

The Silver Lining

BY MELINDA MURPHY

My mom always used to tell me, "You can always find a silver lining if you just look hard enough." Well, I'm looking, mom, and you're right – even if it's incredibly hard to see a silver lining just now.

When I pitched a story to my editor about families being together 24/7, I thought I'd write a funny piece about how hard all this togetherness can be. Oh, and trust me, there is some of that. Our first day of e-learning was not pretty. The school's server went down. And mommy? Mommy went down, too. A leak in our roof drowned my computer so I had no backup or patience. Day Two was infinitely better. Still, my takeaway from home-schooling? Teachers deserve to make a million dollars a year.

As it turns out, there is more heart than humour in this situation.

The ugly bit

There is a very real adjustment to all being together. My friend Katrina Bens quipped, "If this is foreshadowing retirement, then I'm glad the stock market crashed so we can't retire for at least another ten years." She laughed when she said it, but I can tell there's a grain of truth. Being together all the time can be hard.

Anthia Chng in my office is a newlywed, which, quite frankly, can be hard enough. Adjusting to marriage is fabulous, but also tricky. Sprinkle in both spouses working from home and things can get tough. Anthia says, "My husband's 'break time' revolves around watching ridiculous TikTok videos on max volume – and then there are the video work calls he has in the living room, which is our main (and only) working area where we have both our computers set up. It's like I'm playing hide-and-seek with his laptop camera every morning. Send help!"

Can't you just feel her pain? We've all been there these past weeks, with a little too much togetherness and nowhere to hide.

Stay-at-home parents are also having to adjust to their spouse being home. Many now-at-home spouses are trying to help, but only getting in the way of routines. Working spouses don't seem to get that the stay-at-homes have their own set of important things to do, too. And then there are the expectations.

"Whatever I'm doing is obviously not important and can wait until later," stay-at-home dad Brian* told Expat Living. "Also, I've now become the home IT support person for the entire family and expectations are that any issue is fixed within two minutes!"

Yup. Being together 24/7 can be tough.

Working from home hasn't been easy, not only on couples, but just from a sheer comfort level.

Sally* juggles her high-powered job from her bedroom where she doesn't move from her desk all day. "I just feel claustrophobic and I'm sitting on a dining room chair, which is uncomfortable. I'm getting no exercise at all. The only steps I get are from going up and down the stairs to the kitchen."

And Sally has to manage her long list of phone calls with two rowdy kids at home, too. "To be honest, the first day was a bit ugly. The kids were with me all day and there was no routine yet and a lot of screaming. But my husband has really stepped up to help, which has made things much better. We're now in a routine and it's actually fine."

The twist

But not all this togetherness is grim.

"To be honest, what I expected at the beginning of being home together and where I am now are quite different things," says Chloe*. "I thought my daughter would have a fit and forget things, that I'd be dragging my son to do his school work and I'd be struggling with work, but that hasn't happened."

Kids everywhere seem to have risen to the occasion, lighting the way for us adults. Niki Harding told us, "I have to say I'm enjoying having the kids around. I'm super impressed how well they're adapting. It's actually motivating me to be a better person, mum and confidante."



What has happened for the likes of Sally, Chloe and Niki, plus so many others, is they are reconnecting with their families, taking time to play a bit of football or work on a puzzle. Busy calendars have been replaced by cups of tea and internet calls with friends from across the globe. People are really talking and reconnecting, sometimes if only with themselves.

As I write this, my own kids are now on Easter break: two long weeks with no playdates and nowhere to go. The mere thought of it had me in a bit of a cold sweat. Instead, we are enjoying taking the dog for long walks. (Nobody likes this whole situation more than all the dogs out there!) And my kids are loving learning life skills. They've baked bread, built shelves, used the sewing machine, made dinner, perfected an omelette and, yes, they've even cleaned their toilets. They're just happy to be doing things together.

I've also taught my kids something Mr Rogers' mom taught him. Don't know Mr Rogers? He was an icon of American children's television. His mother told him when something bad is happening to look for the helpers. My kids have learned to appreciate those in the healthcare industry, the grocery store workers, the delivery people, the cleaners, the taxi drivers, and all those on the front line helping us.

And that, my friends – all this togetherness and the thankfulness – is actually one of the silver linings of this awful situation. Turns out, we really are better together than apart.



The wider picture

The other silver lining is what's happening to our environment. Factories are shut down. Cars are parked. Boats are docked. The result? Our air and water are cleaner. The planet is actually moving differently as there is a reduction in seismic noise. Go figure.

I sometimes wonder if Mother Nature didn't unleash COVID-19 to protect the planet from the other virus: mankind. Oh, gosh. I can see the hate mail now. But truly, while this situation has been nothing short of tragic for us humans, Planet Earth has been given a chance to breathe and reboot. She is saving herself where we humans have failed.

Singapore is special

But let's be honest, there's nowhere better to be than Singapore right now. Living here is another silver lining. The government has managed the situation better than almost anywhere else in the world. We haven't been as homebound as some nations; nor are we as sick.

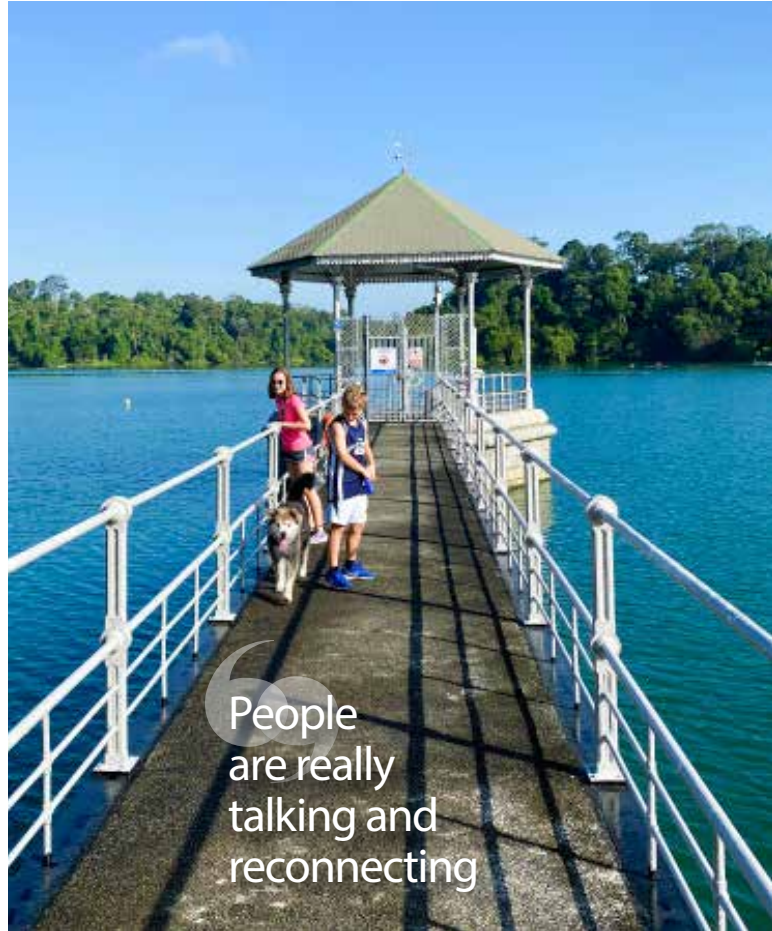
And by global standards, most of our homes are pretty nice. Some of us even have helpers cooking and cleaning. Imagine being elsewhere in the world, crammed into a tiny room (or worse) with no pay cheque coming in and no end in sight.

But living here can be really hard, too, during this world crisis. We are worried about people back home and there is absolutely nothing we can do about it if they do get sick.

My own dear father-in-law passed away this week in the US, though not with COVID-19. But because of the pandemic, we couldn't be with him or our family. There is truly nothing more painful. Being away from family in times of crisis is always awful. Being away during the coronavirus crisis is all the more heart wrenching. There is no greater pain.

And perhaps in some awful life-lesson way, there's a silver lining there, too. We've all learned to really appreciate what we have, near or far – and to reach out and tell people we love them and to take the time to connect. It seems humanity has learned to really love again.

* Names have been changed.



People are really talking and reconnecting

7 Tips for Coping

Mahima Gupta, a psychologist with Thrive Family, offers suggestions to help families cope:

- #1 Carve out some personal space and time, even if that's just going to your own corner, a quiet shower or taking an isolated walk.
- #2 Communicate about expectations, roles and responsibilities explicitly. Do not leave it to assumptions and common sense – talk about it.
- #3 Have realistic expectations. Do not expect 100 percent efficiency or perfect parenting.
- #4 Remember that "this too shall pass". All of this is temporary, so just breathe.
- #5 Get creative with play. Think outside the box and let your kids get bored sometimes.
- #6 Take time to connect with each other, with friends and family, and rekindle long-lost connections.
- #7 Take up a wellness challenge as a family – each member can be the leader one day, and they get to decide on the exercises or activities.

For more details about how to get through these times emotionally, read more detailed advice from Mahima at expatliving.sg. *el*