

Coronavirus (COVID-19): Managing communication in relationships

TIP SHEET

Relationships Australia WA's education team have developed a range of tips to help support you during the COVID-19 outbreak. As a free resource, we encourage you to share this with your community.

Did someone say self-isolation is good quality together time for the whole family?

Indeed it definitely can be, but it also can be a very tricky time. The maths are pretty straight forward – take one pre-pandemic household, subtract fun holidays, outings, down time with friends, shopping just for the fun of it, team sport (any sport!) and add home schooling, job loss, no alone time, limited resources, fear, stress, boredom and uncertainty. It is a formula for some definite relationship challenges.

More often than not, when the outside pressure starts to increase, our emotions can become heightened, and very quickly we can fall into unwelcome patterns of communication with each other.

The really positive news is that we can adopt some effective communication strategies that can assist us in navigating these unprecedented times.

Here are some thoughts and suggestions to assist you:

- **Your tone is as important as your words**

Whilst what we say is super important, it is our tone that tells our person how truthful we are being. We might say the right words, but often our underlying attitude or feeling is less easy to disguise.

Equally so, our body language can speak in a booming voice. For example “*I love you*” on paper reads however you wish it to read, but said with a pause, whilst looking at your phone, followed by a snappy OK gives it a whole new feeling. Your task here is to not just become aware of your tone, but also take responsibility when you think you might need to apologize for your tone gone rogue.

- **Be friends**

When it's week three of isolation and communication starts to break down, much of how we speak and behave might be telling our partners “*I don't like you*”. To bring our relationships out of the ISO shade and into the sunshine, we might need to start treating each other as we would one of our good friends – with kindness, forgiveness and understanding. And don't forget a splash of humour – it's your choice to see someone as annoying or amusingly different to you.

- **Drop the blame game**

It is going to be so easy to point the finger and blame or criticise our partners when we start to feel hemmed in, and are missing the usual pre-pandemic distractions. However, one of the bravest moves in any relationship is to be truthful and take responsibility for ourselves.

This means admitting when we are wrong, saying sorry when we hurt another, and acknowledging the parts of problems that belong to us (and yes, in case you were wondering, there is always a bit that belongs to you)! This may make you feel vulnerable, but it is vulnerability that can bring us closer in relationships.

- **Listen more**

Most of us think we are great listeners because we advise people, we solve problems and we fix people. However the opposite is often true. People aren't broken and we don't need to fix them – but they do have big feelings and an important story to tell. So our job is to listen intently so they feel like who they are counts. Only help when you are invited and not before.

- **Get some space**

This is an important point - there is a very big difference between getting some space (to steady your feelings and clear your thoughts) and walking away from someone during an argument.

These tricky times are going to leave you overwhelmed sometimes, emotions will run high so it's important to know how to be alone without hurting your person and making things worse.

So when tensions are high and no amount of talking is working, then it might be time to take a break. It can be as simple as *"I really want to work on this with you but I'm feeling overwhelmed"* or *"I'll be a lot more helpful after I've got a bit of fresh air/had a shower/had a good sleep"*. Also, it is absolutely ok to sleep on an argument if that means you will be better equipped emotionally in the morning, as long as you both agree to it. It's worth remembering that a tired angry brain is also a deaf brain!

- **Forgiveness**

Many of our present quarrels come from past disappointments, and now you can add a completely new range of issues that might stem from seeing each other 24/7. To really enjoy your relationships in the moment we may need to let go of our past difficulties. Only you can decide to let things go and forgive. This is a very personal and empowering choice. Wouldn't it be incredible to view ISO as an opportunity to clean out the things that are holding our relationships back and start fresh?

- **And lastly...go first**

It's not hard to understand that when we are stuck in forced close proximity with each other communication breakdowns might happen. We can very quickly become stuck in our private hurt and disappointment, which is generally followed closely by our stubborn refusal to be the one to make the first move in repairing the situation.

Break throughs in healthy communication happen when we get brave and be the first person to make a move in letting the other person back in to our heart, our good books and the lounge room. Going first doesn't make you weak, it makes you kind, strong, forgiving and generous. It is also extremely smart to ensure that the ones we love most also feel their safest and most cared for whilst we spend our days together.

As we journey through these challenging times, please reach out for support and connection amongst your community or if you'd like further support from Relationships Australia WA you can call us on 1300 364 277.

Our Education team will continue to facilitate Relationship Australia WA's seminars, workshops and courses face-to-face once government guidelines allow. You might like to like us on Facebook to keep up to date with support information and details of services we can offer during this time.

If you'd like to register your interest in attending a course on **Communication in Relationships** once available, or any of our other courses, please email education@relationshipsaustralia.org.au or call 6164 0200.