

Ask Jenna: COVID-19 Survival Advice for Academics

by Eve Armstrong
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Dear Jenna,

I am attending junior year of college remotely via Zoom. The online environment is super weird and crappy. You stare at strangers for 75 minutes nonstop, and my wifi cuts out, and the professors look tired and way stressed out. It sucks. I want to block my video but stay logged on, so I can leave for like five minutes without anyone knowing. But one of my professors calls on people. If she calls on me and I don't answer, she'll know I left. Am I stuck? – *Xemi*

Dear Xemi, We all need to allow wiggle room for others' attempts to remain human beings. Further, you can approach this in a manner that will minimize your chances of being outed. A professor usually spaces out callings. So, wait until she calls on someone. Then, first affirming that that person engages in answering, seize the opportunity to flee. It is unlikely that she will call on someone else in quick succession, so you're probably safe for a few minutes. Worst-case scenario: if she catches you and gets annoyed, it's probably due to jealousy that you can leave. She's stuck the entire time.

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Dear Jenna,

I am the president of a major research university. We have suffered a COVID-19-associated drop in student enrollment and are seeking alternative sources of income for the institution's survival through this period. For example, it would help to charge higher tuition for students who remain enrolled. Such a decision, however, might be viewed as unethical. Any ideas? – *Name Withheld*

Dear Name Withheld, Given the challenges that COVID-19 presents to students and families, hiking tuition does strike me as problematic. How about instead harnessing some other lucrative property that the students possess, say, their potential to contribute to partnerships with local industry?

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Dear Jenna,

My girlfriend just tested positive for the coronavirus, and I can't go 14 days without sex. Is it okay to cheat on her? I would use protection and she'd never know. – *Gabe*

Dear Gabe, How did you access this column? This is an academia-themed listing. I am not an expert in this area. Best of luck.

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Dear Jenna,

I am a college professor teaching remotely. One student's emotional support mynah bird is becoming a severe distraction during class. The bird purportedly comforts this student through these admittedly-stressful meetings, and in principle that's fine with me. Now, I have a policy that students keep their microphones un-muted, to facilitate communication. During the first

week of classes, the mynah bird would only chirp intermittently. But now he has learned to repeat: "Can you guys hear me? Goddamn it. Can you guys hear me? Goddamn it" ad nauseum. It has grown disruptive. Can I do anything? – *Yahaira*

Dear Yahaira, Unfortunately, in the interest of the student's psychological health, I'd say you're stuck with the mynah bird. Grin and bear it as yet another reality of the online classroom.

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Dear Jenna,

I am the spouse of the president of a major research university. I gather from overheard conversations that the university is short of funds for the year. Meanwhile, lately some expensive items around the house have gone missing. Jewelry, the flatscreen television, and just this morning I woke with a weird scar on my left side, above my kidney. I suspect that my spouse is connected with these oddities. How can I bring this up in a non-confrontational manner? – *Name Withheld*

Dear Name Withheld, What a funny story. Are you sure you didn't slip on something in the dark and cut yourself? I would sleep on it for a night or so before bringing anything up.

~

Dear Jenna,

I am a prodigious graduate student of microbiology and have developed a cure for the coronavirus that is 99.2 percent effective and will save humanity, but no one believes me. What should I do? – *Esmir*

Dear Esmir, Argh, what a pickle. The first thing to try is a submission to a reputable journal. If no reputable journal will publish your work, it might be time for self reflection. And if you're like many of us during this pandemic, you have copious time for self reflection.

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Dear Jenna,

I am a student and had the coronavirus last month. But I felt fine and my professor held an in-person class, so I went. Now that professor has a severe case of COVID-19 and will probably die. This professor is not very nice, and she gave me a C- last semester. But I feel guilty. Should I send a get-well card? – *Samantha*

Dear Samantha, At this stage, it sounds like a "get well" card would add insult to injury. Instead, try a sympathy card to her family. Perhaps she has family members whom you would consider nice, and who would be touched by your message.

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Dear Jenna,

I am a surgeon at a hospital in a metropolitan area. Recently, the president of a local research university wrote to me, asking about standard procedures for the removal of a kidney from a healthy adult of college age. He also asked about our projected maximum capacity from now through the end of this academic year. Now, I can't quite put my finger on it, but this letter gave

me the willies. I do not want to sully a person's reputation. But should I say something? – *Name Withheld*

Dear Name Withheld, Oh dear. Uh oh. Um .. Hang tight; let me get back to you.

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Dear Jenna,

Can you catch the coronavirus via intimate relations with a hunk of granite? Please do not publish my name. – *Name Withheld*

Dear Name Withheld, Again, I am not sure how student troubles unrelated to academics are getting past the editor. I am not a medical doctor and thus am not qualified to comment.

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Dear Jenna,

I am the CEO of a start-up video communications company seeking to supersede Zoom. Our users may activate a virtual doppelganger to stand in, so the user does not have to be present for the meeting. Visually, the doppelganger is remarkably realistic: there is no distinguishing the image from a real person. Its conversational dexterity, however, has kinks. To work out these kinks, we must extensively test-pilot the underlying artificial intelligence algorithm – in a real online classroom. How can I interest the academic world in helping with this vital stage of development? The finished product is sure to transform the online environment during the COVID-enlaved semesters to come. – *Chad*

Dear Chad, Brilliant idea! Your company will save the sanity of millions of scholars. To partner with academia, you must offer something they need in return. Make it: money. They need money, I fear, much more desperately than people realize. Can you offer that? Please let me know, and hurry - there is a renegade university president whom I am anxious to put you in touch with.