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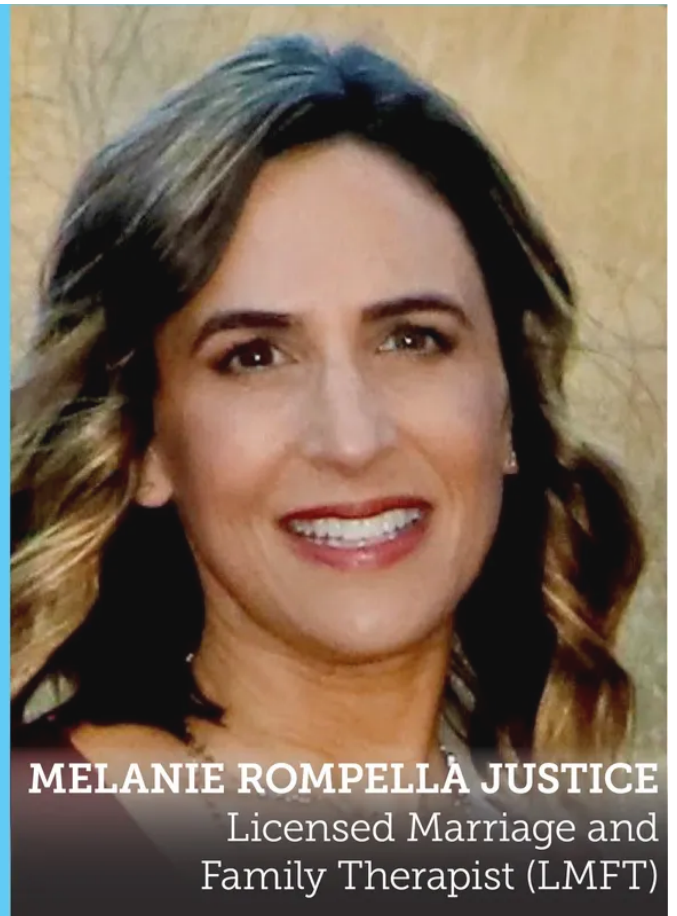
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Motivation thrives on structure, sleep, and sprinklers

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by Julie A. Downey

**MENTAL
HEALTH
IN THE TIME OF
COVID-19**



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***Mental Health in the Time of COVID-19** is a CORE blog series featuring interviews with therapists, counselors, and other mind-body professionals. We are gathering insights to find out how people are responding to the challenges presented by the coronavirus pandemic, and to learn methods to promote healing. We are also capturing observations of sparks of light, as well as visions for ways of living to adopt moving forward to improve our collective wellbeing.*

Melanie Rompella Justice is a mental health counselor at [Moorpark College](#), a part of the [Ventura County Community College District](#) in Southern California. She is a licensed Marriage and Family Therapist (LMFT) counselor, but mostly works with teens and adults. She focuses her practice on cognitive behavioral therapy, which is appropriate for the short-term therapy model used at most colleges.

How have you seen the COVID-19 pandemic's effect on college students' mental health?

I haven't seen a ton of anxiety about the virus itself. When I ask the traditionally college-aged students how they're feeling, they are not worried about getting it. Some are a little concerned about their parents or grandparents because they're older and in a higher-risk demographic, but I thought I'd see more anxiety than I have. Depression and isolation have definitely been more prevalent though, along with a lack of motivation and an inability to focus.

In terms of an increase in anxiety, the exception is students who are moms. They are struggling. They're trying to balance work, college, and homeschooling their children, in addition to regular parenting responsibilities. Since everyone is home all the time these days, there's no break. It's relentless.

As a working mother of three, I can relate! I've always appreciated teachers, but now even more so!

Even though they aren't anxious about personally contracting coronavirus, are students taking it seriously?

A lot of our students in the 18–22 age group are having a hard time staying home. They are meeting up with friends. When I ask if they're social distancing, they say it's too hard. This is especially true for some of the students with autism who already face boundary issues. I haven't heard about any of them going to big parties, though. They are mostly meeting up at parks, and some are hanging out at friends' homes.

How do you respond when a student tells you they are not taking precautions?

I'll offer information and ask them to consider other perspectives. I definitely don't chastise them. I will talk with them and ask, "What is something that would work for you within the limits of what we're supposed to be doing?"

Students who are moms of teens and young adults face an additional concern when their kids do not respect quarantine. One mom who is a cancer survivor and immune-compromised has older kids who continue to leave the house to hang out with their friends. She gets upset, then they follow the rules, but only for a while. It is very stressful for her.

Has switching to video chat and telephone appointments affected your work with students?

I feel like it's been fine, and the integrity hasn't been compromised, but I prefer to meet with students in person. It's more comfortable in my office at school, since counseling from home bleeds into my life outside of work. However, while I'm in sessions and the door is closed, the family knows not to come in.

And many students do not have a private space to talk with me. One student lives with half a dozen people and has nowhere to go, so to avoid interruptions she takes our sessions in the closet.

There's also the distraction of pets. I see a lot of cats in the sessions, which is entertaining!

Are space challenges affecting academic performance?

Yes. Many students don't have a dedicated space to do their schoolwork at home. Some of them focused better in the library or coffee shop.

And for those who have to work on their bed, this can disrupt sleep. In fact, disrupted sleep patterns are a huge problem for students right now. Nobody is going to bed at the right time. They have school, goof around on TikTok, then sleep till noon. They're wasting time, and it doesn't help that they are not well organized.

Sleep troubles seem to be going around, no matter the age group! Can you talk more about sleep hygiene?

Most students have bad sleep hygiene to begin with, but now it's worse. Many of them are doing homework or using electronics while on their beds. Then their brain starts associating their bed with wakeful activities, making it very difficult to fall asleep at night.

Here are some guidelines that I suggest for anyone who would like to sleep better:

- **Set up a separate space to do other activities besides sleep.** If this space is located in the bedroom, it should not be on the bed. The bed is only for sleeping and sex.
- **Do not consume caffeine after 2 or 3 pm.**
- **Stop using electronics at least an hour before bed.** They emit a blue light that suppresses melatonin, which we need for healthy sleep rhythms.
- **Don't lie in bed awake for more than 10–15 minutes.** Estimate this time. Don't watch the clock, though, because that increases anxiety. If you're still awake after 10–15 minutes, get out of bed and do a quiet activity to make yourself sleepy—*anywhere but your bed*. Some good activities to try are reading a book—especially a textbook—meditating, and knitting or drawing. Once you feel sleepy, get back into bed, and try again. If you are *still* lying in bed awake after 10–15 minutes, repeat the process. Doing this consistently will break the connection your brain has developed between the bed and wakeful activities.

Is being away from school affecting performance?

Yes. I've seen difficulty completing school assignments. Almost every single student is having reduced motivation and difficulty focusing. It's due to distractions, lack of privacy, lack of structure, and in some cases, conflicts with family.

They miss sitting in the room with classmates and the teacher. Now there's variety in the sense that they use multiple apps and get different assignments, but it all takes place on the computer. In the classroom, they work as a group and change the environment when they walk to the art room or the music room.

They are doing asynchronous learning, where students do not access information in a single location or at the same time. This is not as effective as in-person classes because they are suddenly expected to learn without the interaction.

One thing they can do is find an accountability buddy. They can pair up with someone who knows the due dates of papers and such and check up on each other.

How do you help people when they're struggling with distraction and motivation?

First, it's important to normalize the experience. A lot of people are going through this—whether they are students or not—so they should not be too hard on themselves.

I help students create their own structure and set up reward systems. I may ask them to identify when they feel most productive and suggest that they schedule the most difficult activities at those times. I suggest building in breaks with enjoyable activities as small rewards.

We also discuss long-term goals. One student is creating a vision board to write down what he's working toward.

One way to prevent feeling overwhelmed is to take out materials for only one class at a time. Having a more organized desk or other work space can help.

What else do you recommend in terms of self-care?

Eating better. Exercise. Sitting outside. Some of the people are not getting out at all and are in a rut. They might not be active in general, but they normally go outside because they have to—to get to class, jobs, etc.

I also suggest mindfulness and meditation and ask students who pray to consider its role in their life. They can also take advantage of the free online mindfulness training program on our health center's website.

A free mindfulness app by [Kaiser Permanente](#) has podcast categories such as Panic and Anxiety and Stress. I'm a big fan. Other popular apps, such as [Calm](#), [Headspace](#), are great, and the [Down Dog](#) yoga app is free to educators and students till July 1.

How does the future look for your school, in light of the uncertainty?

There's such uncertainty, but Moorpark College enrollment for the fall is up already! Typical of any economic recession, which we are currently experiencing, people tend to return to school to strengthen their marketability.

It makes sense that people currently enrolled in four-year schools are choosing to complete core classes at a community college—especially if they have already moved back home. [Also, the price is right](#). Like, insanely economical.

Another popular choice is doing a gap year. Since kids are not getting the full college experience right now, there's little incentive to continue at their 4-year university. And while the professors at prestigious schools have more credence, they may not be tech savvy. This is especially true for those who have never taught online before, so the students lose all that knowledge in the translation.

One note about our services—

Due to the recession, even though enrollment is up, our health center's funding has decreased. Unfortunately, this means we have fewer counselors and support staff to provide services for the new influx of students.

Are healthy things happening now that we'd benefit from continuing?

Some people are eating more healthily, and creating better habits. Some people—maybe the ones who initially struggled the most—are putting in more effort in terms of taking their mental health seriously. One of my students in particular is a rock star! He regularly journals, practices mindfulness and yoga, and rides his mountain bike.

Another student had a really tense relationship with her parents, but since they have been sheltering in place together—and can't avoid each other—they saw the opportunity to put in the work and got to a better place.

Eating dinner with family is easier now that people are not in activities or coming home late from work. And some people are reconnecting with friends who are far away. I even have a weekly happy hour with 8 college friends who live all over the U.S., and even Myanmar, Burma. And although connecting with new people might be rare right now, one student who is a gamer made a new friend through Discord, the chat app.

A lot of people are getting dogs. I've never had a dog before, but during quarantine, my daughter convinced us to adopt a multi-poo we named Ruffles. It's a great, positive thing that many animal shelters are empty right now.

As a pro juggler of family and work-from-home, what insight can you share from your personal experience?

One thing that could be very helpful, while we are trying to mix home, work, and school, is to lighten up on the extra obligations. Once everything shut down, we didn't have to drive to baseball and other activities, but the obligations shifted.

I still feel like we are beholden to other people's schedules. I understand that kids are missing out on birthday parties, but it seems like people who wouldn't normally invite the whole class to a party are asking everyone to participate. I will say that it's been fun to see the creativity, though. Some families are going beyond the car parade and hosting scavenger hunts and online contests.

In terms of this summer, this year, no one can go to public pools, friends' pools, play in the sand at the beach, visit LEGOLand, Disneyland, or travel to see family out of state. This could be a great opportunity to go back to simpler times, like in the 80s, when we would run in a sprinkler, lie on a towel in our driveways, eat popsicles, and ride bikes.

How do you think sheltering in place affects the population at large?

I feel continuing to shelter in place indefinitely is not helpful and actually harmful to many people financially, educationally and for their safety and mental health. However, I don't think we should just open everything back up right now and go back to normal, yet.

What can we do to help each other right now?

I think we'll be seeing a lot more mental health issues and suicides to come due to social isolation and the other effects of our current situation. Please check in on your kids, your friends, your spouse, your parents. If you or someone you know is suffering, contact your health insurance provider for mental health telehealth referrals. If this is an emergency, call **National Suicide Prevention Lifeline: 1-800-273-8255** or **text HOME to 741741 to connect with a Crisis Counselor. This is a free service and available 24/7.**

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