

Adapting for 2021: A Student's Guide

Regan A. R. Gurung December 21, 2020



Dear Student,

Fall 2020 is in the books. How did it go?

Few residential students looked forward to the thought of another term of remote learning or socially distanced face-to-face classes. It is just not the same thing taking a class scattered around a large room, masked, and following arrows and signs to keep space at every turn. Remote learning, with its umpteen hours spent in the same room staring at the same screen day in and day out, was not a much rosier enterprise either. Even online learning was tough.

Add to that being unable to socialize or see family to the same extent as before the pandemic, health concerns, homeschooling children, caring for unwell family, coping with job loss/changes, and experiencing a volatile year rife with political and racial unrest.

Psychological science suggests that when we have little control over an issue, when stressors are unpredictable, and when they are long term (all characteristics of the pandemic), it is best to activate additional coping responses. By now you have heard about the importance of having social support,

getting extra sleep, eating well, and getting physical exercise. In preparation for the new year ahead, the end of the fall is a great time to reflect on what worked well and what needs to change. Here are some helpful tips culled from research and student feedback.

Condition yourself. Physical classrooms, the buildings they are in, and campus condition us for learning. We associate each with “being in class.” This link helps us switch into “academic mode.” If all your learning is now taking place in the same room or at the same table, then you need to develop new stimuli to differentiate the activities you partake in in that space. Create cues to get your mind learning. Examples include placing your class books in clear view only during class times and not playing any music or having the TV on when you are in class. It could even be throwing on a specific jacket when you are in class (i.e., a Zoom shirt). Anything that will signal to your brain that you are in class rather than not is good.

Do not forget reward and punishment. Work for a set period (e.g., one hour) and then reward yourself (e.g., watch a show) after you do. Likewise, if you do not get work done as scheduled, withhold a pleasurable activity that you would otherwise engage in.

Keep your routine. If you built in time to get ready for class and commute to school, try keeping the same schedule. Yes, the trip to your computer is much shorter, but use time saved to get things done. Dressing up like you would if you were going to a physical class surrounded by people and being seen gives your body a slight physiological kick that can help you pay attention better. Set your alarms as if you had face-to-face classes. The signs of normalcy can help.

Change your routine (if it failed). Many students had a routine that involved sleeping in, not changing for class, and doing all their work in one spot. They reported this did not work well. If what you did in fall 2020 did not work for you, change it. We sometimes get stuck in a rut and a change can bring novelty and increase our motivation. Try including specific NEW routines—such as taking a walk and getting air before an afternoon class or preparing your favorite snack before a challenging class. Factor in seasonal changes in the weather, too, and be prepared for changes due to harsh winters

Tighten your schedule. Scheduling is even more important during the pandemic. Plan everything; setting time for fun and for work and allows both to get done. Even put solo “you” time and sitting (or strolling, walking, hiking, running, or bike riding) outside on your checklist so you get air, a change of pace, and some mindfulness. Then make sure you do it and check it off. MOST importantly, schedule even asynchronous classes. Students who set aside time to work on class (regardless of whether it was live or recorded) got work done.

Un-divide your attention. The single biggest change you can make is to ensure that your attention is undivided. Checking social media or surfing websites in a separate window may seem to make a tough class bearable but defeats the purpose of your being there. If the class chat is distracting, switch it off. Even

simply turning your phone off is not enough. Put it in a different room to make it hard to get to easily. Even briefly checking your phone can disrupt your focus. You may start for a quick look, but that may be hard to stop, and you may get sucked in. Before you know it, you decide to log out of class. It happened. Often. Watch for it.

Take notes. Even if participating in class from your room, take notes as if you were in a physical classroom. This is even important if you only have recorded lectures to watch or all asynchronous work. Taking notes organizes your learning and increases retention.

Turn your camera ON. Students reported that having their cameras on helped them stay focused in class and made it less likely for them to distract themselves with phones or step away to do other things. It made them feel like they were IN a face to face class. Seeing other classmates felt good, and the game face they felt they had to wear helped with their own attention too. While bandwidth problems or not having your own space may preclude this, IF YOU CAN, turn on your camera.

We all want the pandemic to end, but it will be some time before learning as usual resumes. In the meantime forearm yourself to make the best of another round of remote learning.

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