

For Parents: How to Help College Students Who Have Come Home

College students from across the US and world have been heading home by the millions as their campuses close and move to online learning. This means that independent teens and twenty-somethings are crashing back into families. These transitions can be hard during good times, but add the stresses of stay at home orders and online learning and college students can struggle. Here are some ideas to help you as you welcome students home.

Realize that this disruption feels like a BIG deal to them. Campus and college ministers are reporting that students are struggling greatly with this disruption. Emotionally, this is their 9/11. As adults we look at them and wonder why they are so upset – they have food, housing, internet, and get to continue with college. But, try to put yourself into their heads. Think back to your young adulthood and remember what you felt like when you were 20. You were restless, active and looking to connect with friends. To your college student, they feel twice as isolated and twice as lonely. They feel cheated about graduation ceremonies and experiences they know they will miss. At their age, you did not have decades of experience to fall back on when the unexpected happened. Up to this point, much of their life was protected and expected. This was not expected.

Because this feels like a BIG deal, be open about your family's situation. Having parents and emerging adults under the same roof again is stressful. Parents work hard and students often focus on themselves. This is a normal part of emerging from adolescence to adulthood – changing our focus away from ourselves to our community and family. If you are stressed about money or family circumstances, tell them. They need to know why you are making certain decisions. Tell them God is real and active and helping you. Make time to pray with your college students while they are home. The power of family meetings focused on praying for your circumstances, church, neighbors and world is real. If we are not visibly praying in front of and with our families at this time,

our families will struggle greatly. Hebrews 11:6 instructs us that we must not only believe that God is real, we must believe He will help us when we ask. We primarily ask through prayer.

Because they may not have as large a reservoir of faith, talk with your college students about hard times from the past and how God provided. Because our students lack decades of experience, they do not have as many stories of God showing up to help as we do. Share your big and small stories of how God has helped you, your family and our country. In recent days, my wife and I have been sharing some of these stories with our 11 year-old. We have even shared some stories that might scare her. The funny thing is, the stories did not scare her. Instead, she took them in stride. It's good for our kids to see that we survived hard times and that God is faithful. In an attempt to shelter our kids from the hard parts of life, we have also accidentally sheltered them from the powerful stories of God's provision. Deuteronomy 4:9 says "Only be on your guard and diligently watch yourselves, so that you don't forget the things your eyes have seen and so that they don't slip from your mind as long as you live. Teach them to your children and your grandchildren."

Online learning is not just different, it is hard. While online learning makes it possible to continue classes during this pandemic, it is a wholly different experience than classroom learning. If you've ever taken a class online you know the challenges that exist interacting with people in an online environment. There are technical problems and communication differences. Add tests and group projects to that mix and it gets even harder. It can be very boring and isolating. As parents, we need to acknowledge that online learning is harder and give our students a break when they complain about it. It's not what they signed up for and they are expressing disappointment. Disappointment in this situation is normal. Watch your college students for signs of depression. If you notice they've lost interest in things they like, are having trouble sleeping, have a more hopeless view of the world and/or have trouble concentrating it's time to talk with them.

Because online life is harder, schedule break times to spend time together to walk away from devices and screens. Our students and families need to focus on activities that refresh us. These activities build resilience in our lives. Establish or re-establish afternoon walks or game nights for your family. We all need to walk away from devices. If there is an upside to the current challenge, it might just be more time together. Keep a regular schedule. Encourage your students to establish hours for study and to work only during those hours. Re-establish a Sabbath day on Sunday. Deuteronomy 5:12-14 says “Observe the Sabbath day, to keep it holy, as the Lord your God commanded you. Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God. On it you shall not do any work, you or your son or your daughter or your male servant or your female servant, or your ox or your donkey or any of your livestock, or the sojourner who is within your gates, that your male servant and your female servant may rest as well as you.” During stay at home orders each day feels the same. Re-establish Sunday as a day of online worship, rest and time with family. God established a Sabbath because we all need it.

The anxiety of their generation has come primarily because of online life. Now, your college students feel like their entire life is online. They are anxious and restless. Again, as adults, we do not understand how people who are being supported can be stressed. That’s because we were not raised in the age of social media and online life. The research is clear. Online life (social media, ubiquitous smart phone usage, and endless online content) has been the tipping point to push our students to anxiety and depression. Online life is rampant with conspiracy theories and things to fear. These build up over time and lead to a general feeling of fear and unease. Our brains and hearts were not designed to live in an online world.

Because anxiety is high, encourage your students to sleep, exercise and eat healthy food. Yes, this reads like a public service announcement. But, in 1 Kings 19, we read the story of the prophet Elijah. After an exhausting spiritual battle, Elijah fell into deep depression. God did not challenge him to study scripture at

that moment. Instead, he helped him get some sleep and some food. The stay at home efforts we are all making are affecting our bodies as well as our spirits. Sometimes, the best thing we can do is get a good night of sleep, eat a healthy meal and get some exercise and fresh air. Electronic devices emit blue light that signals our brain to stay awake. This, along with less activity, makes it harder to sleep. Encourage your students to stop working on computers and cell phones about an hour before they want to go to bed. This will help them be able to fall asleep and get the rest their bodies need. Healthy family dinners together will help everyone in the family connect with people and eat well. So, put the tv trays away and dig in on preparing and eating meals together.

Is this a frustrating time? Yes. It is dangerous? Potentially. It can also be a beautiful time to stop and refocus on God and family. Enjoy this time with your college students. Take time to savor having them around your kitchen table again. Take this time of confusion and make moments your college student and family will remember forever. This can be a precious time. Soon your college student will live in another house, city or country so enjoy this time while it lasts.

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