

Advice for parents who are feeling isolated: ‘Ask for what you need, give what you can’



By Pooja Makhijani

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When extreme social distancing became widespread in the United States earlier this month, and friends began to hunker down with their loved ones, I panicked. I've long lived with anxiety and depression, and some social interaction — although not too much since I'm somewhat of an introvert — keeps me in good health. I mourned the temporary loss of connecting face-to-face.

I'm also a single parent with a full physical and emotional load, so I live with my parents, both of whom are in their 60s. They act as co-parents, and distancing myself and my 8-year-old daughter from them seemed like an impossible task. I was preoccupied by anxieties about my own mental health and the social-emotional well-being of my child — who was devastated when I told her that school was closed for several weeks and that she had to limit her interactions with her grandparents.

I knew that I wasn't the only parent overwhelmed right now. So, I reached out to friends around the world not only to commiserate, but also to crowdsource ideas for how best to build new models of human connection during what may become a prolonged period of separation.

(New Jersey, where I live, has the second-highest number of coronavirus cases in the nation as I am writing this, and schools, workplaces and essential businesses will be closed for some time.)

My fears are not unfounded: Social distancing can increase stress; create a sense of overwhelm and frustration because of lack of support; exacerbate feelings of anger and irritation; or trigger mental health conditions such as anxiety, depression, panic attacks and post-traumatic stress disorder, says Carla Marie Manly, a California-based clinical psychologist.

"We are highly social beings," she says. "We are hardwired to need and desire support and assistance from others. Social connections often provide the energy that helps parents thrive personally — and in their [caregiving role]."

Parents and experts alike reiterated that being attentive and proactive, and communicating about our feelings, can mitigate some of this emotional turbulence and also strengthen our ability to build or maintain strong social bonds.

Julie Schwietert Collazo, a nonprofit director in Queens and mother of three young children, had been intentional about building a like-minded "village" for her family, and she's mindful that she and her partner, as well as her cadre of parent-friends, feel very equipped at this moment. "Our current 'structure' is low pressure, no pressure," she says. Her parenting community members share their loose plans for the day, and their children virtually interact when they have the time, interest or head space.

As grateful as she is for all of the opportunities for gathering virtually, the longer she stays inside, the more acutely she realizes how much her and her family's definition of "community" depends on being with others — and not through a device. "The physicality of our community is more important than I realized," she says, describing a pervasive longing and sadness.

"But in the absence of that, we are at no better time in human history than now to stay connected," she adds. "We share the [collective] load as much as possible. We are in constant conversation as a community of friends, assessing what we have to offer that can make our children's lives even richer."

Irina Dumitrescu, a scholar and writer in Bonn, Germany, has remained in touch with other parents in her community while encouraging her 8-year-old son's interactions with other children via Skype and other online meeting tools. "By trying to make the connections between our children, we are also continuing the kind of conversations we would have around play dates," she says. She's also making it a point to contact, via email or text, three people per day, just to check in. "I want to let the other person know that if they need to offload or talk or connect, they're not alone in their homes, they have someone thinking about them."

Without ignoring the human suffering that has come to pass and that's yet to come, Dumitrescu is hopeful that some individuals' priorities will shift to "the things that matter most," she says, including the deepening of existing relationships and the forging of new ones.

In Singapore, Gail Wong, an entrepreneur and mother of two, has been heeding government recommendations to socially distance since earlier this year and, as of this week, is following even more stringent public health measures in the city-state. While schools have not shuttered — "yet," in Wong's words — her two children's worlds have shrunk; they thrive on adventure and discovery in the company of others. She is not only bringing the outside world to her children, but making sure she remains in touch with their inner worlds as well.

"Just as I check in with my friends, I check in with them," Wong says.

"I ask, 'What are you missing, what is off?' Helping them identify their needs helps me help them," which, in turn, makes her better able to parent.

Providing a mantra for our times — "Ask for what you need; give what you can" — Briana Mohan, an academic and career adviser at Tulane University in New Orleans and mother of a 7-year-old and an 11-year-old, remains attentive to others, both in her family and among her wider circle of parent-friends. "Noticing whether I or a family member or a friend feel anxious or terrified or any other emotion — those things tend to be most helpful to figure out the 'hows,'" she says, adding that there have been many moments in the past few weeks that she has confronted unfamiliar emotions, such as a near-panic attack. She used a college friend's online meditation, and invited her children to join her, to re-center herself.

More than ever, it has been helpful for Mohan to turn to the collective knowledge of her communities. "There are different things that each of us need, and there are different things that each of us know," she says. "It's imperative to examine what do you already do and know that could be helpful in this situation to someone else, or, if you are in a needy situation, what do you need that someone else can provide for you."

So I'm taking her advice. I'm asking for help, which for now comes mostly in the form of phone calls for me and virtual play dates for my daughter. I called on an epidemiologist friend for advice on how to manage in a multigenerational household. We're taking reasonable precautions, such as frequent hand-washing and meticulous sanitizing to minimize risk. And I'm making myself available to others — as a resource for recipes or home schooling activities and as a listening ear to those whose challenges are different from mine. Being open and vulnerable has served me well in past difficult situations, and now while we are social distancing, I'm reaching into that well of giving often. Even writing this piece has made me feel less alone.

Indefinite uncertainty is unnerving, and there is only so much control a person can exert upon an ever-changing situation before breaking, says Manly. Actively listening — to ourselves and others — and acting or asking can "offer some realistic comfort," she says. That's the best anyone, including me, can do right now.