

Wesleyan is so much more than an esteemed educational institution. Wesleyan is a community made up of many people, including the parents and care-givers of students. As a Licensed Marriage and Family Therapist, my work focuses heavily on family systems and functioning. The impact of the pandemic has created struggle and uncertainty, and it is now more important than ever that we are here for each other as members of the Wesleyan community. In a three-part series, this is what we've learned and want to pass on to you as the semester comes to an end.

## Part II: COVID-19 and Social Distancing

### *Communicating the Importance of Social Distancing*

The importance of social distancing is consuming the media. Communities all over the world show that it has been helpful in controlling the spread of COVID-19. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) provides a plethora of information concerning the importance of social distancing and how to be the most effective in doing so.

This does not mean that everyone, including students, is having an easy time following state and federal guidelines and suggestions. I speak often about the phase of development of students and how the pandemic can impact their thought processes, including judgement, decision-making, and peer/social influence. Even our most responsible students could regress in their ability to stay consistent in using their best judgement and clearest mind as a result of increased stress.

We have all had to adjust, however we cannot minimize how student's lives have actually turned upside down in every way. The social and professional skills they are supposed to be developing have been paused which is not always healthy or easy to navigate.

What is the natural human response to this level of discomfort? A major part of it is grieving loss. The phases of grieving are highlighted in my blog to students (link below), and one phase includes denial. It is a human response to want to deny what is happening, and/or have thoughts that this does not actually impact us. It can be a mental response to want to deny severity and forget community influence. Other phases of grieving include anger, shock, bargaining, depression, testing and acceptance. These phases have no order and can circle back in repetitive patterns throughout the grieving process.

Therefore, as parents, I believe it is important to keep in the back of our minds that students are not necessarily being irresponsible or defiant if they express wanting to ignore the guidelines of social distancing, but instead acting out of the human response of grieving.

Parent's participation and intervention with our children, of all ages, could be in the form of gentle reminders that these guidelines are not just rules to be considered, but instead to be seriously followed for community safety. We are not just acting to decrease impact to self, but other's health as well, particularly demographics most at risk, and, environments that are most risky, which is high density areas.

A second reminder would be to explain the importance of social distancing for the future they want. The social distance that everyone puts in now, positively impacts the experiences and opportunities they are looking forward to.

My last point in this, and the most short-term and relative, is that this is a real-life lesson on responsibility. Students are currently practicing for when campus does open up, as to how to take care of themselves in the most responsible way. They will have to socially distance in some degree regardless of when they are able to return to campus. Therefore, it isn't just house rules and home life, but for life on campus, or, for graduates, in a place of future employment. Practicing healthy interactions without giving in to social pressure to disregard rules are critical in avoiding future disruptions to campus life. Therefore, I encourage parents to keep rigid, clear boundaries as to what the household expectations are around social-distancing to help in the transition for when campus and offices do open up.

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# Helping Students Cope with Social Isolation

Social distancing is accompanied by social isolation. Socializing looks different now and can be less satisfying at times. Isolation is naturally increased with less places to go: class, errands, and social events which means that interactions have to be planned, versus organically coming together. Coordinating contact with others and coping with seclusion are completely necessary skills in response to societal changes.

Parents can be active in supporting positive coping skills in two areas:

1. **Encourage new approaches to be social.** Engage in conversations with students about their peers and how others are doing to introduce the topic. Keep a realistic stance that this may be less satisfying than before, and support these feelings. Encouraging students to connect allows them to start practicing taking initiative to do so moving forward, and can develop skills in communication. Even if our students think an online group or activity sounds less productive or satisfying, encourage giving it a try, just once. If your student is struggling with on-line classes, open up the conversation more as to what they miss, and if there are any positives that exist by distance-learning.
2. **Modeling own self-care.** Take some time to reflect on how you are doing personally, and how you are modeling this to your family. This time can contribute to developing healthy daily living habits: early bed-time, new routines, exercise, cooking, utilization of supports and of course social-distancing. Setting the terms and norms can greatly influence others to follow, as well as checking in on the communication patterns and energy in the home. Also, engaging in weekly self-evaluations of physical and mental health to be pro-active in whether or not contacting a doctor or therapist is another practice to put into place for ourselves and our students. This would include identifying any physical symptoms that may warrant a COVID-19 test, reflecting on time spent alone that may necessitate a shift in activity-level, and self-awareness around mental health may initiate contacting a local therapist.

## In Conclusion

The adjustment, navigation and prediction of the future is an ever-changing experience for students. Setting the tone as to how the topic is discussed and practiced is worth taking a look at in all of our homes, so that it is as productive and supportive as possible. Using this situation as a time to learn how to effectively cope, or just reflect on how we cope can be incredibly helpful in development of stress-management skills or simply self-awareness. Increased alone time is inevitable, as young people need seclusion to attend classes and meetings online, but it is important to be aware of how much alone time is spent and trying to help create more community in the home, as needed.

## Coming Up:

Anticipation and Anxiety: Looking Forward in a Healthy Way. In the final chapter of this series, I focus on the chapters ahead.



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I am a Licensed Marriage and Family Therapist, born and raised in Connecticut. I joined CAPS in the Spring of 2019, and I bring knowledge and passion for helping students gain a deeper understanding of their family systems and relationships. I can talk about this topic all day. Watching students reflect and start to realize that they can really start defining themselves as individuals is such an exciting time to work with them. I work with students on the internal conflict that can happen as a result of this process, in a supportive way, encouraging students to develop healthy boundaries and communication skills that can be utilized in all areas of life. If you have questions or want to hear more, please reach out to me for future blog articles: [spowers@wesleyan.edu](mailto:spowers@wesleyan.edu) .

## LINKS

### CAPS

<https://www.wesleyan.edu/caps/index.html>

### Psychology Today

<https://www.psychologytoday.com/>

### Grief Blog

<https://www.wesleyan.edu/caps/CAPS%20at%20Home/Grief%20and%20Loss.pdf>

### Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)

<https://www.cdc.gov>

### Connecticut Response to COVID-19

<https://portal.ct.gov/Coronavirus>