

## Adjusting to An Online Learning Environment

**Ana M. Dison, Assistant Director, Women in Engineering Program**

I've created this resource for you to assist with the transition to an online learning environment. Included are some strategies for how you can be successful, manage stress and anxiety as well as remain healthy.

**Adjusting to an online learning environment:** You might have some experience with online learning and whether it was positive or negative, there are some things you can do to ensure success. These are likely the things that will be the hardest for you to manage:

- Concentrating on virtual lectures
- Managing your time in a new environment/routine
- Processing information via your screen
- Ensuring you have a reliable internet connection & a distraction free environment

But don't worry...there are some practical strategies listed here that can help you manage it all. Keep reading!

1. **Physical space/Surroundings:** You will need to set up a workable space or find a location that you can be productive in, during your classwork time. Consider creating a sign that you can display during your worktimes to indicate to family, etc. that you although you are physically present, you are mentally engaged in work and unavailable. Respecting boundaries is key and you need to establish them so you can be productive. Remember that your bed is not a good office location, no matter how tempting it might be. You need good lighting to help mitigate eye strain and try to find a place that is quiet, distraction free. Consider spaces outside as well!
2. **Confirm or Secure Internet access:** What if you don't have reliable wifi at home? Can you use your local library? Are there other places available to you that don't have large crowds? Whatever your situation, communicate with your professors and **DON'T BE EMBARRASSED**. Internet access is expensive and not everyone has the resources to afford it. Another option is a shared wifi service between colleges across the country called Eduroam. If you are near a college campus, you might be able to go there for internet access. Here's a link for more information: <https://provost.utexas.edu/news/eduroam-provides-worldwide-internet-access>
3. **Get the Tools:** You may need a few tools to ensure that you can access and participate in online learning. A good set of headphones, a microphone, speakers and a web camera are some of the suggestions. If you have these, great. If not, can you borrow them from a friend or family member? If not, purchasing might be an option but don't feel like you have to spend money. If you don't have a tool that is needed, communicate with your professor to see about a work around solution. You will need a way to ask questions and to communicate so think creatively and help your professors problem solve. We are all scrambling to figure out solutions and hope that this will be a temporary situation. Maintaining flexibility is key.
4. **Stay organized:** You will likely have to re-work your study and class 'attendance' schedule and you might just need to start from scratch to create a workable plan. While some courses may reduce content, you can't rely on that for everything. Studying the same amount of time (remember that 3:1 ratio?) may still apply and may even increase. Online learning has definite

advantages such as being able to access the content multiple times (if recorded) as well as viewing content when it meets your schedule. It also can have disadvantages: mainly procrastination. Figuring out a schedule and sticking to it will be key in keeping up with the content and being prepared for finals.

5. **Staying connected:** Maintaining your connections and support network with friends, roommates and study groups is also really important. Yes, we all need to maintain social distancing but luckily, we have the tools to remain connected virtually. Consider who you can gather as accountability partners or groups. For instructional delivery, you can expect that there will be some combination of Canvas, Zoom and perhaps Google Hangouts. Your instructor will message you soon once they have figured out what works best for their course. For staying connected with your peers, be creative and take the initiative to gather your peeps together! We're all in this together and feeling isolated is not productive or healthy. We all need support and we all need to give support. If we all do our part to support each other, we can all manage a stressful situation better.
6. **Realize that there are time boundaries:** Not to belabor the point, but this is a stressful situation for everyone. Faculty are scrambling to figure out how to deliver content differently. Staff are also scrambling to both support faculty and students. We are already stretched very thinly and this emergency is going to affect everyone. It is important that you realize that there are time boundaries for faculty and staff. Messaging a faculty member late at night before an assignment is due or with questions about the lecture AND EXPECTING AN ANSWER, is not realistic. Just because the content and delivery has moved online doesn't mean that traditional work hours have changed. Many faculty and staff are not only worried about their own exposure, they may also be managing children, child care as well as elderly parents. Be patient – we are all trying to do our best to figure things out and to communicate them as quickly and as coherently as possible. There will be mistakes and fumbles.
7. **Practice empathy:** During this extraordinary time, extending courtesy and empathy to others is key. What are you actively doing to be kind to others?
8. **Manage Stress:** Here are 5 things you can do right now to manage anxiety and stress: 1) Breathe: Take a deep breath and sigh it out (yes, make noise!) to release tension in your body. 2) Give yourself a hug: Wrap your arms around your shoulders and squeeze tightly. Seriously, it works! 3) Let it out: Spend a few minutes getting your thoughts and feelings on paper to clear your mind and make space for love and positivity. 4) Tell yourself you've got this: Have a go-to affirmation that you can tell yourself when you're struggling. Something like "I'm safe" or "I'm doing the best I can." 5) Set boundaries: For most, the fear, stress, and anxiety produced by the current state of affairs will be worse than any infection they get. So, pay attention to how the news you consume, the people you talk to, and the thoughts and feelings you have impact your sense of well-being. Set boundaries to protect your spirit.
9. **Manage Mental Health:** Stress is real and wears down our immune response. Staying healthy for yourself and for your family needs to be a priority. That means (in addition to washing your hands) eating right, exercising and getting enough sleep. Spending time outside in nature is a great way to reduce stress and get a little exercise. Walk to the park, mailbox or just around the block. Hang out with your pets. Do some yoga or meditate outside. Staying in the present, focusing on what you can control reduces anxiety and stress. And ICYMI, here's a recent blurb I crafted for you about your sleep hygiene:

*Sleep Hygiene: how are you doing?*

*So, you hear it all the time. The advice about sleep and getting enough, etc. But as a college student, this is a challenge. There is just so much to do – academically and socially. FOMO is real and sacrificing some sleep seems like a reasonable way to get that extra time to do the things.*

*But, at what price? There are so many reasons to make sure you are focusing on your sleep. Here are just a few...First, sleep is how your mind and body rejuvenates. Sleep is how your body has the strength to fight off illness and how your mind is able to retrieve, learn, recall and synthesize information. Sleep is how you regulate emotions. Plus, don't you always feel great after a quality night's sleep?*

*Focusing on your sleep quality and time is essential. Some call it sleep hygiene. And it makes sense...you probably pay attention to your other hygiene but are you paying attention to preparing for sleep? Maybe it's time for you to spend a little time on creating a new routine around sleep?*

*You've probably heard that there is a link between electronic use and sleep disruption. Did you also know that using electronic devices (especially at night prior to sleep) is also linked to weight gain and obesity?*

*Here's how that works. The hormone melatonin is what our body produces to induce sleep but the use of electronics and the blue light decreases melatonin and increases hunger hormones.*

*So, what can you do to change your routine to make sure you are getting sleep quality and quantity regularly? Do you have a set routine to power down before bed? Are you relying too much on daytime naps to get through the day? Is your strategy to "make up sleep" on the weekends?*

*What can you change tonight to try and get a better night's sleep?*

*If you want to learn more, check out this: <https://www.sleepfoundation.org/>*

Adapted from:

<https://www.presence.io/blog/9-things-you-can-do-right-now-to-support-students-through-the-covid-19-epidemic/>

<https://afsp.org/taking-care-of-your-mental-health-in-the-face-of-uncertainty/>