

Living back at home while in college: a perfect storm.

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We aren't trying to be dramatic with the title for this article. We are just saying that having to move back home, because of the Corona virus response, creates a number of situations that when combined can make it hard, not impossible, to have a normal routine.

First, you are switching from face to face classes to online classes. This is hard enough by itself. Online classes require you to set the structure that would normally be set by the class schedule. It used to be that just going to class kept you in a rhythm or habit; it was easier to remember to go to class than it is to schedule time at home for each class. Going to class ensured that you would hear announcements, reminders, and advice from your instructors. Now you have to remember to check the Blackboard site to stay up to date. In a face to face class you could chat, check in with other students easily to get questions answered. Online classes don't have the immediately available conversations. And some students are telling us that there seems to be more work to do in an online class than a face to face class.

Add to this change, the possibility that you don't have a place at home that is free of distractions or interruptions. Your parents may be home due to lay-offs, shut-downs, or your parents may be home because they are now working from home. You may have brothers and sisters who are also not in school. So, you find yourself needing a quiet space to work on classes at a time that the whole family is in the house. Your internet service might be inconsistent. Your home computer might not have all the software you need to do your work. So, the change to online classes might be further complicated by having to share time, space, and hardware with family members.

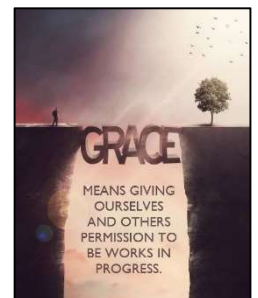
You may need to change your work space. Using post-it notes, calendars pinned to the wall, and daily planners might help. Keeping your work space clean can help; most of your work is probably online, in Blackboard, on your hard drive, or in the cloud...but it can still help to browse your files each day to remember where everything is kept. You might find that it helps to keep everything in a crate, laundry basket, etc. so you can pick up and move to another space quickly. For instance, you might find it helps to move to the back porch when someone in the house needs to do a Zoom meeting.

Everyone has their own preference for working. You need to do what works for you. Saying that, we know that most people tend to do their best heavy thinking in the hours after they wake up. You might schedule your day so that your heavy thinking (writing papers, reading new material) is done right after you get up from bed and save the "busy work" for later in the day.

Add to this combination of online classes and working at home with the additional stress of being back with your family. Research shows us that family relationships can get more tense when adult age children move back home. It is a change for the student but it is also a change for the parents, siblings, and perhaps other family members. Students might feel like the tension is personal; they may feel that the family is mad or frustrated by a student having to return home. Even the best parents can get edgy or irritable having to deal with their own fears of the virus, worry about employment, limited choices with shopping and socializing. Even good parents can struggle with their own guilt and shame about wanting their children to be safe but having to change their daily routines now that more people are in the house.

So, you could have what we call a "perfect storm"; a combination of factors that make it harder to keep working toward the future while figuring out how to study when your siblings want to play, watch television, take naps, etc. It can be hard to find your own daily routine when your meals are coming from the home and you have to go back to helping with household chores on top of your homework.

So how do you get through this "perfect storm"?



Start with keeping yourself calm and giving grace. Cut yourself some slack and cut other people some slack. This is hard for everyone. That doesn't mean everyone gets a pass on being crabby. It just means you and the family have to ease into this new way of living day by day. Don't jump to conclusions; if someone is being picky or critical, first assume they are hurting and they need to work through their own emotions. You don't have to accept their rude behavior, just let it slide for the time being and look down the road. With each day you and your family will adjust to the changes.

Remind yourself that there are times when you will be selfish. That is human. Don't ignore it but also don't beat yourself up over it. Just make a note to do better next time. Ask for forgiveness, and give forgiveness.

Remind yourself that there are times when your parents will be selfish. They are also human. It doesn't mean they are excused, it just means they too need time. Try to not take things personally; blame the situation instead of the person. Enjoy the good times when they happen. Talk to your family and let them know you too are worried and you are worried for them. Grace goes a long way in helping people get through hard times.

Find ways to have "me time" and let others have their "me time" too. Some days just knowing that everyone is healthy, there is food in the house, and the internet is up is enough to celebrate. Life will be different for a while; but that is life. Even without this virus there will be things that we need to accept and work around. Life is a constant process of making changes and settling into routines.

Generally speaking, it is best to remind yourself that everyone is hurting in some way. All you can do, and all you need to do, is to let people know you know they are hurting and let them know what you need. Don't demand what you need, just invite people to think about how everyone needs to work together. Instead of telling people what to do, ask them if they would be willing to do something. Give them the choice, because it is their choice. Let them figure out how they can respond to you.



Think of it using the terms of rights and responsibilities. In a home, everyone has rights but to have those rights everyone has to have responsibilities. For example, you need two hours of quiet to take a test. Mom needs two hours of running the vacuum cleaner or Dad needs two hours to do laundry. Acknowledge that they have needs and ask how you can work together to get all needs met. Maybe they can change their schedule and you can do some of the vacuuming or laundry. Maybe sit down with everyone and figure out when people need it to be quiet and when they need it to be noisy.

Simply put, the response to the virus is making you and your family give up old habits and routines and start new ones. It isn't easy, but it can be done. It just takes more talking, more patience, and more grace. I remember a junior high gym teacher and coach who would always yell "*you guys are on the same team*". He would yell that a lot because we were all playing as individuals. We weren't working with each other; we were each doing our own thing and trying to score. Now is a good time to see your family, and yourself, as a team. Be ready to pass, look to see who is open, make the assist, don't hog the ball...you get the picture. Give yourself the respect that you give your family members. Don't get down when someone makes a mistake. Don't beat yourself up when you goof up. Stay in the game and trust each other.

