The Washington Post *Democracy Dies in Darkness*

The do's and don'ts of apartment living, self-quarantine edition

By Anying Guo

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American University senior Lucy Weiler was perturbed to hear a bass rendition of Deep Purple's "Smoke on the Water" blaring through her living room wall. But then it continued, for nearly a week, during which she also learned that the kids next door had a Bop It and were, indeed, pulling it, twisting it and bopping it.

Since the coronavirus shut down her university, Weiler, who is surrounded by neighbors of all ages, has found herself trapped in a weird conglomeration of noises in her apartment complex. More than 200,000 residents in the District live in apartments, and with more people working from home or finishing the academic semester online, a lot of them are suddenly home at the same time.

New York-based etiquette expert and speaker Thomas Farley (better known as Mister Manners) stresses that people should have a reasonable baseline for life in an apartment complex. In his turn-of-the-century New York brownstone, for example, "I can hear a neighbor switch on a light switch. It would be unreasonable for me to want them to stop doing that, because I chose to live in an environment where sound isn't perfect.

"You're going to have to readjust your expectations during this time," Farley says. "I think this is going to be a time where we all have to pull together as a community and culture, and it starts with our neighbors."

You're probably noisy, too

"Sound is the number one issue in most shared complexes," Farley says. A Google search for "noise in apartments" comes up with 57 million results. People living in an apartment complex should expect noise, Farley says.

But the noise issue is also a give-and-take, he says. To self-test your own noise level, Farley recommends turning on music, closing your door and going into your hallway. If you can hear the music, it's too loud.

Emily Auger, 22, is going through a coronavirus-induced noise problem. Auger, a recruiting assistant, lives in an apartment complex in Brighton, Mass., with about 40 units. Hers is below a family with kids and above a couple with a newborn. Although she had initially noticed heightened noise on weekends, the self-quarantine forced her and her roommate to confront a new reality of shrieking children and a crying baby.

Auger grew up in a suburban neighborhood, watching her parents befriend every neighbor and become fixtures in their community. It's a stark contrast with her current situation, where the only interaction she had with her neighbors was on move-in day. But the ethos her parents instilled in her makes her more sympathetic than angry with her neighbors.

“I would never go up and tell them to shut up their child,” she says. “I imagine they have enough on their plate.” The noise she has encountered has also made her hyper-conscious of the commotion she makes herself, knowing that a newborn is right below her.

“Sure, it would be nice if we could all come home and you never heard any noise from another neighbor,” Farley says. “But that’s not the reality of living in a multi-age, multi-demographic dwelling. It has its own charms, and you have to take the good with the bad.”

Adjust your expectations

After American University announced that the rest of the semester would be conducted online due to coronavirus, senior Thomas Davidenko burrowed into his apartment to ride out the academic and medical storm.

On the third day, he heard the sharp rhythms of a drum slice through his living room, lasting hours into the night. Although the noise was muffled, the drums were loud. But Davidenko has learned to enjoy the irregular beats.

The drums “threw me, but I kinda dig it,” he says. “I think the fact that we’re all facing similar challenges can break the ice between neighbors.”

Etiquette expert Diane Gottsman endorses this sort of patience. “There may be more noise in the building since everyone is working from home and kids are cooped up all day,” she says. “Show understanding during this difficult time, and realize everyone is learning to adjust to a new normal.”

Small gestures go a long way

Gilda Goldental has found herself being hyper-conscious of her own etiquette now that she’s working from home in Silver Spring, Md. She doesn’t vacuum during work hours, she greets neighbors in the hallways, and she has been taking the stairs instead of the elevator, hoping her neighbors will feel more comfortable with fewer people in a small metal box. The crisis has made her wistful for a more intimate connection with the people living around her.

“I’ve realized I should put more effort into getting to know my neighbors,” says Goldental, 24, a case manager for Network for Victim Recovery of DC, a social services organization. “I don’t think I appreciated it nearly as much as I do now. Just getting outside and seeing a lot of what my neighborhood has to offer has made a huge difference in adding relaxation to an otherwise stressful time.”

Gottsman regards these small but significant gestures of neighborliness as huge points of impact for how people can remain positive in a time of uncertainty.

“We have to be tolerant and kind and civil,” Gottsman says. “And those aren’t just buzzwords. We’re all a bit on edge. These things will really get us through this time.”

Tell neighbors you're there

Tell neighbors you're there

Gottsman knows apartment dwellers may not have gotten to know their neighbors like those in single-family homes have. She sees this time in quarantine as an opportunity for neighbors to chat (from a distance) and commiserate about their social isolation.

"The very definition of social distancing, . . . it's making us more aware of all our actions," Gottsman says. "We're realizing how much we actually rely on each other, and it's shaping how we communicate." She suggests reaching out and checking in with neighbors — elderly residents may need help obtaining food or medicine — or simply leaving a note on a neighbor's door, just to let them know you're there.

Ashlee Thomas, a George Washington University graduate student working in urban planning and international development, has been friendly with her D.C. neighbors. Recently, she was bringing in her own groceries and saw an older neighbor in the hallway. She greeted him, joked about their opposing soccer alliances (Madrid for him, Barcelona for her) and offered to help if he needed anything.

"When you ask someone if they need something, it often makes them feel safe," Gottsman says. If you're too nervous to take that initial step and get to know your neighbors, Gottsman suggests organizing a virtual book club or party and asking the apartment manager to help publicize and coordinate it.

Thomas adds that being neighbors is a "fundamental reminder" that you share space with others and that your actions can affect others' well-being.

"Our health is dependent on the health of those around us," Thomas says. "We are a society, not an economy, and only with collective action will we be able to deal with coronavirus."

And what if this time in quarantine becomes long-term? The new normal? Gottsman and Farley both stress that patience, compassion and empathy will go a long way. There is no perfect how-to manual on approaching neighbors in the middle of a pandemic. What matters is the help you can offer.

"When life returns to normal, hopefully those bonds during this time of crisis will carry us through," Farley says. "And that they're relationships that last beyond the pandemic."

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