



Tips for Your “At-Home” Team

For several years, we’ve been studying teams as they **live and work together in confined environments** with little or no physical contact with “outsiders.”

For example, we’ve gathered data from teams that lived in a small simulated space habitat in Houston at NASA for 45 days, and from deep sea saturation dive teams in the Bay of Bengal as they lived in and conducted dives from a small hyperbaric chamber for 28 days at a time. We also studied a crew that lived in physical isolation on the side of a volcano in Hawaii for 8 months, and teams of astronauts during week-long undersea training missions off the coast of Florida. In several of our studies, team members shared with us the biggest work and personal challenges they faced each day and how they and their team responded to those challenges. Meanwhile, we monitored their resilience and cohesion. **As you can imagine, what we found is quite interesting.**

While the purpose of our research is to help prepare crews for future space missions and saturation dives, some of **what we learned may also be applicable to families and friends who are living together in “social isolation” during the COVID-19 crisis**, including situations where one or more of you are working from home and/or home schooling children.

What Happens When Your Family Is Together Every Day?

One thing that is clear about spending prolonged time together in a small space with limited outside contact – **things that normally feel insignificant can start to become irritants**. For example, people often become less tolerant of messiness, hygiene issues, or personal mannerisms. Things you normally might not notice can become quite salient.

Ten Research-based Tips for Your “At Home” Team. If your “At Home” Team will be spending a lot of time together during the crisis (perhaps you are working from home or schooling your children), we encourage you to try out a few of the tips from our research to successfully navigate the isolation challenge.

1. **Create a personal routine.** To sustain some sense of normality, it is helpful to establish a regular routine. This does not need to be your “normal” routine. If in the past you woke up at 5:15AM to allow time to commute to work, you don’t need to sustain that routine. But you should establish a new routine that makes sense now. While you don’t need to schedule every moment, it is healthy to have at least a few planned milestones each day.

2. **Schedule some team activities.** Many of the teams we studied used mealtimes as a reason to get together as a team. Others played games or watched movies together. We encourage you to schedule a few joint activities. One caution...don't assume that everyone likes the same activities that you do! While you may think playing charades is awesome, half your team may be counting the minutes until it is over.
3. **Ensure people have ample "alone time."** Even if you all love one other, you will need some time alone. Different people need different amounts of alone time, but almost everyone needs some! Help your family members find some alone time. Perhaps you can take turns watching the kids. If you are someplace where it is safe to take a walk consider taking some walks by yourself (maintaining distance from others). If you can't get away physically (e.g., in a studio apartment), then periodically set aside a little "do not disturb" time.
4. **But beware of prolonged isolation.** Although it is healthy to spend some time alone, spending too much time alone is a concern. If you notice that a family member or housemate is spending most of their day alone, be sure to check in with them. Try to find something that will encourage them to spend some time in the presence of others. If you are living alone during COVID-19, please use your phone, webcam, and other means to stay connected with friends, coworkers, and/or family. And, if you know someone who is living alone, add "reach out to Joe" to your personal routine.
5. **Be personally productive.** You are probably spending less time going out, socializing with others, or even watching sporting events. If that frees up any time for you, pick one or two things that you will find personally productive. When we say "personally productive," we mean something that will engage you during your confinement and that the "future you" will be feel good about. For example, you might take a few Duolingo language lessons (free!), read something of interest, or work on your drawing skills. One caution here...avoid things that might infringe on your co-habitants...so perhaps now isn't the time to learn to play the tuba!
6. **Take care of you.** Keep an eye on yourself and how you are feeling. Maintain personal hygiene (shower, shave, get dressed) and do something active each day (even if it is just walking in place). Astronauts report that doing some type of physical activity was important for their sense of well-being. Try to eat healthy (we know that can be hard when you get bored). It is difficult to help your team members if you aren't taking care of yourself.
7. **Be nice to your "teammates."** In confined conditions, everyone will have their bad moments. Be prepared to give others the benefit of the doubt. If someone is having a bad moment, allow them space and then ask how you can help. And isolation is not the time to bring up old issues! However, it is a good time to say "please" and "thank you" a bit more often.
8. **Get enough sleep.** NASA has funded a great deal of research on sleep because they know how important sleep is for being able to perform well. It can also impact personal health and team cohesion (it is hard to be nice to others when you are sleep deprived!). Maintain a fairly consistent schedule for going to sleep and awakening. Avoid computer and phone screens at night, avoid caffeine in the late afternoon or evening, and don't rely on alcohol to get to sleep (your sleep quality is typically worse after drinking).

9. **Be aware of your inner clock.** You can think of each of us having something of an inner rhythm. If you tend to jump from task to task, get bored easily, and constantly move around, you probably have a faster personal clock, and isolation may be a bit tougher for you. When you catch your clock spinning, take a breath and pause for a moment before looking for something different to do. We know that is hard, so at a minimum, don't let your antsy-ness drive you to interrupt and annoy others who may have a slower rhythm!
10. **Conduct a "team debrief" with your family/roommates.** Our research has shown that the best, most resilient work teams make small adjustments over time. We're confident that this would apply to family teams as well. To make those adjustments, we encourage you to conduct a weekly team debrief. During a debrief your family would huddle up, reflect upon and discuss how things have been going (what is working well, what might we do differently), and reach a few agreements about how you want to live together going forward. As part of this you can confirm what is working (let's keep doing family movie night on Thursdays), and agree to changes as needed (we'll take turns doing the laundry).

Astronauts and saturation divers have a lot of experience living and working together in isolated, confined environments...and even they struggle with it at times. So, don't feel bad if you and your team are having a little difficulty adjusting to the new living conditions. Focus on being a good team member, be a little more polite than usual, take care of yourself, and help your roommates. Follow the ten tips above, make a few small adjustments over time, and **we're confident you'll soon figure out what works** for your "at home" team!

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