as a replacement for “in person” connection? What are the strengths and limitations of increased reliance on digital connection?

Do you think the overall experience of the coronavirus crisis is likely to enhance or suppress empathy and social connection in the long run? In what ways?

What does the coronavirus pandemic tell us about the need for an expanded global consciousness – seeing ourselves as global citizens with interconnected lives and interests?

After this pandemic, do you think we should take steps to act from a new sense of global awareness? Why or why not?

What might be the appropriate steps you might take individually, and we might take in our communities, state, nation and globally to create the kind of world you want?

Empathy and Connection Resources

HumanJourney.us

[Journey of the Human Mind](#)

Intercultural Understanding and Empathy

[Our Moral Endowment](#)

[Thinking Big: How the Evolution of Social Life Shaped the Human Mind](#)

[Social: Why Our brains are Wired to Connect](#)

[Moral Tribes: Emotion, Reason and the Gap Between Us](#)

[The Righteous Mind: Why Good People are Divided by Politics and Religion](#)

[New World New Mind](#)

[Humanity on a Tightrope](#)

[Why Facts Don't Change Our Mind](#)

Other Sources:

[Quarantined with a Newborn – Alone](#) (New York Times)

Discussion #2: Global Health and Wealth

After reading the materials at the links below, you'll be ready to explore the connection between the coronavirus pandemic and income inequality: the impact on different people and countries and our prospects for improving the quality of life for all.

“For centuries and indeed millenniums, great plagues and other severe shocks have shaped political preferences and decision-making by those in charge. The policy choices that result determine whether inequality rises or falls in response to such calamities. And history teaches us that these choices can change societies in very different ways.”

Walter Scheidel
Stanford University professor of classics and history

In what ways does the coronavirus pandemic have a greater impact on poor people and poor countries?

Does income inequality and the lack of universally available healthcare intensify the risk of global pandemic? Describe.

How did money – originally invented as a mere token of social obligation – get confused with true wealth and become the end in itself?

What is meant by “financialization” and how has this trend intensified the problem of income inequality?

What other resources besides money should be factored into our definition of wealth and economic strength?

What would be the elements of a minimum safety net for all people?

Would that be a good idea, why or why not?

Would that be possible to implement? Why or why not?

Has the strength of various country's social safety nets played a part in their ability to respond to this crisis? In what ways?

What might be the long-term effects of the pandemic on income equality?

Global Health and Wealth Resources

HumanJourney.us:

The Changing World Economy

Trust, Faith, and Confidence – Value and the Role of Money: [Debt, Trust and Money](#) / [Power, Money, and Stability](#) / [Substitute Moneys and Cryptocurrencies](#)
[Risk, Gambling, and Financialization](#)
[Doughnut Economics](#)
[Creating a Learning Society](#)
[Capital in the Twenty-First Century](#)

Health and Education in the Modern World

Global Health: [Income and Health](#) / [Defense Against Infectious Diseases](#) / [Current and Future Challenges](#)
[Public Good or Private Wealth?](#)
[Coronavirus is Our Future \(Video\)](#)

A Sustainable Planet

[Natural Capitalism](#)

Other Sources:

[The U.S. Approach to Public Health: Neglect, Panic, Repeat](#) (New York Times)
[The America We Need](#) (New York Times)
[Social Distancing is a Privilege](#) (New York Times)
[‘A Tragedy Is Unfolding’: Inside New York’s Virus Epicenter](#) (New York Times)
[Ecuador Gives Glimpse Into Pandemic’s Impact on Latin America](#) (New York Times)
[In Scramble for Coronavirus Supplies, Rich Countries Push Poor Aside](#) (New York Times)
[Inequality Intensifies the coronavirus Crisis in Detroit](#) (The New Yorker)
[‘Unprecedented Threat’ for East Africa as Larger Second Wave of Locust Crisis Arrives Amid Pandemic](#) (Common Dreams)
[Why the Wealthy Fear Pandemics](#) (New York Times)
[How the World Will Look after the Coronavirus Pandemic](#) (Foreign Policy)

Discussion #3: Our Finite Planet

As you learned from the readings linked below, scientists have been warning us of the consequences of human-caused global warming – including the risk of global pandemics – for over a century. Discuss the coronavirus outbreak in the context of climate change.

Is there a relationship between global warming and pandemics? Is climate change likely to result in further such outbreaks? Discuss.

What other consequences of climate change are we already seeing across the globe? What challenges are we likely to face as a result that may be comparable to the current pandemic?

In what ways might the economic aftermath of coronavirus enhance or reduce willingness to support measures to curb global warming?

“The Planet We Inherited” (linked below) describes Earth’s cosmic history and the cosmic rarity and finite nature of its life-supporting resources. Does this view alter your perspective on the challenges ahead? Why or why not?

Climate change contributed to the collapse of the world’s first era of global trade, the Bronze Age civilizations. What were the other factors? Are there parallels to our own time and what would be required to avoid a similar outcome?

What were the factors that lead to the emergence of democracy in ancient Greece? Are there parallels there to what we face? What might be a positive outcome this time if a collapse ensues?

In spite of the science and the decades of warnings, why has public awareness and concern about global warming been so slow to catch up?

What forces have stood in the way of more timely and decisive action by governments to reverse climate change?

We have also been warned repeatedly about the increasing potential for pandemics in the modern world and our lack of preparedness. What stood in the way of a timely response?

Are there patterns of “science denialism” impeding our response to both coronavirus and climate science? If so, how can we recognize and mitigate those patterns?

How can we forge the political will and global commitment to act more quickly and decisively to reverse climate change and to devise globally coordinated strategies and infrastructure to address its consequences – including future pandemics and mass migration?

Life on A Finite Planet Resources

HumanJourney.us:

A Sustainable Planet

Our Finite Planet: [The Planet We Inherited](#) / [The Human Footprint](#) / [The Rocky Road to a Sustainable Future](#)
[The Big Ratchet](#)

Intercultural Understanding and Empathy

[New World New Mind: Moving Toward Conscious Evolution](#)
[Why Facts Don't Change Our Mind](#)

Health and Education in the Modern World

Income and Health: [The Next Outbreak? We're Not Ready](#) (video)

Ideas That Shaped Our Modern World

[The Bronze Age Collapse](#)

Tools and The Development of Contemporary Society

[The Axemakers's Gift](#)

[Guns, Germs and Steel](#)

[1491](#)

[1493](#)

[The Case Against Civilization: Did Our Hunter-Gatherer Ancestors Have It Better?](#)

Other Sources:

[How our responses to climate change and the coronavirus are linked](#) (weforum.org)

[Pandemics and the Shape of Human History](#) (New Yorker)

[Coronavirus is Accelerating History Past the Breaking Point](#) (Foreign Policy)

[Why the Wealthy Fear Pandemics](#) (New York Times)

[As humans move into animals territory, contagions like coronavirus risk being transmitted](#) (San Francisco Chronicle)

[Before Virus Outbreak, a Cascade of Warnings Went Unheeded](#) (New York Times)

[The Next Plague is Coming. Is America Ready?](#) (The Atlantic)

[Melting Glaciers and Thawing Permafrost Could Release Ancient Viruses Locked Away for Thousands of Years](#) (Newsweek)

[Climate change and human health - risks and responses](#) (World Health Organization)

[How Climate Change Is Exacerbating the Spread of Disease](#) (*State of the Planet*, Columbia University Earth Institute)