

How to Help Each Other Through the Off-Ramp: *Don't be Stranger – Reach Out to Each Other*

The suggestions here are intended to help us all be better friends to those whose lives have been disrupted by the off-ramp from the return to UNC-Chapel Hill campus in August – and to ourselves! Following these tips are some examples of resources people may find helpful.

How the Off-Ramp Is Especially Stressful

- Whether first-year students who were looking forward to the UNC experience, seniors living off-campus, or graduate or professional students, the off-ramp has been extremely stressful: positive cases among friends or neighbors, tensions among those playing it safe and those taking risks, hotspots, all the logistic demands of moving out after just moving in, challenges in trying to take or teach courses online from home.
- These personal stressors in Chapel Hill lay on top of concerns that students have for their families and communities elsewhere in North Carolina and beyond.

These all are amidst the existing stressors of COVID-19 and the efforts to control it.

- If we don't "cut ourselves some slack," we'll make it worse and get down on ourselves for not meeting unrealistic expectations.
- The virus and associated stress around it just take the wind out of our sails and

compromise our ability to do work. "I don't know about you, but I'm mentally exhausted by 5 p.m. every day, and I think part of the cause is the unconscious stress flowing through us."
-David Brooks, *NYTimes*

- Everyone around us is stressed, including those whom we typically turn to for strength and support (parents, professors, staff, other students, administrators). It is important to approach *everyone* assuming they have good intentions until proven otherwise.

Tips for How to Be a Friend

General

- Your role is to be a friend, not to have all the answers – you can even have questions! The point is to *connect*.
- Small gestures can mean a lot – "hello" texts, sharing memes, voicemails.
- Give yourself some slack; you're trying your best so don't let it get you down. Acknowledge that expectations and productivity are different during these times.

The administration, schools, and departments across the university are calling on everyone to be flexible and understanding. If you are having problems getting the flexibility and understanding you need from an individual, feel free to contact departmental leaders, student services managers, or others for support.

COVID-19 Specific – Being Kind to Yourself

- Be flexible with each other and encourage yourself and your friends to expect and ask for flexibility from professors, family, others.
 - Don't hesitate to ask for flexibility if it is not offered freely.
 - If you are having trouble balancing your family and student roles after moving back home, speak with your professors to work out a plan which works for you.
- Keep in touch – whether Zoom, text, or snail mail – stay in touch with friends and classmates. Organize with your friends recurring periodic check-ins to just share thoughts – from your immediate concerns to the election and your latest TV show.
- Connect or re-connect with a spiritual resource.

COVID-19 Specific – Being Kind to Others

- Don't be afraid to ask others how they are doing, how their families are doing.
- Share your own experiences so others feel comfortable sharing theirs:
 - Anxieties, uncertainties, fear, and stress – normalize experiencing elevated levels of these.
 - Joy and happiness – acknowledge that these feelings are okay now too.
- Recognize that yourself or your Black, Indigenous, People of Color (BIPOC)-peers are likely facing disproportionate stress and trauma right now, but are less likely to have access to mental health services or to reach out for help.
- If you're willing, let folks know you are available to talk or be helpful however you can be.

- If someone among your friends is dealing with some special stressors – illness or even death in their family or of a friend – organize to keep in touch with them and let them know they are not alone. Some supportive efforts – like meal trains – can still be done in a safe and socially distant manner.
- Don't be shy. When someone is suffering, we may hold back because we don't know what to say.
 - Keep it simple – “I'm calling because I'm thinking about you...” or “I was so sorry to hear...”
 - People are open to others reaching out to them
 - It only takes one person to make a big difference
- Try a new stress management strategy with a friend – exercise, mindfulness practice, yoga, etc.

A Few Resources

- [Ideas for Connecting](#)
- [Mindfulness](#), [Physical Activity](#), and [Stress and Anxiety](#) Resources
- [UNC Campus Health](#): M-F, 8-5 at 919-966-2281
- [UNC CAPS](#): 24/7 at 919-966-3658
- [UNC Student Care Hub](#)
- [UNC COVID-19 Tracking](#)
- [COVID-19 in North Carolina](#)
- [HOPE4NC Helpline](#): 24/7 at 1-855-587-3463
- Wellness Apps: [Headspace](#), [Calm](#), [Sanvello](#)
- [National Suicide Prevention Lifeline](#): 24/7 at 1-800-273-TALK (8255) in English and 1-888-628-9454 in Spanish

Recognize that just “talking it out” and having someone to share feelings with can be a big help.