



NAVIGATING SITUATIONS WHERE YOU'RE UNCOMFORTABLE WITH OTHER PEOPLE'S COVID SAFETY PRACTICES

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The COVID-19 pandemic has impacted all of our lives either directly or indirectly. How we choose to address the virus and its associated risks varies from person to person. Conversations with our family, friends, peers, or coworkers may lead to a focus on the virus and the actions we are taking to keep ourselves and others safe. Or people in our lives may engage in or invite us to engage in social activities that they consider appropriately safe but that we are not comfortable with or visa versa. For those who share equal concern about the virus and make similar risk assessments about how to stay safe, these situations may feel easy and supportive. However, if you and other people in your life have different views, these situations may become stressful or frustrating. This guide offers tips to help you feel empowered in these situations to share concerns about your own safety as well as the health and welfare of those you care about.

Identify and Communicate Your Own Boundaries

- Ask yourself:
 - *“If I ignore others’ opinions, with what level of risk am I comfortable?”*
 - Keep in mind that some of your neighbors may have not left their homes for months, while others may feel following precautions and wearing masks are unnecessary. Where in the continuum are you comfortable?
 - *“Am I considering both my own health/safety and others’ health/safety as I assess the risks associated with each situation?”*
 - *“What is my gut telling me? What fears are coming up based on each option? Am I influenced by social pressure, or am I making this decision based on my own values and comfort level?”*
- Identify your boundaries
 - For example:
 - *“I am comfortable with gatherings that are outdoors, distanced, and BYOE (bring your own everything).”*
 - *“I am comfortable attending indoor gatherings, or outdoor gatherings where people are within close proximity.”*
 - *“I do not want to share communal food or drink until the pandemic is over.”*
- Communicate your boundaries clearly and non-defensively
 - Resist the urge to over-explain your decision-making – this often invites the other person to question your reasoning
 - Rehearse your wording beforehand – this allows you to remain confident as opposed to flustered or defensive



- Have a script ready for different situations, such as when someone approaches you without a mask.
 - *“I’m worried about getting you sick, can we please stay 6 feet apart?”*
- Learn when to say “no” and when to propose alternatives
 - Assess the situation. Ask yourself, *“Is there a way to adjust these plans so that they fall within my boundaries?”*
 - If so, work together to come up with an activity that fits both party’s needs
 - If not, you can decline in a way that doesn’t push people away
 - *“I really appreciate the invitation and I would love to spend time together soon! Right now, I don’t feel comfortable seeing people in person, but could we schedule a Zoom date so we can catch up?”*
- Acknowledge your emotions
 - Acknowledge any feelings of sadness, FOMO (fear of missing out), or anger that may arise
 - Be aware that you may be craving social activities more than ever and have mixed feelings if you choose to turn down an invitation
 - Recognize these emotions and validate them
 - Acknowledge it is disappointing to miss spending time with loved ones
 - Acknowledge it is frustrating if friends or family take risks to partake in activities that you would like to partake in
- Practice self-compassion
 - Know that our values can sometimes conflict - a decision may feel right to you and also be difficult to accept because it means missing out on something else
 - Keep in mind that you are making a decision to protect the health and safety of yourself and those you come into contact with and that decision can be difficult
- Reassess your comfort level periodically
 - Be mindful that we are in uncharted territory, and new information is released regularly
 - Be open to revisiting your assessment of the situation as you learn more about the risk associated with different situations, and redefine your boundaries as you see fit
 - Reference reputed sources for information about safety guidelines (e.g., [CDC guidelines](#))

Talk with Friends & Family about Their Boundaries and Risk Assessments

- Use strategies that foster an exchange of ideas in a way that both parties can hear each other and share information



- Ask permission
 - *“Would it be okay if I shared some concerns I have about the pandemic?”*
- Gain buy-in for the conversation
 - *“I would like to hear your views on the pandemic also.”*
- Use effective communication tools
 - Share information, do not lecture the listener
 - Remind yourself: the words you choose are important but how you use those words can be just as important
 - Use a gentle and direct approach
 - Be aware of your tone and volume - lowering your volume will actually compel your listener to pay greater attention to what you are saying
 - Avoid saying, “because I said so”
- Translate statistics or large numbers into something more relatable
 - Instead of: *2% of children contract COVID and 0.5% of those infected children will die*
 - Try adding: *If 2% of the 74 million children in the U.S. contract COVID, which means 1,480,000 children will get sick. If 0.5% of those children die, that translates to 7,400 children dead. For reference, roughly 2,700 individuals died from 9/11... so that’s almost equivalent to three 9/11s, with only children.*
 - Use analogies or metaphors to illustrate the points
 - See Table 1 for more helpful analogies!
 - Know that even if you use science to support your case, the other person may not be able to hear what you are saying
- Focus on the impact of their actions rather than implying their intent
 - *“By going to bars and being in close proximity with a lot of other people, you may inadvertently contract the virus and infect your loved ones,”* rather than, *“You clearly don’t care about your loved ones, otherwise you wouldn’t go to bars.”*
- Share times when you’ve had difficulty following the guidelines as well
 - The message, *“We are in this difficult situation together,”* is more effective than, *“I’m doing the right thing and you’re doing the wrong thing”*
- Frame the conversation in terms of your feelings, rather than the other person’s actions
 - *“I care about you and want you to stay safe.”*
 - *“I worry that you are putting yourself at unnecessary risk of contracting the virus and I don’t want that to happen.”*
- Avoid being judgmental/overly critical
 - Keep in mind your short-term and long-term goals (e.g., for the communication and for the relationship)
 - For example, your goal might be to communicate your concern and



- also to keep this person in your life long after the pandemic is over
 - Consider whether your approach fits with your goal
 - If you shame or pass judgment on the other person, you will likely be met with defensiveness and/or tarnish the relationship, which is unhelpful if your long-term goals include maintaining the relationship
- Listen to the person's needs
 - Recognize that some people are feeling the need for in-person socialization because their mental health is suffering from quarantine, validate that need and help them come up with safer alternatives to whatever behavior they're planning to engage in
 - *"I hear you say...[repeat what you have heard]... I wonder if you could still [insert need] by doing [safer activity] instead?"*
- Meet them where they're currently at
 - Connect and join with them around shared values and trust within relationship (i.e., connection as siblings or shared roles as parents)
 - Using affirming statements that signal you are hearing them
 - Paraphrase and repeat what they say
 - Recognize and accept that change happens in stages, and they may not change their views or behaviors immediately, but you can still nudge them to move forward from the stage they're currently at
 - Check out the **Stages of Change** on Table 2
- Provide examples of clear, straightforward, and/or humorous graphics that illustrate your ideas
 - Many people are visual learners and will benefit more from the use of simple graphics rather than hearing statistics or quotes from long articles





Know When to Walk Away

- Be aware that conversing with a loved one whose opinion is diametrically opposed to yours is challenging and at times, it may be better to walk away from the discussion
- Recognize the signs that this may be the case:
 - Person dismisses the facts you are presenting
 - Facts that contradict a belief system may cause the other person to become even more defensive
 - Person repeatedly changes the topic
 - Distraction will not allow either of you to persuade the other
 - You or the other person are repeating the same thing over and over again
 - This may indicate that neither party is listening to the other
 - Name-calling begins
 - The conversation will likely turn into an argument because the content has become personal
 - You feel your safety is at risk
 - Do not delay, just walk away
 - You find yourself questioning whether your relationship with this person will survive the argument
 - It may be worth saying that you agree to disagree, and you wish them well, but you will be visiting with them after the pandemic is over

Table 1: Helpful Analogies

Other Person's Comment	Potential Analogy / Response
"I don't need to wear a mask unless I feel sick."	COVID-19 can be contagious well before any symptoms present, so you may be sick without even knowing it. A similar situation happened in the 1960s with Rubella, which is contagious up to a week before symptoms start. 12.5 million people ended up contracting Rubella, including many pregnant women. 11,000 of those women lost their babies, 2,100 of those babies died as newborns, and 20,000 of those babies were born with congenital defects.



<p>“Why should I wear a mask if it doesn’t protect me?”</p>	<p>Masks do reduce our risk of contracting the virus a little bit, although you’re right that they’re more effective at protecting others.</p> <p>If your friend knew that s/he had COVID, would you want them to come to your house without wearing a mask? Or to go to your grandmother’s house without wearing a mask? If not, the same would be true even if they don’t know that they have COVID. Since anyone can have COVID without showing symptoms, it’s helpful to act as if we do have it, just in case. In the same way that we wouldn’t want our friend to unknowingly infect us our grandmother, we don’t want to unknowingly infect someone else’s grandmother.</p>
<p>“I’m young and healthy, so I’m not worried about COVID even if I do get it.”</p> <p>“My friend had COVID and s/he was fine.”</p>	<p>You’re totally correct that older people or people with an underlying condition are at a higher risk. Wearing masks and physically distancing is just as much for protecting the people around us as it is for ourselves. Even when we aren’t symptomatic or don’t get that sick, we risk transmitting the virus to people that may not respond to the virus in the same way - and the people that they interact with. There are also a lot of examples of young healthy people getting really sick and either dying or having really painful experiences in the ER, even if they survive. The Broadway performer Nick Cordero was in the hospital for nearly 100 days before dying in July 2020. He was only 40 years old and very healthy, with no preexisting conditions. His best friend Zach Braff (from Scrubs) tweeted “Don’t believe that COVID only claims the elderly and infirm.”</p>
<p>“The government can’t tell me what to do.”</p>	<p>There are a lot of examples of Americans implementing public health regulations while still valuing individual freedom and liberties. For example, laws requiring the use of vehicle seat belts. It is estimated that seat belts save over 10,000 lives each year.</p>
<p>“The curve is flattening so we can stop social distancing.”</p>	<p>We can think of masks, social distancing, and other precautions as similar to a parachute for a skydiver. When the parachute is used, the skydiver’s velocity slows. However, if s/he discards the parachute once his/her speed slows, s/he will start picking up dangerous speed again. We need to keep using the safety measures until we land, or in the case of COVID, until a vaccine has been developed.</p>



Table 2: Stages of Change

STAGE	WHERE THEY'RE AT	HOW TO APPROACH SOMEONE IN THIS STAGE
Pre-Con-templation	<p>Unaware of or unwilling to acknowledge the problem (e.g., "COVID isn't as bad as people think")</p> <p>Hasn't thought about changing behavior (e.g., not following guidelines for physical distancing)</p>	<p>Focus on engagement and building trust</p> <p>Listen to the person, recognize where they are at (e.g., "I totally hear you when you say that no one in your life has been personally impacted, which makes it difficult to appreciate how big of a problem people say it is")</p> <p>Validate their perspective and share your own perspective without trying to convince them to change their own views</p>
Contemplation	<p>Aware of the problem</p> <p>Thinking about changing behavior (e.g., "I might start being more careful when I'm out in public")</p>	<p>Provide positive reinforcement (e.g., "That's awesome that you've started thinking about ways to keep yourself and others safe")</p> <p>Point out ambivalence the person may have (e.g., "It sounds like part of you wants to follow the safety guidelines and another part of you still wants to believe that COVID isn't as scary as people are saying")</p> <p>Instill hope (e.g., "Seeing how other people are still able to socialize and have fun in new ways makes me really hopeful that we can still enjoy life even if we implement these changes")</p>



Preparation	<p>Making plans to change behavior (e.g., “I think I will buy a face mask to wear when I go to the store”)</p>	<p>Assist in developing concrete action (e.g., “I know of a store with really cute and comfortable face masks, I can send you the link if you’re interested!”)</p> <p>Problem solve with obstacles (e.g., “I’ve found that if a mask is uncomfortable I’m less likely to want to wear it, so I intentionally looked for ones that were comfortable and easier to breath in”)</p> <p>Encourage small steps (e.g., “Only wearing a mask in the really crowded areas is still better than not wearing one at all!”)</p>
Action	<p>Implementing specific lifestyle changes (e.g., wearing a mask in public areas, organizing outdoor activities rather than indoor events)</p>	<p>Provide support as the person deals with feelings of loss (e.g., enhance coping skills, suggest self-care activities, brainstorm alternatives to risky activities)</p> <p>Emphasize benefits of their new actions</p>
Maintenance	<p>Continuing desirable actions</p> <p>Repeating preparation/ action steps (e.g., “I might stop going to bars and restaurants as well”)</p>	<p>Assist in coping, finding alternatives, providing reminders of the person’s goals, etc.</p>
Relapse	<p>Returning to the pre-contemplation or contemplation phase as new information or new pressures are introduced (e.g., “I hadn’t realized that asymptomatic people can also spread COVID”)</p>	<p>Help the person identify triggers and problem-solve how to avoid those or respond when future obstacles arise (e.g., “It sounds like your friend tends to push you to do things you’d otherwise try not to. How could you talk with them about your boundaries or avoid situations where you may feel pressured?”)</p>



RESOURCES

How to stand your ground on social distancing, without alienating family and friends

https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/wellness/family-friends-disagree-social-distancing-coronavirus/2020/06/06/ec4b034a-a769-11ea-b473-04905b1af82b_story.html

How to talk to people who aren't social distancing -- and get them to listen

<https://www.today.com/health/social-distancing-how-talk-those-who-aren-t-doing-it-t180088>

How to talk to your friends who still aren't social distancing

<https://www.inquirer.com/health/coronavirus/coronavirus-social-distancing-neighbors-family-20200401.html>

What to Do If You and Your Loved Ones Disagree About Social Distancing

<https://www.self.com/story/social-distancing-disagreements>

Help! My Loved One Refuses to Practice Social Distancing

<https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/loving-bravely/202003/help-my-loved-one-refuses-practice-social-distancing>

What to do with friends who don't social distance

<https://www.bbc.com/worklife/article/20200604-what-to-do-with-friends-who-dont-social-distance>

How to Manage Conversations With Family Who Won't Accept Social Distancing

<https://theeverymom.com/what-to-do-when-family-wont-accept-social-distancing/>



Friends Are Breaking Up Over Social Distancing

<https://www.theatlantic.com/family/archive/2020/04/friends-are-breaking-up-over-social-distancing/610783/>

How to Talk to Your Friends and Family Who Aren't Taking COVID Seriously

<https://theeverygirl.com/how-to-talk-to-your-friends-and-family-who-arent-taking-covid-seriously/>

