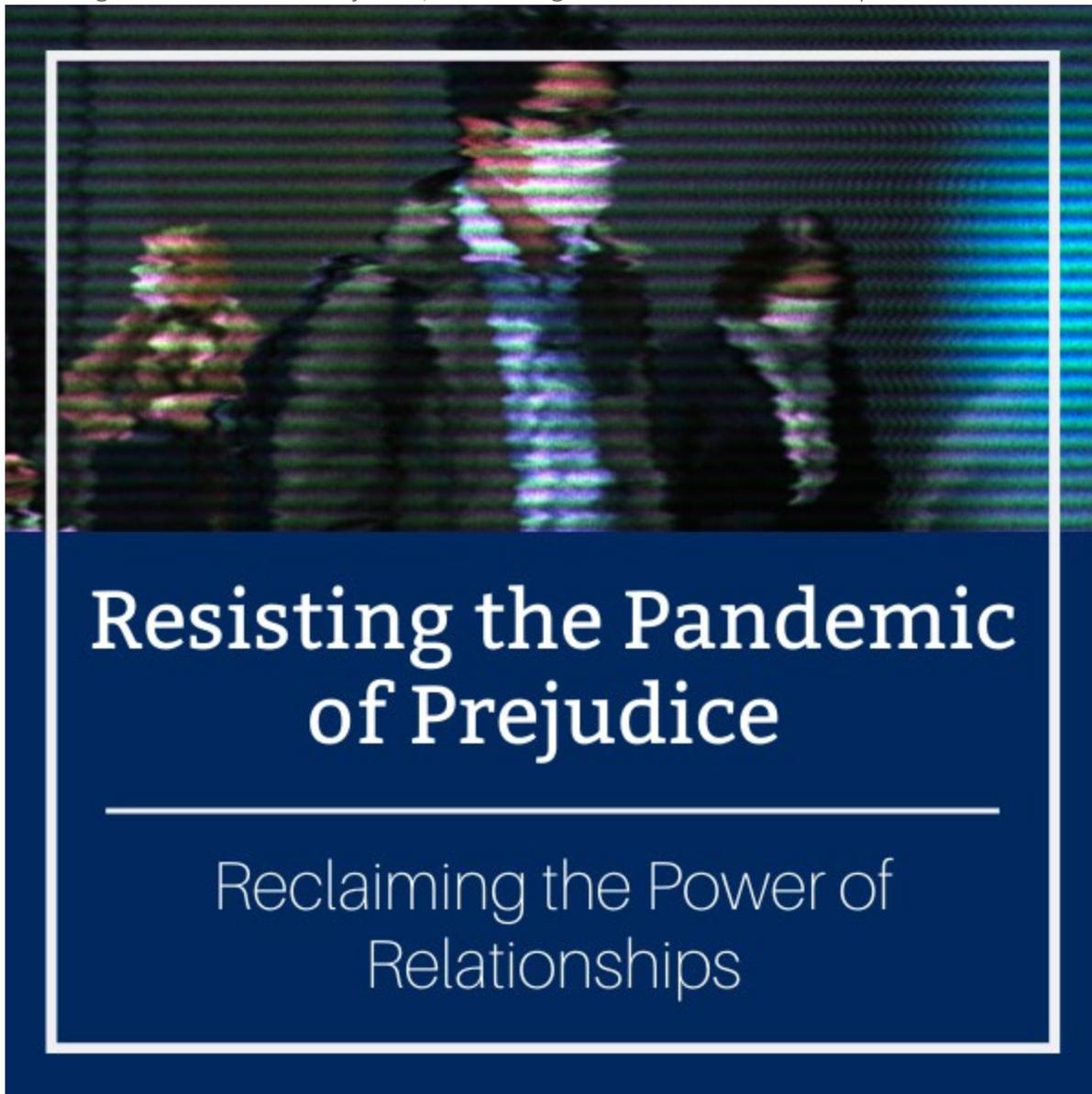


- Resisting the Pandemic of Prejudice, Reclaiming the Power of Relationships



- March 11, 2020
- [Developmental Relationships](#)

By Eugene C. Roehlkepartain, PhD, Vice President of Research and Development

Much of the world has become transfixed by the global health crisis brought on by the rapid spread of the coronavirus, or [COVID-19](#). Twitter feeds, cable news, other media are saturated with conversations about the state of testing kits and vaccines, shortages of safety masks, hand sanitizer, and tissue paper, the complex logistics of whether to cancel events, close schools, and urge telecommuting.

All of those technical and logistical responses are important. The practical urging of public health experts to wash hands, cover coughs, and avoid crowds are valuable ways to play a part in slowing the spread of the virus and, ultimately, save lives.

How we respond also reveals a great deal about who we are, what we value, and how we relate to our fellow human beings. We certainly see evidence of human goodness. Tireless healthcare workers and researchers seek medical breakthroughs to prevent and cure this new disease. Countless healthcare providers care for the sick,

often putting themselves at risk, particularly before the nature of the disease was known. Even the heartache of families who wait helplessly as a beloved family member dies alone quarantined in a nursing home reminds us of the deep bonds that hold us together.

An epidemic of fear and blame

In *Epidemics and Society: From the Black Death to the Present* (2019), Frank M. Snowden, professor emeritus of the history of medicine at Yale University, chronicles how societies have responded to centuries of epidemics, from bubonic plague to smallpox, malaria, AIDS, SARS, Ebola, and others. In each case, he documents the ways in which people who became sick—and their countries and cultures—were scapegoated, reinforcing prejudices and deepening divisions between people, cultures, and nations. Poor people were blamed for the cholera epidemic in Paris in 1832. Gay people were blamed for AIDS in the 1980s. “It’s always some other group of persons we want to blame,” explains Dr. Snowden ([On the Media](#), March 6, 2020).

Today, Wikipedia is crowdsourcing [a growing list of hate crimes, violence, and discrimination](#) in response to COVID-19: Chinese restaurants have experienced sharp declines in customers due to fear of the virus. Some students from China were blocked from attending school in Canada. Hmong men were turned away from a hotel in Indiana because they were perceived to have the virus. Asians have been attacked on the streets of New York and other cities and told to take their virus home. And, unfortunately, the list is growing.

Nurturing our best selves through relationships

How might we respond to these acts of prejudice and xenophobia, as well as our own fears, in the midst of the uncertainty and risks of the coronavirus without scapegoating or reinforcing biases? And how might we support young people to respond in ways that bring out their best (and ours)? In this downloadable [tipsheet](#), we’ve provided ideas for actions to consider during these uncertain times with young people in your family, classroom, or program that are prompted by Search Institute’s [Developmental Relationships Framework](#). This framework articulates key elements of relationships that help young people be and become their best selves.

Working together for the common good

When containing a communicable disease, taking protective measures to prevent the virus from spreading is scientifically sound. But when it comes to building strength in ourselves, our children, our families, our communities, and our nation, isolating ourselves can have the opposite effect: Making us less secure, less trustful, less cooperative, and less human.

Many public health experts say that we might have been more effective in slowing the spread of the coronavirus internationally if we had been more willing to share resources and information more readily sooner, as was being urged by the World Health Organization. Indeed, in an interview published in the *New Yorker* ([March 3, 2020](#)), Dr. Snowden reflected on the patterns of epidemics through history:

‘We have to think that we have to work together as a human species to be organized to care for one another, to realize that the health of the most vulnerable people among us is a determining factor for the health of all of us, and, if we aren’t prepared to do that, we’ll never, ever be prepared to confront these devastating challenges to our humanity.’”

Dr. Snowden was reflecting on global health epidemics for the general population. But his point also resonates with the day-to-day challenges of caring for and nurturing the strengths and resilience of young people, including those who are most vulnerable. If we are to create communities and nations that effectively ensure that young people have the opportunities, supports, and resources they need to grow and thrive, we need to work together aligning our vision and resources to address the challenges and inequities they encounter.

In the short term, young people in some schools and communities may need to spend more time being physically separated from each other. Ten years ago, we would have assumed that the substituted online interactions would be impersonal and transactional. Yet we now know that well-designed, intentional online experiences can foster and sustain meaningful relationships. Our opportunity in the midst of this national challenge is to become more intentional, creative, and innovative ways to use our online interactions to nurture with young people the kinds of developmental relationships they need to be resilient and thrive.