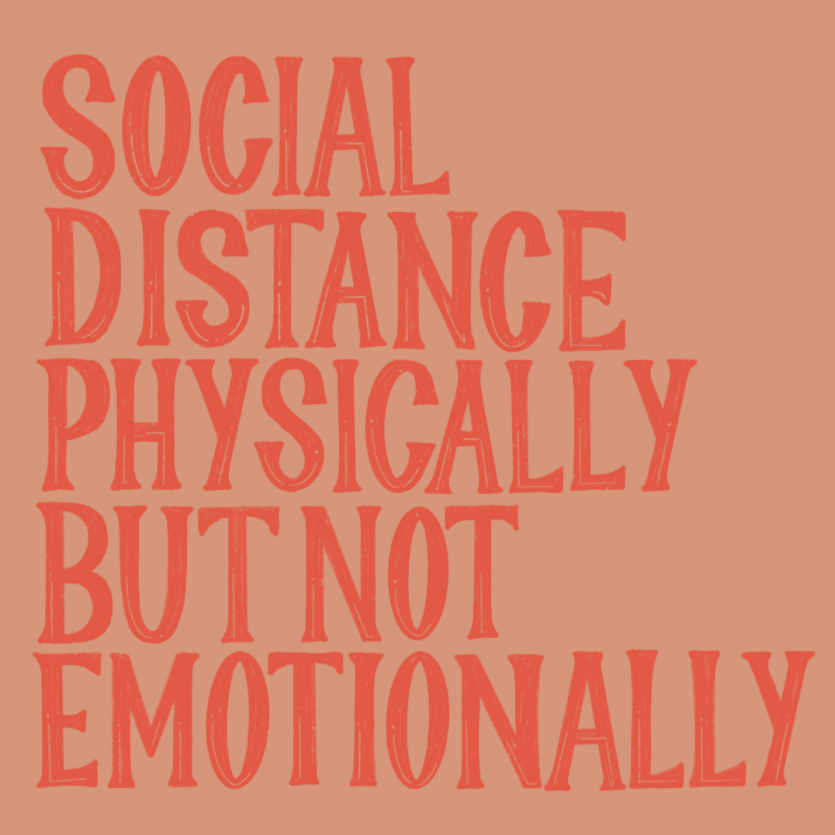


The top of the page features a decorative background of vertical red brushstrokes of varying lengths and thicknesses, creating a textured, artistic effect.

JULIE LYTHCOTT-HAIMS

**Navigating COVID-19 with Young Adult Offspring:
Here's What You Might Hear... Here's What You
Might Say...**

A solid red rectangular box containing white text in a bold, serif font. The text is arranged in five lines, centered within the box.

**SOCIAL
DISTANCE
PHYSICALLY
BUT NOT
EMOTIONALLY**

If you've got a young adult in your life, they may be having a hard time being back at home (or contemplating coming back). They play new roles out there in the world which have nothing to do with us. They have their own routines with people they've come to rely upon and care about. They've been doing the hard work of becoming their adult selves, with some fun stuff thrown in too no doubt. They're accustomed to being on their own, and if not completely on their own then at least not with us all the time.

I feel for them. Since my next book is for them, I've been doing a lot of thinking about who they are as a generation, what they need, and what makes them thrive. The ways in which today's young adults differ from those of yesteryear are well known, yet we older folk can still relate to their predicament, and therefore offer empathy. I mean, take me back to the late 80s and tell me I have to return to my parents' home just as my independence is taking off? No thank you.

But I also gotta say... this whole situation can be challenging for us older folk, too. Dan and I were empty nesting as of this fall (or 'free-birding' as we called it LOL). We missed Sawyer and Avery terribly—I'd pass their empty rooms each morning and sigh, often!—but it was simultaneously a delicious new phase for us where time was ours to do with as we wanted. Now in the blink of an eye we're cooking for four again, cognizant of other peoples' wants, needs, and moods, paying a LOT more for groceries, and contending with stuff... everywhere. And that's the easy part.

Harder are the conversations we have to have with them about social distancing. Harder still are the unspoken feelings of what they've left behind or perhaps lost forever. Like the experiences and rituals that won't happen, the dreams deferred, and the big pause button that's been pushed on the ride of their life. Then there's the realm of the practical. Who's responsible for what in this new paradigm? They want us to respect their autonomy and independence. But with rights come responsibilities, right?

I'd like to try to help you as I endeavor to navigate these things in my own house. So here are my thoughts about what I sense young adult offspring may be feeling right now, followed by my suggestions for how you might respond:

1. They don't want to be treated like children.

But they ARE our children, aren't they? Well... yes and no. In a technical sense, yes, of course, they are. But almost by definition if they've returned to our home, they're somewhere in between childhood and full-fledged adulthood that entails a tremendous amount of growth which we don't want to inhibit or undo. And yet, being back home means they're dependent on us at least a little bit and perhaps quite a lot. We need to get it all sorted out.

I recommend you set the tone by having a family meeting with your young adult offspring to talk about how roles and expectations have changed since they were last living under your roof. The purpose is to check in on how everyone is doing, and to go over roles and responsibilities for keeping the household functioning. And don't impose the date/time of the meeting on them. (I learned this lesson the hard way). Instead ask for input on a time that works for all, just as you would if you were setting up a meeting with an adult friend or colleague.

2. They want connection, but they also want to be able to make their own choices.

Our family meeting continues...

Open the meeting by acknowledging that your kids aren't children anymore, and that even though they're back home you don't want to fall into old roles—both for their sake and for yours. Acknowledge that there are some things we may need and want to do together, but there are plenty of times when we want to be able to do our own thing. State that while each of us has different ways we want and need to spend our time, there are also things we need to take responsibility for, collectively. So we want to find out how everyone is doing individually, and then figure out how we're going to handle the collective stuff.

Ask everyone to do a 2-3 minute check-in starting with saying whether you're "Green" (fine) "Yellow" (so-so) or "Red" (doing poorly), and then explaining what that means. Acknowledge what people have shared. When this part is over, thank everyone for sharing.

Segue into the main topic which is a conversation about collectively running the household in this very unusual time. You might liken your home to an Airbnb with individually rented rooms and one shared kitchen and common area. Or perhaps it's a group that's gone camping and you need to figure out who is best at what. In my view, the biggest topics to cover are meals and chores, but you might have others.

- **Meals:** You're trying to establish expectations that everyone can rely upon. Does everyone want to eat every meal together? Just dinners? Every day or just a few days a week? Who will cook? These are all things to work out together, and you'll need to figure out whether you'll ask these questions once a week, or treat each day as it comes. At our family meeting I said that I was happy to make breakfast for others but was having a hard time balancing that with getting my work done. I learned that one of my kids is happy to get their own breakfast (I'll admit this makes me a bit sad!) and that the other would love for me to make it. I said that works, as long as it happens by 9:30am so that I can get on with my day. We also agreed that we would have dinner as a family at around 7pm each night, but that anyone can opt out, with notice.
- **Chores:** Reiterate that if the household is going to run smoothly with everyone up in it, everyone needs to pitch in. Toss out a list of chores (think through what needs to be done daily versus multiple times a week, weekly, and biweekly). Figure out who will be responsible for what. Ideally the plan should feel equal—whatever that means in your family—in that everyone does some things, regularly. But take note of important distinctions. In my house, for example, Avery is a full-time college student navigating virtual classes in a different time zone and producing homework, while Sawyer is not. So Avery needs more leeway when it comes to chores, whereas Sawyer can help out more yet his need for downtime has to be respected, too. Ideally everyone is doing the chores they're best suited to. One obvious chore is getting (and cleaning) the groceries. Here, family members at lower risk might be tasked with going to the

supermarket and drugstore. Or maybe they're the ones to wipe it all down once it comes home. We went with Instacart grocery delivery this week (thank you, Instacart!) and when it arrived Avery was doing homework while Sawyer, Dan, and I wiped down the containers, washed the produce, delivered my mom's items to her, and put the rest of it away. This is what felt fair for our household. You will come up with your own plan!

I recommend you end by thanking everyone for the conversation. Indicate that it'll probably be a good idea to check in on how all of this is going for everyone in another week.

As with all things, you will have your own needs and nuance. Through connection and allowing everyone to make their own choices, the goal is to segue your relationship with your young adult offspring from one that was once relatively hierarchical (parent as instructor; child as follower) to one where your young adult offspring is more of an equal (in terms of rights AND responsibilities). The older they are, the more important this is. Hopefully this time spent back at home with you will offer them the chance to further develop the skills that will pay dividends when they get back out in the real world.

3. They ache to see their peers in person.

While FaceTime and Zoom are like modern day science-fiction for those of us who are older, our young adult offspring already routinely connect with each other this way... What they ache for is the in-person connection, particularly if they have close friends or a significant other. You want to validate that, and empathize. At the same time, this virus is serious and rules must be followed.

They are young adults, so you don't want to take the approach of THOU SHALT NOT. Rather you want to invite them to make safe and healthy decisions. But don't mince words. Talk through the science. Tell them it's clear that to lower the number of deaths that will result from COVID-19:

- Unless we are "essential workers" we have to practice social-distancing NOW
- We can only leave the house for necessities
- If we do venture out beyond our germ circle, we must stay at least 6 feet away from all other humans

You might tell them that one of the most fundamental facets of adulthood is the realization that life isn't all about us anymore—this virus happens to be the perfect reminder that as adults we have a collective responsibility to keep our families, community, and society safe.

Also tell them that tremendous trust is what holds the family germ circle together. What that means is that each of us trusts that all of the others will abide by the six-foot-apart rule and practice the required hygiene rules. And with that trust, we're good. Because here's the rub:

Human connection, exercise, and fresh air are all necessary for our wellness, so we have to inject those things in our lives even as we're doing our best to mostly stay inside. So we must be able to trust that our young adult offspring can occasionally meet up with a friend for a walk or bike ride (they should not travel in the same car), or meet a friend at a park, and even whisper sweet nothings around a fire pit as long as they commit to staying 6 feet apart. (If you have younger kids you might explain that you can't trust that the 5 or 11-year old will be able to stay 6 feet apart from a friend, which is why you are not allowing playdates for them. This will help them see that you are treating them as an adult, not as a child).

4. They're tired of talking about the virus and its impact on their lives.

First, remember that the virus is A LOT to process for your young adult offspring. The scary reality is inescapable, and our devices chirp with the latest discouraging updates. Blech. (I mean it's A LOT for you, too, right?)

This unusual moment can harm our mental health, or can exacerbate an existing mental health condition. (Although I want to acknowledge that for some, this opportunity to retreat from the world is just what the doctor ordered.) We need to check in on how our young adult offspring are doing without being annoying. I recommend you choose your path carefully and wisely.

Give your young adult offspring space, yet check in with them on this every few days. If you sense that they are struggling, ask them if they want to talk. And if they do, listen well and reflect back what you hear. Avoid giving advice. Your greatest gift to them is not your ideas or solutions (and certainly not your stress and worries – unload those on your partner or a friend your own age). Your greatest gift to your kid is your presence, coupled with empathy. Summon a memory of fear or loss you experienced when you were their age and tell how it felt. (Don't act like it's the same thing they're going through; your goal here is just to show them that you can sortof relate.)

And let me also acknowledge that it's hard to be a role model for our kid when we, too, are struggling. I encourage you to try your best to focus on the only things you can control, which are your own actions and your own responses in the moment.

5. They are worried about the future.

Will I still have my job? When will my college invite me back? Will I get an internship? These questions are very much on the minds of a generation raised with the constant fear of getting off track. Their fear is real and valid—again, acknowledge it, validate it, empathize. Tell them we do not know when things will get back to normal, but we are optimistic that it won't be too long.

And although we truly do not yet know whether that cool summer thing is on or off, whether

school will resume in the fall, whether that certain test will take place, or if that job will be available, we do have a lot of say over what is happening in our home TODAY. Be that role model of being in charge of the only thing you can be in charge of: YOU. Read books. Do puzzles. Exercise. Talk about something interesting happening with your work. Play music. Weed the garden. Fix a leaky roof. Dance. My mother taught Avery to embroider. Avery and Dan made candles. Dan and Sawyer practiced their guitars. All while I try to give advice to other people :) When the Instacart delivery came and we prepared to methodically cleanse the new groceries of a potential virus, I asked Sawyer to put on Simon and Garfunkel. And goddamn it if hearing those voices of calm comfort from MY childhood didn't help me keep the lid on my own anxiety, more or less.

6. They might want to stay where they are rather than come back home.

Both Avery and Sawyer are back home with us, but if you have offspring still weighing that decision, here's what I'd do...

I'd ask them for their thoughts on the pros and cons of staying put versus returning home. First off, recognize that they might feel an obligation to care for you (and if so, you'll need to listen well to what they're trying to tell you). Yet the older they are, the more likely they are to have a full life of their own which means coming home may feel really complicated, perhaps even untenable to them. They'll particularly feel this way if they have a significant other.

I asked [Clarice Cho](#) for her thoughts on this—she's the 25-year-old freelance lettering artist, designer, and social media manager who helps me communicate all of my thoughts to you. (Thank you, Clarice!) Two weeks ago, she was living the life in New York City. Then she decided she really needed to be home with her folks in the Bay Area. She described her decision to me this way. "After an initial quarantine [in NYC], I made the decision last week to fly back to California (to my parent's house that I grew up in), to ride out the rest of this unknown shelter-in-place period. I'm self-quarantining in my room for 14 days here to ensure I am not carrying the virus or could infect my parents. It was an incredibly tough decision to come back for many reasons, but I think for the long-term the right one for my own sanity and mental health."

Wherever our young adult offspring end up riding out this virus, the main point is that in order to slow the spread of the virus and keep themselves and those they care about safe, they need to shelter in place. If they have roommates/housemates, they are essentially functioning as a germ circle if not a family. That means they can be in close proximity to those persons while practicing the necessary hygiene (frequent handwashing for 20 seconds with soap and water; don't touch their hands to their face; if returning home from somewhere shower immediately and put clothes in wash). It also means that in order to contain the spread of the virus they must stay six feet away from all others. I'd frame it as a commitment to one another's safety and to the safety of us all. I'd say it's a set of behavioral requirements

based largely on trust.

This also means that as the virus and our response to it continue to play out, our young adult offspring may at some point want to venture toward greater responsibility. They may want to rent a place with their peeps and cohabitate. As long as they can cook and clean for themselves, I'm all for it. (I might even help with the bills since work is hard to come by in this unusual moment). Talk about adulting!

7. Don't Just Take My Word For It....

Since I am interested in empowering young adults, rather than speak for them I've asked 25-year-old Clarice to share with you her overarching thoughts on this subject:

How did you feel when you first became aware that something serious was going on?

I just felt fear. And maybe a little bit of dread. I'm already a bit of a hypochondriac and germaphobe, so news of a pandemic just heightened all of those anxieties. Initially I also felt anger, because some people were mocking those like me who were taking it seriously—I almost felt like I was being gaslit to feel extra for taking precautions. Luckily my close circle was supportive and took it equally as seriously, so we just commiserated together.

How have your behaviors changed? How have they not changed?

I do more frequent wipe-downs of surfaces and my phone (used to just be once a day, now I try to do as frequently as I wash my hands). I think the biggest thing is not being able to go out to restaurants, coffee shops, and shows. I moved to New York for those things, and it feels weird to be there when all those establishments are closed for now.

What is hardest about this for you?

I feel a strong sense of grief—grief for all the plans I had coming up, and grief for the life I thought I'd have in New York. I feel strong waves of sadness and pits in my stomach each week from that, and it took me a while to pinpoint that the feeling was grief. And of course, the fact that so many people are getting sick. It's scary—I worry for myself, sure, but mostly for my older family members and immuno-compromised friends.

Are there any benefits?

Absolutely. I have caught up with friends in different places more than ever before. We do weekly Quiplash (digital party game) sessions, virtual happy hours, and dance parties. Normally we all have separate lives and it's hard to find time to chat. Now, it's all we have time to do. In a way, I feel more in touch with them than ever before (but not physically in-touch :). Also, I've read stories about how the planet is healing itself during this time of less consumption (specifically, photos from the canals in Italy come to mind). That's **incredibly** encouraging, and I think that if we can tackle this pandemic together, we can also tackle climate change.

What is the biggest question on your mind right now?

How are we going to go back to "normal" and how long will it take? Not to be dramatic, but will things ever be the same again, or should we expect that social distancing from our friends and family is how it's going to be going forward?

What would you say to older people about how your generation is feeling right now?

We do care, and most of us do take it seriously. Just thinking of my parents, I think I am more afraid of this spreading than they are! This affects all of us, it doesn't discriminate based on age, so we all have to be in this together. Also, I hope that no one discredits how others are feeling. I could see someone saying, "Oh bummer, you just can't go out or hang with friends," or to high-school seniors, "So what if prom is canceled? Bigger things are happening." That devalues what's important to certain groups of young people. It's all relative, right? For me, the biggest thing was a friend's bachelor party (and hopefully the wedding is still on for summer?!). It's my first friend to get married, so I've never experienced anything like it before. Sure, on paper it's just a fun weekend—but emotionally it still feels like a weighty event that's suddenly been taken away.

What would you say to your generation by way of advice and support?

If you're someone like me who has tried very hard to follow the rules, stay up-to-date on the news, and do your part to flatten the curve, and you see peers who aren't, say something. I've had to do this and it's...extremely awkward. You have to play the parent and tell your peers, "I know you want to go to Hannah's but maybe do a digital hangout rather than expose yourself to a larger group?" which feels like overstepping. But explain that just because we're no longer physically interacting, doesn't mean interaction has to stop. Have the hard conversation if you see the current guidelines being unfollowed, and if they're really your friend, they'll get where you're coming from. And lastly I'll just say to my peers: sitting at home, watching the entirety of Netflix, and never having to put on real pants or a bra is not the worst punishment (but be sure to get fresh air every day if you can!). The sooner we all do it, the sooner we can resume normal life out in the world!

What's your advice on how we are all going to get through this?

Just stay calm. The mental gymnastics we as humans are able to do is both incredible and absolutely terrifying. Try not to get into dread spirals. Look at this time as an opportunity to deepen connections with loved ones, learn a new skill, or just process your thoughts (I've never had this much time to journal in my life!). We're going to get through this if we stick together and continue to support each other. Also, get some puzzles. They are a BLAST and pass the time beautifully. Currently working on [this one](#).

I'm an eternal optimist to be sure, but taking that hat off and trying to be quite realistic I actually think Coronavirus and its required sequestration could provide marvelous fuel to our young adult offspring. Treating them as adults with rights and responsibilities at home could help them prepare to lead and serve our communities, institutions, and nation. And goodness knows we could use a set of strong leaders in the next generation.

So there you have it. I'll talk to you next week. Meantime, my best to you and all the young adults you know and love. Together + apart we're going to get through this!

xo,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "JULIE". The letter "J" is large and stylized, with a long horizontal stroke that extends to the left and curves under the "L". The letters "U", "L", "I", and "E" are in a simple, uppercase, sans-serif font.

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