

A detailed, 3D-rendered image of a coronavirus particle, showing its characteristic spherical shape with a textured surface and a prominent crown of red, spike-like proteins. The particle is set against a dark, slightly blurred background.

Coronavirus

April 9, 2020

Dear Gillings Staff Members,

How are you doing? Depending on when you transitioned to remote work, you may be on your third to fifth week of working from home now. Anyone who imagines that working from home is a picnic should hear the real life stories of what it is like: Stories like some of yours, about already having a huge number of responsibilities – caring for aging parents, young children or grandchildren you're raising – and a lot of people coming and going – and then, suddenly, being asked to turn your apartment or house into an office for remote work. If you are fortunate enough to have an internet connection, your now-home-schooled children also are vying for computers and internet connections. Even the best connections are being rattled by the number of people online at certain times of the day.

People with whom I've talked describe a lot of distractions at home – partners, children, parents, pets and all the things you couldn't have done during a normal workday but now can't ignore – grocery-shopping, meal prep and endless dishes to wash, the growing pile of laundry, dog that needs to be walked and toys that are waiting to trip someone. Being home in the daylight, I see fingerprints I'd never have seen before and feel driven to remove. There goes five to ten minutes. Except for a likely minority of us, our homes are not our offices, and making them such is a huge mental and physical adaptation. And that's not even factoring in the loss of colleagues we are accustomed to sharing space with, whom we count on every day in so many ways – collaborating in real time, helping each other when we get stuck, cheering each other on – people whom we value for their very presence. I am used to being able to stop by Angelica's or Grace's desk and ask a quick question or call on their expertise to solve a Microsoft problem. Our familiar guides and work support systems have been taken away.

That's all before we started Zooming. We couldn't live without it and be productive now. But living with it and Zooming through hours of meetings every day is exhausting in a way we might not have predicted. Everyone with whom I talk about remote work seems to feel similarly. I sure feel it. We can get a lot done in those Zoom meetings, but it requires a degree of concentration that goes beyond in-person interactions. And then, of course, there's the fear of losing the connection. For a while I thought I was the only one who was finding myself on the outside looking in at a Zoom meeting. Then, I realized I wasn't the only one. From what I have heard and seen, you are working really hard and trying to make this work. But it is stressful – and for some people, really anxiety provoking.

This all would be different if we were working at home for a brief, finite period – maybe due to a snowstorm or something like that. But we're in the eye of a pandemic, and we're worried about the people we love and care about, our friends and colleagues, and, let's face it, ourselves. We can't go anywhere except outside and a very few restricted places where we may be taking our lives in our hands. Who knew that grocery shopping could be hazardous to your health! When we take walks, we often find ourselves crossing the street to avoid others who are out walking, so we don't violate social distancing rules. As spring holidays

approach, we can't go to religious services in person or gather with extended families and friends for special meals (see "[Making Passover, Easter and Ramadan Digital This Year](#)," NYT, April 8). It can feel lonely and isolating. Some of you have missed birthday celebrations, weddings and even funerals of family members living out of state. We are isolated from sharing joys and sorrows.

The pandemic curve will plateau, and begin to come down, but we don't know when. Most people will survive, and we will begin to do some of what we did before. But we are living with the anxiety and discomfort of ambiguity. Even the best modelers can't tell us for sure whether it will be next week, a few weeks away or some weeks after that. Our faculty members will have contributed in important ways to progress against the virus. Scroll down and jump to the section, "[Our Faculty Experts](#)," on the Gillings coronavirus information portal, which Matthew Chamberlin and his team are keeping current.

So, we've got to go on about our business, the business of living. And in that vein, I have a few suggestions, some I have learned myself during this experience. Others are from people who also are dealing with this in real time. First, don't ask perfection of yourselves in all tasks. Your computer connection will crash, the laundry needs doing, the dog has got to go out, and your kids are hungry for food and attention. Give yourself a break, admit that you're doing the best you can, and take care of the people around you. From what I've observed and heard, you're doing a fantastic job. But let's be clear. We are not going to achieve all the goals we set for this period, when maybe we focused on the potential benefits of peace and quiet. After the first two days of non-stop Zooming, I had to let a couple of goals go immediately. Please...give yourself a pass to be human. Likely, none of us will achieve championship metrics right now, and that's going to be OK.

Take time for yourself to do something that brings peace, joy, comfort, togetherness, aloneness or whatever you need. Sometimes, take it during the workday. I bet you will be more productive and, if not that, then happier and less anxious, anyway.

Ask for help if you need it or think you might need it. Check out some of the resources on our [coronavirus information portal](#) and the [University website](#). Talk with your HR consultant.

If it all becomes too much, take a break – a day or multiple days off. You may see the world differently when you return. It may be a staycation but make it one without work.

If that's not working, talk with your supervisor about what other resources might be available to help. You are not alone, and you do not have to solve everything by yourself. I have been impressed and moved by how everyone with whom I interact – from the chancellor, provost and head of HR for the University to other deans and leaders at Gillings – expresses humility and empathy about our shared predicament. No one expects the impossible. Across the university, supervisors are being asked to be flexible, adaptable and empathic. We all are experiencing this for the first time...together. We are in this together even though we are not physically together.

Tomorrow, Friday, April 10, is a University holiday. Take the day off. Don't work. Do what you want or need to do. I promise that the work will be there when you return to it. I mean it. As I said at the beginning of the pandemic response, this is not a sprint. It is a marathon, and we need you to be OK at the end of the race. We need you healthy for the long run, for the important work you do, for your coworkers and families, our students and our public health mission. Please know that I care about you and so do a lot of other people.

Wishing you and your loved ones good health in the days, weeks and months ahead.

With gratitude and appreciation,



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