

Things I've Learned from COVID-19 Social Distancing

By Christine Curry Ross

Associate Dean of Institutional Effectiveness

The following was written in May 2020 in the early weeks of the pandemic

ONE – It's easier to teach somebody else's kids than your own. For my tribe, the beginning of our COVID-19 reality started March 13, when Virginia announced public K-12 schools would be closed for two weeks, which then blossomed to the rest of the school year. By the last week of March, I was working from home. This really translates to “do everything you normally do at work in a day AND make sure the Grinch (my 16 year-old) and Littlest Man (my youngest son) are still learning at the same time, AKA the “Ultimate Multitasking Home-school Challenge.” I started off those first few days with delusions of grandeur – posting my pretty little well planned lists on Facebook, embracing this opportunity to help my boys learn areas of self-interest. Having been a fairly decent public school teacher in a past life, I was SO confident that I was up for the challenge. By Day Three, the lists were gone, the learning vs. sleeping in/video game battle began, and every positive Facebook “see how well my child and I are rocking this learning from home thing” post made me beat myself up for my own failures as a working-from-home-while-pandemic-homeschooling-Mom.

TWO – We all deal with stressors differently. Straight shooting here – the first two to three weeks were more than just rough. About every three days I would have an emotional meltdown, with anger, yelling, and then loads of tears. MackDaddy (my husband) had a few temper flares in those first few weeks as well. Social media memes were joking about loads of babies nine months from now named Rona; meanwhile I was thinking the opposite – this shelter-in-place is going to lead to more divorces! The boys were having their own hurdles trying to figure out this new world of shelter-in-place. Our Grinch, mourning the loss of his friends, the reality that his 16th birthday was now in lock down, not to mention the music camp he loves and looks forward to all year may now be cancelled – slept... I mean A LOT! His days and nights became flipped. He totally became part bat, I swear! On the other hand was Littlest Man. Overhearing the news and adult conversations, he became afraid to leave the house because the virus might get him. Top all of this off with the stress of the unknown, and a side order of expecting everyone else to be dealing with all these uncontrollable changes with a new twist every day – it was a recipe for disaster. Once MackDaddy and I stepped back and realized we all just needed some space to deal with this in our own way – things have been much more – peaceful. Once we started to realize that these were our reactions to this unknown, there seemed to be a communal sigh of relief and we started working on a new and more healthy “coronormal”. I have let go of trying to control everything; Mackdaddy makes sure to walk away and get some air before letting situations get to him; the Grinch is still sleeping in but his days and nights are not fully flipped; we are limiting the COVID news and Littlest Man is feeling better about going out in the yard, or walking the neighborhood with social distancing.

THREE – Even though we’re in the same storm we’re not in the same boat. There was a post going around social media with this tag line and it really rang true for me. Whether it is because of your family dynamics, your work situation, or your political views – reality truly is relative. It is much easier for me to accept and adhere to sheltering in place when both MackDaddy and I are fully able to work from home and bring in our same paychecks. No one in our immediate tribe works in healthcare, retail, or the food industry, so we are not walking into the healthcare crises side of things each day. I can’t help but believe we would be weathering this whole storm quite differently if: we had no income because of the economic shutdowns; we lost a family member to COVID-19; we had no savings to pay our bills and buy food; or we were furloughed or lost our jobs because our company closed indefinitely.

FOUR – Community counts. Whether you are in a small town or big city – check on your neighbors and single friends. As crazy as we may be getting cooped up with kids or spouses, there are plenty of people even more isolated and totally alone. With so many families spread across the nation, your elderly neighbor may not have family close by to check in on them. We try to drop off a goody for our elderly neighbors once a week with our phone number so they know we are thinking of them and here if they need anything.

FIVE – Be discriminate on your consumption of media. For me, this time has been THE WORST! As states begin to look to reopen, I am learning terms such as gaslighting. It seems as the shutdown lingers on, the divergence of opinions and views of reality continue to skew to the right or the left. There are SO many websites and videos out there, on BOTH sides of the political aisle, that are built in a way that they appear to be actual news stories, when in reality they are all fictitious, yet are being shared like wildfire. Rather than completely start to question everything we have been living through for the last eight weeks, I have started running every news-looking item in my feeds past the scrutiny of snopes.com and an “is it news” site. I have also given myself permission to take a 30-day break from some of my peeps that consistently want to spread these stories — there is enough stress and anxiety in my life right now. Give yourself permission to do the same.

SIX – Sleep is GOLDEN! Around week three, my already middle age messed up sleep cycle went haywire. Instead of just getting up for an hour or so in the middle of the night, I started sleeping three hours...TOPS! I was beyond exhausted and just could...not ... sleep! Come to find out – pandemics can do that to you! It took about two and a half more weeks and some more self-forgiveness, and at least now I am back to my normal bad sleep habits (it is a work in progress...).

SEVEN – It’s hard to be creative under unknown stress. Yeah – at the beginning of the stay-at-home order, along with delusions of home schooling extraordinaire, I also suffered from thinking with all this home time I would most certainly finish writing my novel I have had going on the back burner for longer than I care to mention. I would get back to blogging at least two or three days a week. Maybe even dust off my guitar and piano and start playing beautiful music again. I mean, at

this point we have probably all seen the meme about what Shakespeare and Sir Isaac Newton accomplished while they lived through a pandemic ... why not me?! Ummm.. no, Turns out it was all I have just to get through the day without wanting to lock myself alone in my car in the garage for a few hours. Alas, pandemic stress and lack of sleep don't really do much for getting my creative juices flowing.

EIGHT – Give grace to yourself. You are doing the best you can with what you have in uncharted territory. Give yourself some latitude and self-love.

NINE – Give grace to others. Review #2, #3, and #5.

TEN – Roll with it. — with so much uncertainty, let go and let God. Now, eight weeks into our 'coronormal', the boys are learning at a much more relaxed pace. Littlest Man seems to do best if he comes in my home office by 9am and gets it all done early (reading, writing, and one other area each day) in my reading chair while I am working at my desk next to him. The Grinch sleeps much later, and oversees his own learning (he argued that he has maintained straight A's despite being in dual enrollment courses AND taking 8 courses instead of 7 like everyone else — and he was right, I couldn't really argue back). It's a compromise, but it works. We put in our day's work, have all of our meals together, and enjoy playing games (Littlest Man is killing us with Monopoly) or watching movies together in the evenings. We celebrate the small stuff, and are learning how to make the best of a situation out of our control. My yarn stash is well stocked, our ebooks replenished, and audible is reloaded. Rather than planning for our vacation, we are figuring out how to give Littlest Man his camp experience this summer in our back yard (you guessed it – his camp was cancelled). I refuse to call this a new normal, but more of our transition to the new normal.