

COVID conflicts are putting big strains on relationships

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(HealthDay)—As the coronavirus pandemic wears on, it's clear that not

everyone's on the same page when it comes to preventing the risk of infection.

Lots of people wear masks, try to maintain [social distancing](#) and avoid large gatherings. But plenty of others forgo a mask or wear it on their chin, go to busy bars and attend social gatherings, like weddings.

Both sides think they're right. And that's led to friction and frustration among friends and families.

How can you deal with these differences and keep your relationships intact?

"This is a super-charged topic. Your beliefs about science are now injected with politics," said Dr. Richard Catanzaro, chief of psychiatry at Northern Westchester Hospital in Mount Kisco, N.Y.

"My fundamental approach to stuff like this is to be as direct as possible. Express the concerns that you have, and acknowledge that the other person might not agree, but explain it's how you feel. For example, ask the person to wear a mask when you're interacting with them. If they refuse, say, 'Let's talk virtually then,'" Catanzaro said.

He added that the tone of the conversation hinges on how important the relationship is to you.

"In a marriage or more permanent relationship, be more open with the person, and try to get them to see how their behavior is impacting you," Catanzaro said.

For more casual friendships, he suggested taking on more of the "responsibility" of the request. "You can tell friends, 'It's a possibility I could be overreacting, but I would rather overreact because it's not only

my health at stake, but also the health of my parents and my kids and my co-workers,'" Catanzaro explained.

L.A. Barlow, a [clinical psychologist](#) at Detroit Medical Center, has been seeing a lot of people struggling with these [coronavirus](#) lifestyle mismatches.

"It has a lot to do with the uncertainty around the coronavirus. Usually, when people in a relationship have differences, it's OK to negotiate to a common ground," she said. But that's not always possible with coronavirus issues. It would be tough to persuade someone who's been careful about social distancing to attend a wedding with 100 people, for instance.

Whenever possible, she advised, try to find some middle ground. "Try to understand the other person's perspective," Barlow said. "'Why are you feeling we shouldn't go out to a restaurant?' If you can't find a happy medium, let them know, 'These are my boundaries.'"

There are extremes on both sides of COVID-19 risk. "Some people are frightened to even walk out their front door, while others are throwing coronavirus parties to deliberately get sick. For anyone on the extremes, try to educate them," Barlow said.

E. Scott Geller, alumni distinguished professor at the Center for Applied Behavior Systems at Virginia Tech in Blacksburg, said the mixed messages everyone has been receiving are a big part of the problem.

"If we don't want to wear a mask and social distance, we listen for those messages that justify our behavior and say coronavirus is a hoax," he said. "It's called confirmation bias. We hear what we want to hear and deny what we don't."

Geller noted that people are motivated by seeking success or by avoiding failure. People who are partying, going to restaurants and not wearing masks are success seekers. "If I'm partying and having fun, I'm going to keep doing it until consequences influence my behavior," he explained.

Meanwhile, people trying to avoid failure—getting the coronavirus—are nervous and scared and not as happy. "They're also scared and fearful that the success seekers will make it worse for all of us," Geller said. "When you talk to a friend who is a success seeker, make it personal (presuming that you care about each other): 'You can do what you want, but it hurts me.'"

All of this is more than a difference of opinion, he pointed out. These are decisions that affect our health. And it's especially easy to be negative over email or social media, Geller added.

Catanzaro said it's important to have an outlet for any anger and frustration you might feel over someone else's coronavirus behaviors. "Recognize that you're angry and find an outlet—exercise, meditation, whatever you do to cope with anger," he said.

And, what if it's your kids who are struggling—watching their friends get together, forgoing masks? Think of it as similar to when other parents let their kids stay up late, while your children have what they consider to be a strict bedtime.

"Explain: 'This is what I believe and what I want for you. You don't have to agree with me and I know it's frustrating, but there's still a danger out there and here's the science behind my decision,'" Catanzaro advised. Tailor the talk to your child's age.

And all three experts agreed: You may have to let some relationships go—at least for a while.

Barlow said if someone isn't respecting the boundaries and behaviors that make you comfortable, you can choose how you'll interact with them. "If they're just not listening to your concerns, it's OK to decline to be with them," she said.

For more important relationships, like your marriage, therapists can help you reach agreement. "Let a professional help mediate for you. Maybe we can work on negotiating," Barlow said.

People who have a lot of anxiety that's affecting their daily lives and ability to get things done might also benefit from talking to a therapist, she added. Telehealth can be a helpful option.

More information: Learn more about protecting yourself and others from coronavirus from the [U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#).

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