

Coronavirus (COVID-19): Communication for couples

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.

COVID-19 and its attendant stresses may have thrown extra challenges at many relationships. Often when difficulties loom, poor communication skills are a contributing factor.

In truth though, communication difficulties are just a part of the challenge. The real challenge that couples face is that for whatever reason, they feel disconnected from their partner. Lack of good communication skills can fuel this disconnection.

Here are some tips to help you increase your feelings of connection with your partner, through quality conversations:

- **Listen**
The goal here is to be interested in what our partner has to say. When your partner is speaking, give them your undivided attention. Show them that you are paying attention by nodding and confirming what you have heard.
- **Show empathy and validate what your partner is experiencing**
Empathy is the attempt to better understand the other person by getting to know their thoughts and feelings. Listening is the beginning of empathy, and the second part is to validate our partner and their experience. Phrases like, "That is hard" and "I'm here for you", will build emotional connection, which is just what we need in these difficult times.
- **Ask quality questions**
Quality questions are designed to open up a conversation. They are one of the main ways we can come to know our partner better. They usually begin with what, how, when, or which. When you are in a conversation with your partner and are about to give your opinion, ask an open ended question instead and find out how much more you learn about them.
- **Manage your emotions**
During a crisis, our emotions often feel very raw and the slightest thing can send our conversations spiralling out of control. It is helpful to be aware of this. When we begin to feel overwhelmed, it is important that we call a halt to the conversation and take time to soothe ourselves. Once we are calmer we can proceed with the conversation.

- **Take responsibility**

One great difficulty we face is our tendency to blame others, especially when things are difficult. Blame keeps us defensive and powerless. Taking responsibility is seeing where we have contributed to the difficulty and also where we can respond and act to do something different.

- **Use 'I' Statements**

All relationships have challenges which need to be addressed. It is important to bring challenges to our partner's attention without a full blown attack. One method of doing this is the "I" statement. This is a short neutral message about what we have observed, how this behaviour has affected us and a request for what we think would be more helpful.

For example: *"When I am interrupted while I am talking, I feel ignored. What I would really like is to be listened to until I have finished speaking."*

- **When in doubt, a hug can do wonders**

Sometime, despite our best efforts, words seem to divide us more. Since connection is what we are aiming for, try not saying anything and just hold on to each other. Hugging releases the bonding hormone, which is often just what we needed anyway.

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 for Couples** once available, or any of our other courses, please email education@relationshipsaustralia.org.au or call 6164 0200.