WFH | Focus on the positive to keep family interactions constructive

Life & Work Connections
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Reflect for a moment, back to this past holiday season: celebrating Thanksgiving with family, ringing in the new year with friends. During that joyous time, it is highly unlikely that you could have known about the challenges we would be facing a few months in the future.

Gov. Doug Ducey's official "Stay Home, Stay Healthy, Stay Connected" executive order went into effect March 31 at 5 p.m. However, many of us had already begun sheltering at home when schools closed March 16. While staying in close quarters has the benefit of keeping us near loved ones during a time of crisis and anxiety, it can test the resolve of even the most patient and loving among us.

Now that we have lived this way for several weeks, we have an opportunity to take a step back with our family members, to explore what is working well. Family therapists often employ this approach, rather than discussing what is broken, when it comes to solving relational problems.

Families can become stuck in maladaptive patterns of interaction, amplifying negativity within the household. Perhaps you find yourself frequently pointing out what your child is not doing, such as putting away their toys after playing. Both of you leave the conversation feeling hurt or frustrated. In the context of prolonged time together, these feelings can fester into larger behavioral problems.

Focusing on the positive and what is working well can give the family a collective boost of self-esteem. It can also allow family members who are not typically included in the conversation to feel like they have a voice and are helping during a difficult time.

How can families take on this positive self-assessment project on their own? Here are a few suggestions to consider.

Lead with appreciation (whole family)

Hold a family dinner or game night with everyone present. Parents lead off the conversation by expressing appreciation for someone else in the family. Ask others to share something they are grateful for. Sharing appreciation and gratitude fosters positivity and helps to set a constructive tone.

The conversation can then pivot to what the family is doing well. If the discussion turns negative, gently steer back to the positive assessment. Be sure to include everyone, even young children. You might be surprised and delighted by what you hear.
Catch them in the act (tweens and teens)

Adolescence is difficult. It’s a period of life in which a person's body is changing, their hormones are surging, and their attitudes can be, well, a little salty. This attitude issue can fray any parent's patience, especially in close quarters.

Catch your teen or tween off guard by catching them in the act of doing something positive. Write them a short note of gratitude for all they are doing to help with the family, e.g., taking the trash out, washing the dishes or walking the dog. Words of acknowledgement and encouragement will go a long way towards promoting positive energy with your teen.

Draw out strengths (young children)

Create a family coat of arms with your child, using a blank template [1] (PDF) and whatever craft supplies you would like. Divide the coat of arms into four or more sections and ask your little one to fill in each area with something they love about your family. You'll learn a little about what is going on in your child's mind? and come away with a keepsake.

There is no doubt that these are challenging times. However, they may also offer an opportunity for your family to grow closer, fostering much-needed support and connection to carry your family through COVID-19 and beyond.

Bob Cunningham [2], an employee assistance counselor at Life & Work Connections, is a licensed professional counselor with a master’s degree in marriage and family therapy and more than 17 years of experience in medical and higher education environments. Every Monday at 10 a.m., he leads Mindful Mondays, a 15-minute Zoom session [3] that helps University employees reduce stress and develop a mindfulness practice.

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A version of this article [5] originally appeared on the Life & Work Connections website.

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