



STAR Initiative

## Physical Distancing: 6 Tips for Staying Socially Connected from Afar

On a typical Wednesday, I see a half dozen familiar faces on the walk from my car to clinic. Each morning, I get the joy of seeing babies snuggled into their parents' arms, kids tugging on a parent's shirt asking to play with their parents' phone, and parents greeting interpreters and friends in the waiting room. The smiles exchanged with patients and with the front desk staff set an amazing stage for the day. In this time of physical distancing, though, I've lost those incidental moments. I've lost the connections with my pediatrician friends and colleagues that come from curbside consults and working together to serve our kids. This is a very real loss and it is ok for all of us to let ourselves experience honestly what that has meant.

However, even as we collectively mourn the loss of social routines, we can still remain connected and can create new routines that have the potential to maintain and even grow our social relationships in unexpected ways.

**Tip 1: Turn in-person interactions into virtual ones.** Tools like Skype, Zoom, Google Hangouts, and Facetime can be a great tool – allowing you to see friends, family, and collaborators without needing to be in the same place. In the past two weeks, I have had research lab meetings (with a group of 10), mentorship meetings (just two of us), department wide-meetings (with dozens of faculty), and collaborator meetings (with 3 plus attendees). Its been wonderful and reassuring to see the faces of so mentees/colleagues and I've found that these have been just as productive as the in-person version. When a dear friend had her birthday party, she brilliantly turned it into a skype party and a local event suddenly could include friends across the country – it was so fun to get to know her dearest friends and to collectively celebrate her! If you can't seem to get these tools to work – that's ok! Especially with someone you know well, a phone call can be every-bit-as-connecting as a video call.

**Tip 2: Create new routines for reaching out to others.** For most of us, prior to COVID-19, there were countless opportunities to run into familiar and unfamiliar others – the walk to work, school drop-off, a trip to the grocery store – throughout the day we don't even notice how often we had a chance to trade a smile or say hello. Now, we will all need to make a bit more effort to create those routines. Even with this extra effort, it does not need to take much time. A friend of mine has started texting a different friend each morning as part of her routine. I've had more interactions with neighbors (from a careful distance!) as I've waved at them across the street, over the fence, or texted them to check in each afternoon.

**Tip 3: Consider social media as a way to stay connected – and create goals for how to use it.** Many of us were already using social media tools such as Facebook and Twitter to share pictures of our growing children with our families and friends, to create and maintain

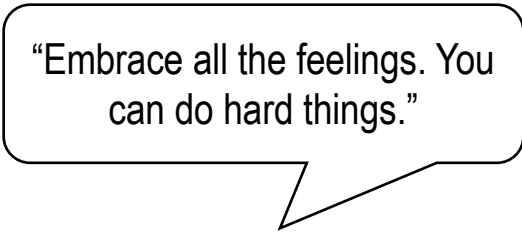
professional communities, and to disseminate/ share knowledge. These tools can become a tremendous resource at a time when in person interactions are necessarily limited. If you are not already using social media, or if you are but are shifting the ways that you are using it, consider what goals you have for social media use. Would you like to be better connected to the resources and social community in your neighborhood? Do you need help navigating changes to your job that have arisen due to COVID-19? Maybe you quickly need to learn how to deliver therapy by phone or teach to a virtual classroom. Perhaps you need a crash course in homeschooling. Perhaps you are looking for a sense of purpose and for ways to try to help your community to manage COVID-19 or even tips for how to reduce your own risk of getting COVID-19. Finally, many of us just need a community of others who can collectively mourn, support, and move forward. Your goals for social media use may help you to pick which platform to use, what social media “groups” to join (or create!), and who to “follow” or “friend.” Even if you have always been active on social media, when you consider your goals during this time of change you may realize that you want to use social media tools somewhat differently in upcoming weeks and months.

**Tip 4: Remember that different people can fill different roles in your life.** You may have “that friend” who you know you can count on to make you laugh. Or that friend who is always there to listen without judgment. Or someone who you can problem solve with, so that by the end of the conversation you’ve figured out how to accomplish the impossible. Make the most of each friend, each social media platform, and recognize that it is rare if not impossible for just one person or just one platform to meet all of our needs. It also may be that for some relationships you may need to get creative about how to stay connected. Maybe friends you watched the game with, can become friends you challenge to an online video game. Friends who you met for coffee to talk through your stresses can be friends you talk to over the phone with coffee you make at your house.

**Tip 5: In-person interactions at home will change. Be flexible. Be kind.** For many of us, school, work, and other activities meant that time with everyone together in the same living space was limited. In my family, school and work responsibilities have shifted quite suddenly and we are now all sharing the same home twenty-four hours a day, 7 days a week. Our child needs protected space and time (and supervision!) for remote schooling. My partner and I need space out of our child’s earshot for research meetings related to sensitive discussions (the research focus of our work includes suicide and trauma) and I need to coordinate to assure complete privacy for telepsychology when I am wearing my “clinical hat.” As I write this, my husband is on a study section call and my child is working on the literacy part of the day. I have moved one of my meetings to happen after my child’s bedtime and an earlier meeting took place by phone as my child ran around outside during “physical education.” All of these moving parts require patience and ongoing communication/coordination. Over the course of weeks to come, we will all need to be flexible – striving for effectiveness over perfection. We will need to be kind to ourselves, with self-compassion when we can’t live up to impossible expectations (such as being the best-ever homeschool teacher while maintaining the same level of productivity at work). We will need to be kind to each other, understanding that it’s normal for kids to be sad or mad at unexpected moments when we don’t explain things the way that their teacher does.

We may find ourselves being uncharacteristically short or impatient or easily annoyed. Just notice. Take a breath. Give yourself a break and a “do over.” A few times I’ve caught myself being short with my child and have stopped what I’m doing, looked him in the eyes and apologized (“I’m sorry I was short with you”), checked in (“what do you need?”), and then after being present with and responsive to whatever was needed I explained what I will do next time (“I will work to be a better listener.”). I remind myself that this is difficult for him, too, and it is so important to be kind to him AND to myself as we adjust.

**Tip 6: Change is hard and this will take an effort – hang in there!** It will be some time before routines take hold and stop being effortful. New routines will need to be created. The interactions that seemed so easy before will need work and renegotiation. Check in regularly with others in your life to see how things are going with your new approaches to staying and be flexible about making adjustments. Recently, when I was coping with the death of my father, a friend texted me, “Embrace all the feelings. You can do hard things.” I’ve scrolled back to that text more than a few times in the past two weeks. This fully-compliant-with-CDC-physical-distancing message has meant more to me than I can articulate.



“Embrace all the feelings. You can do hard things.”

We can all do this. Together. It will be hard. And we can do hard things.

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