

Consolidated Tips on Creating a “Quaranteam”



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Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic affects us all in different ways and may be a time for trying some unconventional solutions to daily stressors that individuals and families are facing. A recent survey by Syndio finds that 14% of working moms and 11% of working dads have considered quitting their jobs because of family demands caused by the COVID-19 pandemic (Hinchliffe, 2020). These rates are even higher for marginalized groups at 26% for Hispanic women and 15% for Black and Asian women compared to 12% for white women (Hinchliffe, 2020). Issues such as childcare, remote education, eldercare and feelings of isolation are putting a strain on individuals and families as the pandemic continues.

You may have recently read about one possible solution that people are turning to that includes forming a “bubble” or “pod” with select friends or loved ones to allow for socializing and to share responsibilities such as childcare, eldercare, educating children, housework, cooking meals, etc. This concept has been regularly practiced and promoted in places such as New Zealand and Alberta, Canada and is sometimes referred to as a “quaranteam,” “covid bubble,” “quarantine pod,” or “pandemic social bubble.” Quaranteams are now gaining traction in other areas of the world as well. The idea behind a quaranteam is that everyone within the bubble can socialize with one another, but limit interactions and practice recommended social distancing with anyone outside the bubble. These bubbles may be a good way to balance mental health and family functional needs with physical safety and there are some common themes and tips (consolidated below) that appear when researching “quaranteams” and how to get started with one.

“Caution fatigue or quarantine fatigue is real, so bubbles take into account what is reasonable, feasible and sustainable. Social bubbles are a middle-ground approach that expands social interaction and contains risk by limiting exposure.”
-Melissa Hawkins, Epidemiologist at American University

Consider the risk

Consider your vulnerability to COVID-19 as well as that of anyone else in your household when deciding whether or not to form a quaranteam. Bubbles that include people over 65 or have other high-risk factors may want to include fewer people and proceed with a more cautious approach (Schumaker, 2020). Also keep in mind the risks that may come if anyone within the bubble works in a high-exposure environment. Dr. Daniel Griffin, an infectious disease specialist at Columbia University Medical Center, recommends limiting your bubble to ten people or less, as any more adds additional risk. Griffin also notes that if anyone exhibits symptoms, they should self-isolate and the rest of the bubble should too (Prior, 2020).

Choose people that you trust

Bubble with people who share your values and needs (Austrew, 2020). While it may be nice to share a bubble with people you know are fun at parties, it may not be wise to include them if you do not share the same values and cannot fully trust them. In some cases, it might be a good idea to form a quaranteam with other family members that you know well and can have difficult conversations with. If you lose trust with those in your bubble, you can choose new people to bubble with, but leave 2 weeks of time in between to be sure you don't bring any infection to your new bubble.

Other criteria for selecting your quaranteam

If you have children, you may find it beneficial to form a “double bubble” with a family that also has children to play with and can share childcare duties (Schumaker, 2020). If you need assistance with childcare or eldercare, it may be helpful to include people in your bubble that do not normally work outside the home to assist. If that isn't possible, consider hiring a nanny or caretaker who also follows your quaranteam's guidelines and can be shared by its members. The families within the bubble can all share the cost and there are some tips on Care.com for doing just that.

In addition, some parents are forming “learning pods,” also referred to as pandemic pods, microschoools and homeschoools pods. The concept is very similar to forming a quaranteam with another family or two with school-aged children and includes sharing the cost of hiring someone to teach the children or if possible, a parent already within the pod could be the educator. The learning can take place at one pod member's house, rotate houses, or take place at separate location such as an outdoor space. (Austrew, 2020)

“Families in these [learning] pods choose to co-quarantine and follow safety guidelines to lower COVID-19 risk so they can participate in schooling together. Many pods are hiring private teachers, teaching nannies or tutors to execute school curriculum for their children, though some are opting to teach kids themselves.” (Austrew, 2020)

If you live alone, forming a bubble with a couple of other friends or family members can have its advantages for mental health and socialization to reduce feelings of isolation. Selecting people whose skills compliment yours is also a sensible choice to share duties and to learn from one another.

Write up terms of agreement

Make things clear by writing something up. You want this to improve your situation, not add stress to it (Austrew, 2020). Discuss in excessive detail all of the precautions you take on a day to day basis so that everyone is on the same page. Once you come up with the precautions that members of the quaranteam are comfortable with, it might be a good idea for everyone to practice them for 2 weeks before getting together (Lichfield, 2020).

Gideon Litchfield, Editor-in-Chief of the MIT Technology Review, recently formed a quaranteam and suggests treating this as more of a business transaction to improve mental health or to get assistance with childcare for example (Lichfield, 2020). Don't use this to judge your friendship/relationship. Agree to have no hard feelings if things don't work out with the people in your bubble. Some friends may not be great bubble mates and that is okay. It doesn't mean you don't have a good relationship. In addition, you can only join one quaranteam so don't let it bother you if a friend doesn't choose you for their bubble. Lichfield also suggests outlining the things you agree to communicate on. For example, if you have a socially distant visit with a friend or a doctor appointment, you may want to let the rest of the team know. It is best to over-communicate on this issue than to under-communicate (Lichfield, 2020).

Keep open communication

Everyone should be willing to share details about their day to day life, detailed precautions they take and if they had any potential exposure. Here are some suggested topics to discuss: what do you do with groceries when you arrive at home, do you wear a mask when you are outside, do you separate indoor and outdoor clothes, do you clean your phone, how do you clean produce, do you order takeout, what is your process for going in a store, etc. (Lichfield, 2020). Recognize that facts regarding COVID-19 are ever-changing and everyone has different levels of risk they are willing to take so try not to be judgmental when discussing precautions because there are a lot of things we still don't know and we are all just guessing to some extent. Don't ask your bubble mates to defend their choices and be willing to compromise in some areas. In addition to discussing precautions also talk about why you want to form a quaranteam; what are your motives and what are you hoping to gain from the bubble (Lichfield, 2020)? For instance, do you intend for it to be more of a learning pod for school aged children, do you hope to have some assistance with caring for an elderly parent or your toddler, or are you looking for someone to spend time cooking and watching movies with?

“Err on the side of more information, not less about any change in your routine. If you read about something that worries you – a new report about coronavirus transmission, say – talk about how it made you feel...Over-communicating creates a virtuous circle of trust that you're looking out for each other's well-being.” (Lichfield, 2020)

Set a trial period

Set a trial period and agree to have no hard feelings if someone decides they aren't comfortable and would like to back out. Don't be afraid to quit the bubble if you become uncomfortable or lose trust.

Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic doesn't seem to be ending anytime in our immediate future so reaching out to friends, family and neighbors to form a quaranteam is one way to come together with others to address challenges caused by the pandemic. As mentioned above, members of a quaranteam can share childcare, housework, schooling, playdates, birthday dinners, and game nights together (Austrew, 2020). In addition to these functional benefits of quaranteams, the socialization with others can be valuable to mental health as well. This is just one of the creative ways people are using to adjust to the next "new normal."

"It will probably feel really weird and hard because we're not used to navigating such uncertainty, and so many strange and rigid rules with other families. Still, for some, pods could provide a way to stay sane while we all continue to try to stay safe." (Moyer, 2020)

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