

**Family as the nucleus of society:
Do you feel locked up during the lockdown?**

by

Marius Meyer

Yesterday was Good Friday in South Africa and in many other countries. It was wonderful to hear about families enjoying holy communion at home, despite the fact that they could not do so at church as a result of the lockdown regulations. Today we put the spotlight on families as the nucleus of society. The essence of family life is at the centre of the lockdown. George Santayana highlighted the importance of family when he stated that “the family is one of nature’s master pieces.” Family members working in non-essential services are now spending all their time together, with the exception of the odd visit to a shop by one or two family members to buy some food for the family to continue with another two weeks of being locked down.

The lockdown presents us with an opportunity of rediscovering the importance of family being together at home. We are often so busy running around to different places as part of the rat race. Perhaps we also need to rediscover the essence of being at home. Channing Pollock said: “Home is the most popular, and will be the most enduring of all earthly establishments.”

It is during this time of being together as families at home that we also realise how important family life is. We realise again how special our loved ones are and why it is so important for societies to have strong and healthy families. Given the high divorce rate in South Africa, government listened to divorced parents and relaxed their strict regulations to allow children of divorced parents to rotate between the parents. We are reminded again how special our family members are, and why we need one another as fathers, mothers, brothers and sisters. And uncles, aunts, grandparents, grand children, cousins, nephews and nieces, and of course in our African culture the notion of the extended family as a more inclusive approach to family life.

The reality of modern family life is that family members often stay in different towns, cities, provinces and countries, thereby complicating the close connection between family members. But connectivity and social platforms such as Skype, Zoom and Imo make it possible for us to be connected from all over the world, despite times zones forcing us to plan connecting time more carefully. While we live in different places, we are in the same space as family members being connected to one another. Then we also have the odd prodigal son who returns home from time to time when he runs out of money.

While family life is often characterised by moments of joy, fun and togetherness, there are also many broken families, and it is sad to hear about the increase in cases of domestic

violence during this period of lockdown. Family conflict, rebellious teenagers, and difficult parents or grandparents can exacerbate the typical challenges faced by some families. Be that as it may, we are connected as close family members, and this unique and special bond binding us together unifies us as a closely knitted group of family members. But family life also has its own drawbacks, and these issues are amplified during periods of staying together over extended periods such as long weekends, holidays or lockdowns. Hence, the need for some guidelines in enabling family members to live together and to make the best of 35 consecutive days being together. Here are some guidelines to enable us to ensure and maintain an effective family life during the lockdown:

- Make sure that all family members practice good hygiene in terms of washing hands, physical distancing and cleaning of surfaces and the house. Reinforce safe behaviour when one person leaves and returns to the house when going to the shop for essential supplies.
- Given the need for less frequent road trips, create and update a list of things to buy so that it is not necessary to leave the house more than once a week.
- Prioritise the health of all family members. Take extra vitamins to build your immune systems.
- Count your blessings as a family, be thankful for all the good things that make your family so unique and special.
- Agree on house rules in the form of explicit values, and relax or change any rules that may be in contradiction with national health guidelines such as hugging and kissing.
- Write down what is important for your family such as love, caring, faith, fun and all other things you enjoy. Also reflect on the things you miss during this time, such as cycling, hiking, travelling and parties. Let the children draw pictures of these activities.
- Make communication the most important priority in your family. Communicate clearly and with respect when you say something, and listen attentively to others and respond in appropriate ways. Build your family relationships, you have all the time in the world to practice and improve on your behaviour every single day. Share your concerns, fears and anxieties about the Covid-19 virus with your family members.
- Adjust your family budget and planning for the rest of the year. Have open discussions about the goals of the family and the specific individual goals of each family member, such as completing the academic year or a major project at school or work.
- Decide to do things you really enjoy as a family such as braai, watching a movie or television programme, playing games or similar activities.
- Respect the uniqueness of each family member, that is what makes family life so interesting, we are all different, unless if you are identical twins. Parents and children are from different generations and have different needs and interests. Accommodate these differences such as music, interests, communication styles and habits.
- Show appreciation to your family members for their contributions. The small things such as good food and any kind gestures matter even more during times of crisis.
- Despite all the bad news around us, create a positive atmosphere in the house.
- Maintain a good sense of humour in the house, but balance it with the need of focusing on the seriousness of the situation. We are all in a state of disaster with serious regulations and consequences of non-compliance.

- Value each other's interests, and make space for these interests to be accommodated where possible, and where legal in terms of the lockdown regulations. No jogging, surfing and other illegal activities during the lockdown. Keep up to date with any amendments to the regulations and comply accordingly.
- Ensure that there is an equal distribution and contribution when it comes to the different chores that need to be done.
- Respect the need for some family members to focus on their work and studies by not unnecessarily interrupting one another. Share some of these work experiences with your family members so that they can also get a better understanding of your work.
- Encourage one another to achieve success in your work and studies and celebrate key milestones and tasks completed.
- Keep small children engaged and look after their health and safety.
- Use each other's strengths to get things done and refrain from exploiting each other's weaknesses during this time of stress and discomfort.
- Watch out for any high risk behaviour such as complete withdrawal, panic and paranoia. Of course we are more tense and anxious during these times and we therefore need to look after our mental health and wellbeing.
- Learn to share as we taught our children from an early age "sharing is caring" and now during the lockdown let us also turn it around "caring is sharing."
- Agree to manage your irritations and minimise unnecessary conflict and sort things out before it becomes a fight that could have been avoided.
- Create some unusual incidents of fun and laughter such as baking a cake together. Experiment with reversing roles, let Mommy do the braai and Daddy the washing. Let us use this time to challenge society's stereotypes and traditional gender roles.
- On a daily basis reach out to at least one family member who is at a different location, skype or phone such as a brother-in-law, cousin, grandmother or other family member. This is the time to build and rebuild family relationships. Likewise, connect with your friends as often as you can.
- Build a tech savvy family. Here is a once in a lifetime opportunity for children to teach their parents on how to use technology in the comfort of their own homes. Having said that, be careful of Internet addiction. Vary your activities and create phone free moments such as eating together and going outside for a few minutes.
- While space is a challenge for many families, be creative in preventing overcrowding in certain rooms or spaces, and allow sufficient space for family members to do their own thing, while also doing things together at times. You will reach a point or several points during this extended lockdown when you will suffer from cabin fever and feel "I need some space."
- In the event of a family member being infected with the Covid-19 virus, follow all the isolation regulations provided by the Department of Health, while providing extra emotional support to the family member.

The above guidelines can be tailored to the unique circumstances of your family. For instance, parents working in essential and non-essential services will require an even more serious adjustment to family life. Each family is unique and may require some unique actions, but the general principles of good family life are universal all over the world. That is one of the

unintended consequences of the lockdown, we are presented with an opportunity of being together with your close family members. Unfortunately, the reality is that we also have many dysfunctional families and therapy may be required in certain cases. Fortunately, essential services such as psychologists and social workers are available remotely. Use them when needed. Aishwarya Rai Bachchan asserts: “My family is my strength and my weakness.”

In conclusion, family is the nucleus of society. Essentially, family members are team members. Make the team work for you and practice and transfer these skills to the work environment on Microsoft Teams and other platforms. While the lockdown puts pressure on family life, we also need to realise that we live in abnormal times during this pandemic. It is definitely not normal for family members to stay together for 35 days and 24 hours for 7 days a week. It requires refocus, rethinking, restructuring and disciplined behaviour and actions. Above all, it requires love, compassion, grit, perseverance and support. Ultimately, the lockdown reminds us that society consists of families. Being at home with your family should be your happy place, but that can only happen if all family members make it happy. You want to feel free, happy and liberated and not locked-up in your house because of the lockdown. You will become frustrated and develop a strong desire to take a walk, scream or run away at times. But let us continue to be disciplined, also in our family life during the extended lockdown. Maintaining a good family life will assist us in building a better and more caring society, even after the lockdown has been lifted. As Michael J Fox affirmed: “Family is not an important thing, it’s everything.”

Marius Meyer lectures in Strategic HR Management at Stellenbosch University and is Chairperson of the SA Board for People Practices (SABPP). For more information on the Coronavirus, visit www.sacoronavirus.co.za