

Etiquette, not social shaming, will get people to wear masks and keep a distance

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It's always been awkward to call out others for doing things in public that are annoying or even harmful. But people now face dicier situations as the COVID-19 pandemic raises fears that some are spreading a

dangerous virus by not adequately washing hands, wearing masks in public or keeping far enough apart in grocery store checkout lines.

On NextDoor and Facebook, Bay Area residents are venting about perceived social-distancing violations and debating whether to report neighbors who have gardeners in their yards. Emiliana Simon-Thomas, the science director of UC Berkeley's Greater Good Science Center, saw an elderly woman on a 10-foot-wide trail shout "6 feet! 6 feet!" at a jogger who passed by her too closely.

Experts in [medical ethics](#) and etiquette say it's understandable that people are lashing out. With [public health guidelines](#) evolving, there's a lot of uncertainty about what's safe and what's not, adding to people's overall stress about their health, jobs and what the future will look like.

But experts say it doesn't help to let fear turn people into self-righteous social vigilantes. Shaming people online or in public can be counterproductive if the goal is to change behavior and pull everyone together in a time of national crisis.

Here's where etiquette comes in. Emily Post once said that considering the rights and feelings of others is the "very foundation upon which social life is built." Simon-Thomas added: "Etiquette is a way for people to get along in situations that are ambiguous, which is what we find ourselves in now."

Safety first

While people prioritize public health, they can still be respectful, explained Shashi Dosaj, founder of the California Institute of Etiquette in Danville.

For people close to you, you can offer "gentle" reminders to wash their

hands, Dosaj said. With strangers who are acting in ways that seem selfish or reckless, you should still be polite and "hesitate before passing judgment," Dosaj added.

"No one wants to be 'told' what to do, even if it's for their own safety," said Dosaj. That includes teenagers who may still be congregating in local parks. In that case, a passer-by could humorously call to them, "Happy to see you're having a good time—and staying 6 feet apart!"

Be patient, be kind

Right now, the only control people have over the [coronavirus](#) is behavior, said Arthur Caplan, director of the Division of Medical Ethics at New York University's Grossman School of Medicine. But don't be "obnoxious" in trying to police other's behavior, he said.

"The best way to deal with the pandemic is to be nice to each other and leave the nastiness to the virus," Caplan said. "What you're trying to do is appeal with carrots, not sticks."

For example, it's possible that the elderly man hovering too closely in the pharmacy line has momentarily forgotten the new world order of social distancing, Caplan said. It wouldn't help to dress him down in a way that assumes he's being stupid, selfish or indifferent.

The carrot-vs.-stick approach also applies to perceived mask violations, Caplan said. If you want to say something to the woman at the store with the bare face, you could talk about how you feel better wearing one, Caplan said. "That customer might still think you're being a jerk, but it's better than "How come you don't have your Goddamned face mask on?"

Learn before you speak

Another reason to hesitate before calling someone out is that you may not know enough to take a stand, experts say. For example, complaints about runners not wearing face masks stem from different interpretations of Centers for Disease Control and Prevention guidelines and evolving orders from Bay Area counties about their use outside.

The CDC has said masks aren't necessary for people exercising outdoors if they stay at least 6 feet from one other. But new research, reported by NPR, suggests that people engaging in strenuous workouts may need to stay at least 12 feet from other people, which can be difficult on heavily-trafficked streets and trails. New orders from Bay Area counties Friday said people don't need to strictly wear them while walking, jogging or biking, though they are recommended.

You don't always need to say something

If you're too nervous to speak up to a stranger, that's fine, Dosaj said. You can just step away if the person is crowding you at the store or not wearing a mask. If anything, you can give them a look that conveys alarm.

Dosaj also said there are times when people probably should mind their own business, even if they have a reason to complain. For example, you may be right that your neighbor's gardener is violating state and county orders regarding "essential" work by doing "cosmetic" upkeep on their yard.

But Dosaj asks if it's worth hurting your relationship with your neighbor by complaining—when most gardeners maintain social distance by working solo and wearing masks. She also said you may not know if the gardener is clearing weeds to prevent fire—work that is deemed "essential" to keep the property safe.

But for their own peace of mind, people should probably mind their own business in situations over which they have no control, said Jennifer Peepas, a Los Angeles-based writer who pens the CaptainAwkward.com advice blog.

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"Some of my neighbors had people over on Easter weekend," Peeples said in an email. "I think it was a bad idea, and I hope nobody gets sick as a result. If we were already friendly and they had invited me, I would have said, "No, and also, what are you thinking?"

"What I did was I stayed quietly in my house and let them be, since I don't know them well enough for them to listen to me about public health directives," she said. "The only person I can control is me."

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