

8 Tips for Strengthening Your Family Relationships

By Lisa Herbert, MD

Practicing medicine in this current environment has been challenging for many. For healthcare professionals, many who have found themselves on the front lines of this pandemic, the traditional roles of delivering healthcare have forever changed. The surge of telemedicine, working longer hours, seeing more patients, caring for a sicker population and making difficult decisions have greatly impacted their emotional and mental well being. This emotional and mental strain has affected many families and their relationships. As a clinician and a partner, spouse or parent you can end up feeling torn between your commitment to your practice and your commitment to your family. It can leave you feeling lacking on both fronts.



Below are some tips for strengthening your family relationships in this new normal:

Parenting Tips

Set Aside Time for Reviewing School Related Matters

Most children and their parents have had to adjust to 100% virtual learning, while others may have hybrid learning. Everyone is trying to adjust to a new schedule. Select a time each day where you can focus on homework, school forms and requests. If possible, sit down with your child, if they are old enough, and review teacher expectations and requests with them. This ensures that your child is aware of expectations and they understand what is being asked of them.

Disconnect and Create New Memories

Memories are created when you take the time to be in other's presence and commit to being in the moment. Think about how you can make the time you create together special and memorable. One way is to disconnect from electronic devices and reduce screen time for children. Studies show that even before quarantine, kids were using their devices when they were supposed to be sleeping 80% of the time. Think about what you and your family are passionate about or have fun doing and bring your children into the conversation to make sure it's something they want to do. Maybe you start a movie night or game night. Work on a vision board. Pick a charity and give back virtually. Bike ride in the park.

Create a Family Calendar

It can be hard to keep up with everything given all the competing priorities. An electronic calendar like a Google shared calendar works well. The shared family calendar is where you can enter all activities related to family members as well as school-related activities. Everyone gets a notification, and this is great for sharing with your spouse, partner and older children. If an electronic version does not work, print a monthly calendar and put it in a place visible to everyone in your home.

Plan Mealtimes

Mealtime is a momentous time of the day to connect with your children. Breakfast or dinner can be a time to catch up on what's happening in your child's life, to reconnect with stories or shared memories

and to create a time to have discussions on events happening in the world. I know that having every meal together may be tough. The best way to achieve this is to plan it in advance. Look at everyone's schedule and see what days and times work best. Have a list of easy meals that you can prepare in under 30 minutes when you are in a bind for time.

Spouse/Partner Relationships

There are also some habits that couples can learn on their quest for a successful, healthy and happy marriage during stressful times.

Show Each Other Appreciation

We all want to know that the people in our lives appreciate all that we do and the sacrifices we make. The feeling of appreciation can be in the form of getting the kids ready for bed after a long workday, or a simple surprise such as flowers, ordering their favorite meal or other small token of appreciation. Often the words 'I appreciate all you do' can go a long way to helping your spouse/partner get that boost of energy they need to keep going.

Create a Safe Space to be Vulnerable

During this time of emotional and mental strain, we need a safe place with our spouses and partners to be ourselves, and to open up about our feelings. Being open and sharing your feelings does not mean that your partner is looking for you to provide a solution to the problem. Just being present, listening and providing a shoulder to lean on can do wonders for improving communication. Compassion and understanding from our spouse/partner are so important as it allows us to do what we love and be the amazing caregivers that we are.

Be Present

It's important to have meaningful connections with your spouse/partner. It doesn't have to be complicated. You can create simple ways to be present with your spouse and give your full, undivided attention, such as:

- Be present without thinking about work or other responsibilities.
- Surprise him/her with an at home date night or outdoor activity with proper precautions and social distancing.
- It's essential to remember important dates and special occasions, but it's equally important to be spontaneous.

Intimacy

Don't let the stress of this challenging time get in the way of connecting with your loved ones daily. If you ignore this facet of your marriage, you can end up with a strained relationship. Intimacy is the ability to have a close, loving and affectionate relationship. Sleep in late together. Have breakfast in bed. Intimacy is not just about physical closeness but also about an emotional connection. Relationships without intimacy fail to thrive. Intimacy can also be obtained by giving positive comments and acknowledging what makes your partner special.

We Can Help

As part of your VITAL WorkLife Well Being Resources, you have access to peer coaching and counseling that can support you in your relationships. To access your resources, contact VITAL WorkLife at **877.731.3949** or through the **VITAL WorkLife App**.

Lisa Herbert, MD

Dr. Lisa Herbert is a board-certified family physician, bestselling author and speaker and has been a Peer Coach with VITAL WorkLife since 2016. She earned her medical degree from Upstate Medical Center in Syracuse, New York. Dr. Herbert received her certification in Personal and Executive Coaching from the Coaching and Positive Psychology Institute and is a member of the International Coaching Federation.



Dr. Herbert brings over 20 years of experience in providing primary care and serving as a healthcare leader. Dr. Herbert is dedicated to guiding clinicians, clinician moms, organizations and professionals on their journey to achieving balance in their lives so they can have successful, rewarding careers and maintain meaningful relationships.

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