



UMB News

Face to Face: Our Relationships

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Imagine spending every hour of every day at home with the ones you love. Sounds like a dream, or does it?

As millions of us are discovering, we're not accustomed to working from home, seeing how our significant other actually spends their day at work, having kids hunkered down over the kitchen table trying to finish the strangest school year on record, or even just having everybody in the same house all the time. There are many, many types of relationships and it seems just about every one is being tested during the coronavirus lockdown. It's too early for reliable data, but the anecdotal evidence is certainly being tossed around the media.

You can read about "coronadivores" and "coronababies" in The New York Times. The Wall Street Journal likens what we're going through to a "stress test" on relationships. Even the BBC advises that it may not be practical to "quarantine and chill." (If you don't know what it means, don't ask.) Any way you look at it, being alone together or just being alone is an emotional magnifier.

The May 28 edition of *Virtual Face to Face with Dr. Bruce Jarrell* featured guest **Geoffrey Greif, PhD**, University of Maryland School of Social Work professor and the author of several books on couples, sibling, and male "buddy" relationships, and soon a new book exploring connections with in-laws.

To start things off, host and University of Maryland, Baltimore Interim President **Bruce E. Jarrell, MD, FACS**, expressed what seems to be the majority opinion among Americans: isolation is for the birds. "I'm the kind of person that loves to have face to face meetings with people in person," he said. "That was the way I worked."

Greif was sympathetic, but pointed out there can be advantages to isolating with a loved one. "My wife said to me the other day, 'I'm getting to know you in a whole new way.' She meant that as a compliment thank goodness," he added.

"But during this pandemic, what is it exactly that creates the stress?" Jarrell asked. "Is it that I have to have people around me?"

"We're all in the same storm, but our boats are not the same size," Greif explained. "I'm a grandparent but my children are not in Baltimore, they're in Boston. I don't have them underfoot, or I don't have them near me. Those are two narratives. Do I think of them as being underfoot or as a source of support? But the way I write that narrative, I'm in control of," he said.

Callers were quick to seek answers, and advice. "How does one gently navigate adult child-parent dynamics when one parent is living in the adult child's home that's not perceived as disrespectful for the parent?" asked one caller.

"My significant other and I just moved in together. This is a big transition even without a pandemic. What strategies would you suggest we adjust to this new living situation, specifically for finding some personal time when we're basically confined together in our home?" asked another.

The most feedback from the audience came from this question, "When I'm at home working I don't really feel like stopping working and fixing lunch for my husband who's also at home and then he goes off and does what he's doing and I'm stuck with cleaning up the mess, too. How do I get him to take more initiative?"

"The truth is I have no idea," Greif responded with a chuckle. "That being said, we can start to say what happens if you say, 'I'm going to make your lunch, and the expectation for doing that is I'm going to expect you to do the dishes?' Everybody's feeling various levels of stress, being unclear what the new rules are going to be. Are we going to change our roles or are we going to continue in the roles we've been in?"

On a more serious note, there was this question that went right to the bottom line: "Right now we have to treat each other as a threat. In my trips to the store, people are less courteous to one another as a result. Will we ever go back to being friendly and smiling?"

"I'm a great believer in the resilience of the human spirit," Greif offered, thoughtfully. "I think we've coped as a country, as a world with world wars and other terrible events. ... I'm an optimist and I think we need to wring from this, with a W-R-I-N-G, to our benefit as hard as it is now with so many people dying, with so many people unemployed and worried about their next paycheck. ... I'm optimistic that we will come through this, hopefully in a better place."

Watch the entire program by clicking the link above.

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