

# How to calmly navigate personal interactions during COVID-19

August 17 2020, by Laura Rees

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Thanks to COVID-19, we've slowly built new routines centered on being at home. But as we start to enter various phases of reopening and increased contact, we may feel uncomfortable interacting in person again.

Treating each interaction as a type of micro-negotiation provides a helpful road map for navigating these potentially tricky situations.

What once were automatic interpersonal behaviors now require explicit agreement.

What do you do if someone enters the elevator with you without a mask?

If a friend rushes close to greet you?

If someone stands too closely in line?

What if you are (perhaps unintentionally) the offending party?

These situations are increasingly common and can escalate quickly into full-blown conflicts if not handled carefully. I draw on research on effective negotiations and conflict management to offer concrete suggestions and practical tips for how to ensure everyone walks away happy—and safe.

Overall, treating each interaction as a micro-negotiation first involves a change of mindset. Productive changes to your behavior will then follow more easily.

It is important to note that many interactions won't require all the recommendations below. But thinking about each in advance can help you be ready in the moment. A negotiation done well in this case may be one in which you don't even realize you've successfully negotiated until after it's over. Practice and preparation are key so that these tactics become second nature.

## **Prepare and have a plan beforehand**

In negotiations, an important concept is what's known as BATNA, which stands for the Best Alternative to a Negotiated Agreement. It is what you will do instead if you don't reach agreement with your negotiation counterpart.

For daily interactions during the pandemic, this means you should have a clear idea in advance of what you will do if a situation gets too uncomfortable. [Research shows](#) that having a defined, desirable alternative in mind helps negotiators perform better; the psychological comfort of having an attractive backup plan helps you feel more powerful and removes unnecessary stress in the current moment.

Rather than storming away in a huff, or escalating a conflict unnecessarily, plan ahead and have explicit options in mind. For example, if mask-wearing doesn't seem to be enforced in a particular place, know before you leave your home what you will do: you might get takeout from a different restaurant, order groceries for pickup or delivery or simply come back at a different time.

Having your alternative in mind will help you remain calm, knowing that you always have a perfectly acceptable alternative. In fact, [research shows](#) that simply feeling that you can handle a tense situation can help you avoid reacting unproductively.

## **Respect other perspectives, but be creative**

Although it might seem inconceivable that someone may have a different comfort level in terms of interactions than you do, it's bound to happen and doesn't mean the other person is crazy. (In fact, they may be thinking you are the crazy one.)

A more productive approach is to try to understand the other person's perspective, and how you can satisfy both of your underlying needs in a

creative way. [Separate the position \(the behavior, or the "what" that makes you feel uncomfortable\) from the interest \(the "why" of the behavior\).](#)

For example, if you're not comfortable attending the "small" get-together of friends that somehow grew much larger in number, that's OK. Simply say so explicitly, but also suggest an alternative that could meet both your and the host's interests (to connect with an old friend) in a different format (taking a physically distant walk together later in the week).

Remember that respecting the other person doesn't mean you have to agree with their position.

But by being creative and focusing on deeper, underlying interests rather than more superficial positions, you can keep everyone happy.

## **Don't take it personally, and use threats wisely**

Despite our best intentions, it is likely that some interactions may lead to strong emotions, even anger.

However, rather than reacting angrily to a situation, [which can backfire](#) depending on how it is received, take a step back and reconsider the situation from an open-minded, problem-solving perspective.

Use the other person's reactions and emotions as a trigger to help you find out what's really going on at a deeper level, which [research shows](#) shows can help you reach a more mutually beneficial solution without having to simply give in to the other person's demands.

If you feel that you need to resort to ultimatums, do so carefully and purposefully. [Research suggests](#) that WISE threats—those that you are *willing* to enact, that serve your underlying *interests*, that help the other

person *save face* or maintain their dignity and that are *exact* rather than vague—are more likely to lead to effective conflict resolution.

Thinking about each interaction you have as a form of micro-negotiation will help you practice a few fairly minor behavioral and mindset changes so that you, and those around you, are more likely to have positive interactions and avoid unnecessary conflict.

It's important to remember that we're all navigating uncharted waters, and negotiating what used to be mundane but now feels uncomfortable may not come naturally. However, with conscious practice and an open mind, it's possible to approach even the most challenging interactions from a productive problem-solving mindset.

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