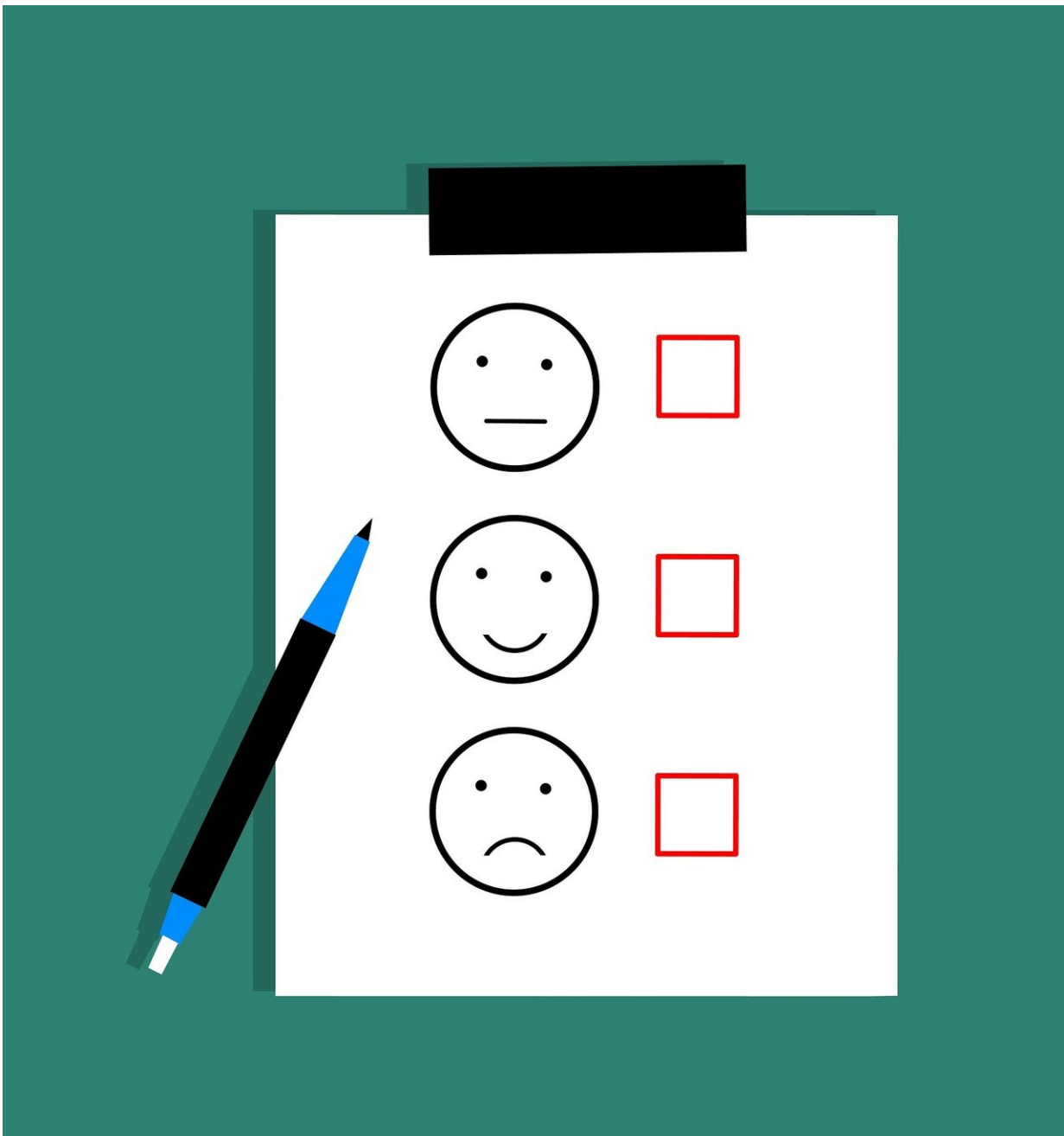


Psychologists offer tips on relationships during the pandemic

August 3 2020, by Kim Eckart



Credit: CC0 Public Domain

Months into the pandemic, as restrictions loosen and more people venture out, families and friends may confront differences over what's necessary, safe or comfortable.

So many questions and choices: Attend a child's birthday party? Host a backyard barbecue? Meet for a drink? Hug a relative?

Decline, and you risk hurt feelings; accept, and you may expose yourself and your loved ones to risk, increase the risk for your community, and feel judged by others in the process.

All are natural experiences during the pandemic, University of Washington psychologists say, but there are ways to approach interactions with friends and loved ones, and to reflect on your own feelings, that can provide a positive path forward and help maintain healthy relationships.

"Effective communication skills are key to navigating conflicts around COVID-related attitudes," said Peter Rosencrans, a doctoral student in the UW Center for Anxiety & Traumatic Stress. Consider the goal for an interaction. Maybe you simply want to explain how you're feeling, and that maintaining the friendship or relationship is the priority.

Rosencrans recommends speaking with a respectful tone and an easy manner, listening actively, with interest, and really trying to understand the other person's point of view. Use humor when appropriate. Smile genuinely. Think of it as the "soft sell" approach, rather than the hard

sell, he said.

Key to that approach is trying not to judge others for the decisions they feel are best for them, said Michele Bedard-Gilligan, an associate professor of psychiatry and behavioral sciences in the UW School of Medicine.

"These things are going to differ greatly from person to person. A little empathy and understanding goes a long way," she said.

For example, everyone has a different level of risk at which they are comfortable, said psychology professor Jane Simoni. People take "reasonable" risks of all kinds every day, balancing a need or want with the possibility of rejection, loss or danger. Letting a newly licensed teenager drive the car, for example, can be considered a reasonable risk.

A deadly pandemic, of course, carries with it other risks. People face differing degrees of risk related to COVID-19, due to age, underlying [health conditions](#) and other factors. If someone believes they are less likely to suffer severe consequences from contracting coronavirus, then they may be more willing to take risks that expose themselves, noted Bedard-Gilligan.

The difficult conversations can arise when someone's behavior endangers others, she added. Arguing or trying to engender fear is unlikely to work. You can attempt a rational discussion with that person, or focus instead on what you can control in your own life, and the behaviors and limits that work for you.

Following [public health guidelines](#) should be paramount, and doing whatever possible to minimize risk to the community, said Jonathan Kanter, a UW research associate professor of psychology who's leading both King County and national studies into how people are coping with

the physical isolation of lockdown restrictions.

"When we experience others not following guidelines, we have choices to make, and they're not easy," Kanter said. "Do we feel a responsibility to speak up? Will we be effective, or just start an argument that won't change behavior in any event? Do we have a handle on why we're feeling what we're feeling, and are we coming from a sense of values and purpose, or are we just reacting out of anger?"

People are feeling a responsibility to step up because of a lack of leadership, but they don't necessarily know how to be effective, or even why other people aren't adhering to the guidelines.

Researchers say there could be more, and perhaps better, [public health](#) messaging to educate the public. Simoni, who specializes in community and health psychology, said that in the early years of the AIDS epidemic, solely disseminating information about the risks of HIV wasn't enough. Public health interventions needed to promote not only the knowledge of what was necessary to stay safe, but also the motivation and skills needed to effectively change behaviors. This also had to be done at many levels: individuals, health providers and systems, and communities. Today, the mitigation strategies around coronavirus—the importance of wearing masks, testing and contact tracing—require the same coordination at the individual, health provider and community levels.

Fear and a lack of control tend to guide our responses, Simoni said.

"There are a variety of reasonable reactions to the pandemic. Try to have compassion and patience with other people. We share more in common than we think," she said.

In her own life right now, Simoni said, she feels comfortable playing tennis, but other tennis-playing friends don't. "We all agreed not to judge

each other. Everyone has to feel comfortable and supported in their choices," she said.

What about when the situation is more adversarial? Say you're asking someone to change their behavior, or standing your ground.

Speak matter-of-factly, and nonjudgmentally, Rosencrans said. Be clear and direct about your feelings and beliefs about the situation; don't assume the other person knows. Explicitly ask for what you want.

"Keep the conversation focused on your goals," he said. "But potentially be willing to negotiate, while also having a clear sense of your limits." In the end, focus on what works, and try not to let the desire to be "right" on every point of disagreement get in the way of being effective.

Provided by University of Washington

Citation: Psychologists offer tips on relationships during the pandemic (2020, August 3) retrieved 27 April 2024 from

<https://medicalxpress.com/news/2020-08-psychologists-relationships-pandemic.html>

<p>This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.</p>
--