
Wellbeing

Happy families in lockdown: An oxymoron, or a goal worth pursuing?

by JUDE BECROFT

Family relationships inevitably take a hit when family members spend an extended period of time in close proximity with one another, such as family holidays or annual celebrations like Christmas and Easter.

At best, we can expect to find that the mere existence of our family members is irritating and annoying. We become cranky because we're forced to live in close quarters and spend intense and prolonged time with the same people, over and over, with what can feel like a monotonous schedule of meals, walks, and games. It feels like our autonomy has been taken away, and invariably we "strike out" and try to reclaim our independence – hence, arguments and rows often ensue.

There's even a fancy name for this condition: Hypercopresence - when people are in each other's pockets, 24/7, and feel they can't get away from one another. It's like a large dose of family, all at once, explains Professor Melanie Booth-Butterfield, a communications expert at the University of West Virginia.

At worst, research shows that during such times of hypercopresence, rates of partner separation increase, along with domestic violence and suicide.

But none of us have ever faced a lockdown situation with our loved ones, so we don't quite know what to expect – there are no research findings to refer to, no best-practice guiding principles, so it's likely most of us will be making it up as we go along. The term "lockdown" certainly doesn't suggest

a positive picture, but rather one of incarceration, lack of control, powerlessness, and deprivation. Yikes! Four long weeks at least with just our immediate family members... hypercopresence+++!! But does it have to be a problem? Or can this time with our family be a happy experience?

First up, let's consider what's realistic. As Russ Harris states in his bestselling book *The Happiness Trap*, happiness is just one of many emotions we experience, and not the be-all-and-end-all, not the gold standard. Feelings of happiness don't last, no matter how hard we try to hold on to them. Instead, Harris suggests a more realistic approach is to seek "a rich, full and meaningful life", where we make room for lots of emotions to come and go, none of them better or worse than others, where we take action on things that matter to us, and live life according to what we value and stand for in life. This can give us a profound sense of "living life well", rather than a fleeting feeling of pleasure or gladness. So, during lockdown, let's assume happiness will hopefully show up, but don't panic when it's not there. Rather, take a moment to consider your family values and how these might show up more, rather than just considering how we want to feel or what we want to achieve in the next four weeks. An example of a family value might be "helping others", which could refer to taking some small action to help another family member or a neighbour living alone; or "fun-loving", where each day, one family member takes a turn to share a joke, a funny song, or a fun activity – for example, teaching the rest of the family a TikTok dance (kids love a good laugh at their parents' expense!).

Secondly, be proactive and make a plan up front for how you want your family life to be, rather than reacting in the moment to inevitable stress and tension with an angry, "OK, that's it,



things need to change around here!” We can expect to live by a slightly different set of rules during lockdown, compared to our “usual” lives, because hypercopresence is certainly not the norm! For example, you might be more relaxed around screen time, given it’s currently school holidays, and the only way your children can connect with their friends may be online. Balance family time with autonomous time – have times you all come together, such as mealtimes and walks, and also make time for everyone to go off and do their own thing. Teens in particular enjoy being locked down in their bedrooms at the best of times! This is entirely normal. Loosen up your schedule and don’t try to cram too much in. Consider assigning responsibilities to everyone in the family, for example sharing the household chores, and taking turns to cook or assist with meals. And lighten up when things just don’t get done – practise living with a little more mess than usual, a little less structure than usual.

Thirdly, let’s adopt the mantra of “strike while the iron’s lukewarm”. Anticipate that it’s entirely likely and virtually inevitable there will be problematic – even unhappy – times, look for the early signs of these, and act as quickly, calmly and skilfully as possible. For example, don’t wait until your stress levels have reached boiling point and you’re threatening the kids with throwing out the Xbox or disconnecting the modem. In this state of emotional overwhelm, we’re far more likely to react in the moment, lose sight of our goals, and forget about the facts. Rather, notice how the kids are starting to stray from the plan and push the

limits, or how you’re forgetting to remind them of what’s been agreed. Re-state the agreement: “Remember guys, one hour each on the Xbox, and only after you’ve done your online schoolwork and chores.” Remind them of the consequences: “Otherwise, you’ll have zero time tomorrow.” And reinforce the benefits ahead of time of sticking to the agreement, e.g. earning “bonus time” at the end of the week.

And lastly, keep your eye on the bigger picture – this is a short-term situation, it is not indefinite, and the fact is that lockdown will come to an end eventually. It’s so easy to get caught up in unhelpful thoughts and feelings in the moment and become the living embodiment of them, which doesn’t serve us or our loved ones well. For example, watch catastrophic thoughts like, “I can’t stand being with my family for another second!” or “This is never going to end!”. Allowing these thoughts and feelings to “show up” in our minds without reacting to them, accepting that they are entirely normal, and reminding ourselves that they will all pass with the passage of time, then allows space for other experiences to dominate – ones that serve us better. Look for the silver lining – which can take quite some effort at times! – such as having a break from rush-hour traffic and commuting to work or school, or the daily grind of scheduled activities, and more time to do things we enjoy. Focus on the things you love and value, and adopt an “attitude of gratitude” for what you have in your life right now. This can help diminish the anxiety of lockdown in the longer term. And as Russ Harris reminds us, “Life gives most to those who make the most out of what life gives.”