

Tips for Teens: Taking Care of Yourself During a School Shutdown by Sara Primo

I am not a mental health professional, but I am a high school teacher, parent, yoga teacher, and aunt to a teenager. As my own school prepares for an imminent shutdown to mitigate coronavirus risks in Philadelphia, I am finding my attention span is fractured, my nerves shaky, my moods unpredictable. While stocking our pantries is important in anticipation of the uncertain weeks ahead, I have been thinking more and more about stocking the internal reserves in our own psychological pantries. Here are the suggestions I find most fortifying at this stage.

1. Small choices matter; respect the mind/body connection.

I am not here to tell you to only eat green leafy vegetables. I will be stress-eating gummy bears by the bag-full while I grade my students' essays. On the other hand, I want to remind you that there is a cumulative effect of forgetting to eat well, forgetting to drink water, forgetting to move around -- and it doesn't just manifest in a stomach ache or headache, but actually affects worldview. To stay brave and optimistic, stay hydrated and consider your nutrients. Reach for your running shoes. (I am literally eating jelly bellies while I write this. Moderation in all things.)

2. Use breathing exercises as a tiny meditation practice.

It is a common thing to hear someone say "I don't have time to meditate" or "I know meditation would help but --." Forget it. If you have time to breathe, you have time to meditate. I believe this sincerely. My daughter and I have been practicing "triangle breathing" and "square breathing" as a way to center and restart. In triangle breathing, you breathe in for three counts, hold your breath for three counts, and exhale for three counts (imagining and picturing your breath sliding up/down the three sides of a triangle while following those three instructions). In square breathing, you inhale for four counts, hold your breath for four counts, exhale for four counts, and hold your breath for four counts (before repeating a few times). My daughter is six and this is not too hard for her, so I know you can do it. I guess to commit to do it you would have to believe in its effects, and the best I can attest to is an entirely settled nervous system which basically feels like a new chance at life. No big deal.

3. Create boundaries between things: between school and home, technology-centric hours and tech-free times.

Under normal circumstances, one of the "advantages" of online learning is the blurred definition between homework and classwork. Right now, that blurred line may be a source of dread or concern... This shift to remote learning can be unsettling for those of us (students and teachers alike) who tend to work very hard, to begin with. This can give the sense that we are never quite done or never quite off duty. I go back to a lot of my burnout prevention strategies, such as [the pomodoro method](#) of giving yourself breaks after twenty-five-minute bursts of productivity. But beyond that, think about defining the different portions of your day. You might need to do more than usual to "draw lines in the sand" in your mind between different modes and activities. This could mean having a

specific area of your home where you do homework, or it could mean leaving your phone and computer charging somewhere other than your bedroom when you go to bed.

4. Rediscover something that used to delight you.

This morning I pulled out our bright red teapot and made a big pot of English Breakfast that lasted me all morning. Later I pulled out a pile of beloved board games like *Qwirkle* and *Ticket to Ride* that I haven't seen in a while. Yesterday I bought big fat markers at the craft store that I plan on using with my kids when the days get a little long. Dig out a favorite old t-shirt that is so much softer than anything else you own. Take out that half-knit scarf you gave up on finishing a few years ago. Ride your rollerblades up and down the hallway, until someone tells you to stop (does anyone own rollerblades anymore?). This might reconnect you to simpler times or younger you -- chicken soup for your soul, so to speak.

5. Choose something you have been wanting to watch/read to finally indulge in.

Most of the "best movies of 2019" are still or finally streaming, as are the best comedy specials. My bedside table full of books is shimmying excitedly, proud to about to have its moment in time. These are ways of "escaping" that feel good for my repository for beauty and connection to a broader creative community. Not to mention a reminder to appreciate details in my days or a reminder to keep my sense of humor.

6. Keep your space tidy.

I am not suggesting you turbo [Marie Kondo](#) your whole home with all your restless energy, though go for it if you feel inspired. I am instead pointing out a space/mind connection, parallel (if not as dire) to the mind/body connection. During snow days in my past, it was easy to let dishes pile up and craft projects expand aggressively. Since this "snow day" might last for quite a while in some cases, staying sustainable involves cleaning up after yourself. I have committed to working on my tendency to live out of a volcano-like pile of sweaters and sweatpants in my room over the following weeks, simply because when I live that way, my mind feels like it is itself a pile of sweaters and sweatpants. Your mind feels cared for when your space is; I wish it weren't true (I would love to avoid those dishes) but it is.

7. Stay connected not just to people outside your home but people inside your home.

You will hear a lot about staying in touch with your friends, via the internet if necessary. But what about the people living in your home? Try not to take family members for granted. Try to listen attentively as they talk, as if you are on a long road trip or family camping trip. Try to balance asking for space with making time for each other. Have daily rituals that complement the hours spent in your own world.

8. Take care of something.

Roll around with your dog, keep a windowsill of plants alive, play My Little Ponies with your little sibling. Make a casserole for a way older neighbor (washing your hands beforehand, of course). Get out of your own head and remember to feed something and keep it alive, from friendships to pets. Life goes on and keeps expanding, from within a crisis-slowed-down world.

9. Do something unexpected to break up or combat a feeling of monotony.

As I type this, my kids are having a snack in the camping tent we built in our dining room at lunchtime. I like to think that maybe I would have built a tent indoors as a high schooler. We all know the feeling when our relaxation turns against us. When we look down at the sweatpants we've been wearing for three days and see them as proof of something untoward, as opposed to proof that we are living our best life. You need to jostle yourself out of these holes. These self-surprises can range from low maintenance to high maintenance, from dressing up unexpectedly to taking a midmorning bubble bath. From watching an eyeliner tutorial and perfecting your cateye wings, to blasting a favorite song and dancing. If you are legitimately surprised by yourself, then you are sparking something that can sustain you.

10. Don't feel guilty for pockets of joy, play, or creativity.

It is painfully obvious that the world is in crisis and that the coronavirus will leave an astonishing mark on civilization. That can be true, and you can also be feeling OK or even great some of the time. Take those moments as sustenance that will get you through times when the anxiety or sorrow might hit harder.

11. Consider yourself a radical surfer!

Similar to #10, work on staying nimble with yourself. All those books and articles about resilience in teenagers -- some of the time, you get to be the poster child for what they're talking about! But you also need to be patient and gentle with yourself during the low, slow dips when you don't feel like the poster child for anything except eating too many gummy bears in one sitting.

12. The adults around you might not have all the answers, but that doesn't mean they don't have any of the answers. :)

If the adults in your life are like me, they are surprised to not be able to offer you a better sense of what the next month will look like. These are uncertain times. But just as you don't get to rest assured that the adults have it all covered, so too do you have the same amount of power that we do to stay strong and calm on the inside, which is what we are all equally called on to be right now. And we are as here for you as always, if not more so!