

I'm a nun and I've been social distancing for 29 years. Here are tips for staying home amid coronavirus fears.



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Sister Mary Catharine Perry, a cloistered nun with the Dominican nuns in Summit.

By Sister Mary Catharine Perry, as told to Cassidy Grom

For the past 29 years, I've chosen to [practice social distancing](#). Of course, I and the 17 other nuns I live with don't call it that. We are formally called cloistered sisters, meaning [we never leave our walled-off monastery in Summit](#) except for doctors' visits or perhaps shopping for a specific item. We don't go to parties or weddings or out to eat with friends. I often go months without leaving our 8-acre home.

The [coronavirus](#) is forcing many people in New Jersey and across the world [to stay home](#), limit outside contact — and in a way, start living life like cloistered nuns. Of course, this virus is not good. Sickness never is. And I understand that this sudden shift in our society is frightening. As someone who has lived a life of separation, I'd like to share from my experience how you can make the best of it.

First, you need to establish structure.

Your normal day-to-day lives have structure imposed on them from the outside; you have to catch the train at a certain time to go to work, you have school recess at the same time every day. These things give you a sense of consistency and rhythm.

Now that you are stuck at home, create a schedule for yourself and your family. At the monastery, we wake up at the same time every day and get fully dressed (no pajamas). We have planned time for prayer, worship, work, eating, and fun. Our days usually have a peaceful rhythm. This might take some experimentation; each household is different and for many, it might be the first time they spend an extended period of time with roommates or family.

Second, be intentional and love others.

It is easy to get caught up in making sure you and your loved ones are safe and your needs are met. We are in uncharted territory and these reactions are understandable. However, we should fight against self-centered urges. Call older people in your neighborhood and ask how they are doing, if they need anything.

Give the gift of your time. Cook meals with your family and play games. It is interesting that a lot of people are frightened by this extended time at home because the core structure of society is the family unit. Maybe this is a good opportunity for all of us to strengthen those family bonds, and our efforts will have an effect on the wider community.

Don't hide from roommates under the guise of needing to work; get to know them and learn to enjoy their company. At the monastery, the prayer bell rings and it forces me to stop working and to focus on why I'm really here. It reminds me to leave the project at hand (whether that is making candles or soap, operating our gift shop, gardening or working in the kitchen), and join my sisters. The projects that I am working on aren't bad; they are good, but sometimes I can allow myself to be too busy.

The monastery is not an apartment complex. We are an intentional community and it takes work to become one. It takes a deliberate way of life. It means learning to listen, forgive and accept each other.

Third, use this time for self-reflection and relaxation.

"I need a vacation to recover from my vacation!" people say. Well, this could be it. These weeks are your opportunity for a more quiet, simple life. Every day after lunch, my sisters and I take a 90-minute break of "profound silence." We don't move around the building or talk. We stay still. We read, pray or reflect. Sometimes, we will do a hobby quietly. Sometimes, we nap. People say they want peace and quiet. Then when it is thrown in their lap, they panic. They don't know how to be alone. They are afraid to confront their "shadow side," the hard truths about themselves that they don't like. They fill their lives with noise to run away from their emotions. Life isn't meant to be rushed. Use this time to get to know yourself.

Stop. Be still. You can either waste this period of social-distancing and be frustrated, or you can choose to make it the best it can be.

Sister Mary Catharine Perry has been a cloistered nun with the Dominican nuns in Summit for 29 years. This opinion piece was based on conversations as told to NJ Advance Media reporter Cassidy Grom.

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