

Q&A: How to talk to others about healthy habits like face masks and distancing

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Students socialize from a safe distance on Northeastern's Boston campus. Credit: Ruby Wallau/Northeastern University

"Yo, dude, put on a mask!"

Those words are probably heard dozens of times a day. The sight of someone without a face covering, openly coughing, or standing a little too close for comfort is enough to set off someone who can't understand why another person isn't following widely prescribed guidelines to slow the spread of the coronavirus. Often, this interaction leaves both parties in a sour mood.

No one could have imagined six months ago that this is how we'd be living. But the pandemic-induced stressors can be eased by being aware of our feelings and figuring out how to use them in the service of the goal you're trying to achieve, says William Sharp, associate teaching professor of psychology.

For example, before heading over to a friend's backyard for a social gathering, know what you're walking into by having a [conversation](#) beforehand about what you're comfortable with. If you feel okay about others not having a mask or being properly spaced apart, let that be known. Likewise, if those requirements are non-negotiable, share those feelings too.

Sharp, who is a therapist, provided tips to News@Northeastern on developing healthy ways to have productive, useful and non-confrontational conversations to diffuse those situations that have become part of life in a pandemic.

The healthy habits that we need to practice, whether they be mask wearing or physical distancing, are pretty simple. But the conversations that we might have about them can be a bit tricky. When we are preparing for an important conversation, under any circumstances, we're grappling with two powerful

**forces—our personality and the circumstance itself.
Can you explain how those might influence us?**

I've always said we have to start with ourselves, because there are certain things that we bring into every conversation. The ways that we're used to dealing with tension, conflict, feelings, and thoughts that we'd rather avoid—so much of that is our personality. So much of that is who we really are. And so, when we're put in a situation, there's that intersection of the real world and our inner world.

And that's, I think, where things kind of get a little bit dicey for some people. And again, it depends on how flexible our personalities can be. So if we need to respond differently, can we, but certainly, we're also presented with novel situations for which we have no kind of script that we normally can go with or think about. And so I think we have a lot of those coming up, seems like almost every day, recently.

**Can you describe some of the different responses
different personalities might take as their avenue to
approaching a situation? Maybe humor, maybe a
more serious or assertive approach?**

When people are walking into a new situation they kind of are bringing themselves in, and then they may meet someone and they may go to their old default. So if humor, for example, is something that they're very used to using and playing things off as a joke, and saying what they want to, humor is great.

I often find that within humor, there usually is a little bit of that aggression that somebody is trying to discharge, they're trying to work something out of their system. And so we will see humor as a way, but

other people are also much more comfortable just saying 'Here's what I want.'

I think we also can find people whom we would all find aggressive, people who just kind of barge right in and steamroll you. Maybe they feel to us like they're entitled, but they're just really good at saying what they want. So those are three kinds of a multitude of personalities that we can meet in everyday life.

You said we might not always have a script for every scenario. Can you explain how experiences that are pivotal, or things you might not have experienced before, can change our personalities in ways we might not expect?

This is always a big question in personality theory. How much of our personality is from the inside? Is it our genes, is it our hormones that are making us the way we are? How much of it is from the outside and the influence of the social world on us? And then, of course, every theory that is somewhere in between those two extremes.

When I teach personality, I just present all of them and let students suss out what they're going to end up believing or not believing or liking or not liking. But we get presented with some of these situations, like the one that we're in right now with COVID, where every single day seems to be a new challenge.

I know people who use aggression and others who are completely withdrawn and aren't doing a lot. So there's ways in which this type of a mass experience really lets us know that it's not all just from the inside. There really is an outside world that's influencing us. I think an interesting research question is 'What's going to happen a year from

now?' Are those changes permanent? Or are we just for the moment altered in terms of our personality and character?

So before we have an important conversation, a lot of people will cycle through 'what if?' scenarios or situations, and kind of pre-determine outcomes in our own heads. How can that hold us back when the actual time comes to get down to it and start talking?

I think that's actually the best thing for us, to be aware that we're always doing these self-talks. We're always coming up with scripts, we're always thinking of 'How is this situation going to play out?'

It's really good for us to start with becoming aware that we have that script and we have ourselves in every situation that we go to.

I think the problem becomes if we really then don't open ourselves up to what's happening in the actual situation. If you're going off of a script, and all of a sudden you're in a situation where that script is obviously not working anymore, it's going to get awkward. Somebody could be really upset because you're responding to things and you don't seem to be listening to anything that they're saying.

That's when it becomes a problem, because the person doesn't feel heard and you don't understand why it's not solely what you want.

Is there anything else that might make us apprehensive before an important conversation?

I would say out of all the feelings that we have at our disposal, the biggest one that people want to avoid, for the most part, is anger and

aggression and hate—any version of that.

There's nothing wrong with those feelings. They're totally natural feelings. The actions that some people take when they're really mad and angry and feeling an amount of hatred or aggression at someone, that's when things can become destructive. But really, anger in a lot of ways can be in the service of helping you get what you want, which may also be what the other person wants as well.

Become aware of all your feelings, certainly the ones you want to avoid, and figure out how to use them in the service of what you're trying to get. Avoiding them just ends up with those feelings becoming, in a way, stuck. And I think we lead a much fuller, happier life when we're able to have all of our feelings.

The distinction between being angry and being assertive seems to be key there. Can you describe the difference a little bit more and why we can embrace feeling assertive and openly communicate?

I think some of the lines that we draw are somewhat arbitrary around that, because I don't know in our unconscious exactly how different they are. They might actually be the same. I think the difference, though, is in how we use it.

Again, I think the outcome and being aware that you can use these feelings in the service of what you want is really important.

You say that our starting points for assessing our own needs, wants, desires or concerns is ourselves. Would you call that your golden rule for conversations?

Knowing yourself is really important, because if you know yourself, you're going to be able to know what you're bringing into a situation. And that gives you some degrees of freedom of maybe being able to do it differently.

If you're not aware of what you're doing, you're just going to repeat the same things over and over and over. And you may believe that it's all happening to you as if it's totally coming from the outside, when the reality is there's a little bit of you mixed up in this and that's why the same thing keeps happening.

When should we start having those conversations about what our expectations are for mask-wearing, physical distancing, and other healthy habits?

I think we want to start having those conversations with ourselves. What is your tolerance of risk? Because let's face it, there's nothing out there that is risk-free. Even prior to COVID, going out brought in certain risks. Now, there are much deeper, real risks that I think we have to contend with, and so I think we want to know what we're willing to do.

Know what you're willing to tolerate, what you would like. Then, prior to going to your friend's backyard for that socially distant drink or snack or check in, have that conversation with them. Here's what I would like. Here's what I would be comfortable with. And then, hear what they have to say.

You talk about how fruitful conversations are, especially when they start prior to when we reconnect with people. Can you speak to situations where we might not have that luxury?

Wearing a mask when you go into a grocery store, let's say, is something that is required everywhere that I know. So what you walk into in some of these situations are the people who maybe don't realize they've just encroached into your six feet, or they're even just too close, if you want to have even more distance.

When you go into the produce section and there's this nice, beautiful pile of red apples, and you just walk up to take one. Now we have to kind of look because if somebody else is there, I usually just wait. I let them pick the apples that they want, and then I go up and take the ones that I want. But there are situations where you've waited, but now somebody else has come right up next to you and it's like 'What's going on? I'm maintaining six feet. Why aren't you maintaining six feet?'

I think we have to be okay, in those moments, with using our personality in a way to say, 'I'm going to pick my apples and then you can have as many as you want,' or 'I'm almost done. Just give me a minute and I'll be out of your way.'

It's such a good time to be civil. We're all under so much, it would be really nice if we could just be a little nicer to each other.

Can you talk about what a productive conversation around mask-wearing might look like for someone with whoever they're living with?

I think those are some of the most difficult conversations. I like to start with myself. Why am I wearing a mask?

The science is emerging and changing a little bit every day with this, but what I really believe is I'm wearing a mask to protect someone else.

I think if I can say to somebody 'Look, I'm wearing this because I really don't want you to catch something if I have it. I am really doing this to protect you. Could you do the same? Would you be willing to join me in that?'

And if they try to drag you into another conversation, that's when I find it really good to come back to, 'Again, let me tell you why I'm doing it, because I really think this is important that I wear this mask to stop the spread.'

It's tempting, because we're all human, to get into these other fights or to try to argue science. But if you can come back to what your real convictions are—and none of this works if it's inauthentic—when you really do that I think you have a good ground to stand on.

You talk about the positive results that setting our parameters early can yield. How do those conversations, having them openly with those we interact with, put us at ease?

I think when you are left totally in your own head, you can really run into issues because it is totally in your own head and it may not be founded. You may have a better idea of how the conversation is going on, but the opposite can be true. You can have a very pessimistic view, like 'This is going to be terrible, it's going to be a big fight.' And by having that conversation in advance, I believe all of a sudden, you realize, 'Oh, I was worried over nothing.' And how many times have we said that to ourselves?

I think that holds true in these mask and distancing conversations as well. Sometimes it's worse in our head. So having it, you might be pleasantly surprised. If not, again, forewarned is forearmed. You know what you're

walking into, and you can be a little bit more prepared.

How can we get better at having these conversations that we encounter probably now more than ever?

I don't know many people who would have predicted this is how we would be spending August. I can't even believe it's August at this particular moment. But I find practice is really the only thing that we can do. And the good news is, the more you practice, the better you're going to be at having these really difficult conversations.

Because one of the things that happens, I find, is you become a little bit more aware of what it is that you want, what you're thinking is.

And if you're open to having these engaging conversations, again, you're influenced sometimes by what other people say in one direction or another, and that helps you in future conversations be able to say, 'I have thought about this. I just had this conversation last week.'

When I started as a therapist, there were these great little tidbits that my supervisors would give me. And I actually did write them in my notebook or on a little index card just because sometimes, when it's so new and you think it's great, you want to make sure you get it right. And in these moments, you know, your thoughts can leave you.

So sometimes if you need to write it down on a piece of paper, have it written in your phone or whatnot, it's helpful to kind of have a couple of notes for yourself. I guarantee you though, over time, and with practice, it will become second nature. It'll just be something that you're very used to doing.

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