

Coronavirus (COVID-19): How to manage relationship tensions

TIP SHEET

Differences, tension and the conflict that results from them are a normal part of any relationship. The challenge of the COVID-19 pandemic is that we are possibly facing months of uncertainty and many of the problems we face may not be resolvable in the short term.

At times such as these, our stress levels become higher and our difficult emotions seem to surface more readily. This not only leads to more conflicts, it leads to more unresolved conflicts.

One of the secrets in healthy relationships is learning how to manage conflict so that it doesn't damage the relationship. The most productive way of doing this is through mutual acceptance and understanding. When a couple manages conflict effectively, they learn to understand each other at a deeper level and renew their commitment to the relationship.



Healthy conflict

During unresolved conflict, each person in the relationship can begin to see their partner as the problem. This gives rise to thinking that the relationship is no longer beneficial or is falling apart. We start looking at our partner as the enemy, just something else to add to that list of problems that we are already facing.

In fact, unresolved conflict is normal in all relationships, even outside of very challenging times. Every relationship comes with its own set of problems because partners are unique and different from one another.

Here are some tips to help you resolve conflict in a healthy way:

- **Remember, all conflict isn't bad**

Be realistic - there WILL be conflict during this time. It's natural, normal and unavoidable, so don't feel bad or defeated when conflict arises.

- **Keep conflict in perspective**

It is vitally important that the feeling of friendship is maintained in spite of an ongoing difficulty. The issue is the difficulty you are facing, and not the person that you are in a relationship with. In times of crisis, there is a need for support of one another.

- **Set boundaries**

Examples can include things such as no swearing, disrespect, yelling or blaming. Avoid "spillover" - that is when a disagreement about one aspect of your lives becomes an excuse to bring up everything else that's bothering you.

- **Agree to Disagree**

Be ok with disagreeing on things - there doesn't have to be a wrong or right or a winner. Plus it can be ok to sleep on a disagreement if it means getting rest and facing an issue with fresh eyes in the morning.

- **See your partner as your friend**

It is helpful to see a conflict as a discussion with a friend, rather than a war with an enemy. In a war one partner is trying to destroy the other's perspective and opinions. In a discussion, we are interested in the other's point of view and of finding ways to move forward as a couple.

- **Create a safe space for discussion**

It is important to create an atmosphere in which a constructive dialogue can take place. Be present and attentive and reserve your judgement rather than making assumptions.

It's important to speak respectfully and ask open ended-questions, whilst keeping the discussion specific and on topic. Don't forget to give each person the opportunity to speak.

- **Seek for a Win/Win**

Once each person's point of view has been considered, it is time to work toward a solution. Ideally a solution can be found that meets each person's needs. However this is not always possible and so the difference must be managed so that forward movement can occur. Consider being flexible with what you want.

- **Make and accept repair attempts**

Many conflict discussions go off-track and end in blame and emotion. In large part this can be avoided by making and accepting repairs. When we make repairs, we are taking responsibility for our part of the difficulty and are acknowledging our partner's point of view. When we accept repairs, we acknowledge that we have heard and are willing to let go of the hurt and move forward.

When a discussion ends in conflict, it is important to have a conversation about what happened that contributed to this outcome. It is very important to refrain from blaming by focusing on what they did, rather focus on your behaviour and accept responsibility.

- **Keep the conflict current**

When an issue arises resolve it there and then. Either talk about how it makes you feel straight away (but without blame) and express what you would like instead, or decide you have bigger

fish to fry and you are not going to sweat the small stuff.

- **Don't let old conflicts join new ones**

Unfortunately many couples will be coming into isolation with big relationship issues already nipping at their heels. It might be time to let go, remember the bigger relationship picture, focus on the "WE", and perhaps say sorry. Agree on the trickiness of the relationship pre-isolation and agree to tackle each issue as it arises from now on – no more stock piling resentments.

- **Regulate your emotions**

Be aware that in this time of crisis your emotions may be heightened. Take the time to look after yourself and when you feel distressed, take time out to relax. During this time do something to soothe yourself such as read a book or listen to calming music – don't think about the conflict. However, it is important to come back to the discussion when you feel calmer.

- **Minimise the conflict when there are children around**

Under normal circumstances parents are their children's most important first role models. But more so than ever children are having to experience and learn from parents experiencing extreme new adversities. Through our own conflict we will be teaching our children how to manage it themselves.

- **Write your feelings and thoughts down**

Not every moment of angst needs to be worked out with another. Get it down on paper instead.

- **Remember to connect**

After difficulties reach out and connect through hugs, spending time together and other pleasurable activities.

- **Focus on the positives**

Identify and appreciate what is going well in the relationship. This will increase feelings of trust and safety.



Financial and Work Concerns

Research shows that even before COVID-19, money is one of the top five reasons that couples fight. One of the biggest challenges is not the actual money issues, it is what money means to each person, and the way in which the money issues are talked about in a relationship.

Issues regarding work and the meaning of work may also surface, especially if there has been rearrangements to work conditions or job loss. These changes can have an impact on time availability – some people may have to work more or different hours, others will have a lot of time on their hands.

These are complex challenges and not easily managed.

The following tips may help:

- **Plan a time to talk about the situation**
Schedule an appropriate time to sit down and discuss these matters where all people involved are free from distractions. Money and work conversations are often emotionally loaded, so go slowly and give each person a chance to share their thoughts.
- **Understand each person's values around work and money**
We all hold different values around work and money. In some relationships the current crisis will lead to further tensions around people's differences in these values. Be patient with yourself and your loved ones and seek to understand their values by asking about their history with work and money.
- **Understand the impact of any changes to each person's work**
Many people's work location or status of employment has been impacted by the COVID-19 restrictions. It is important to give each person space to discuss how the changes in your household have impacted them. Changes to work life and employment status may lead to higher levels of tension in the household, so be kind and have patience for each other.
- **Seek official financial information and support**
The government is creating stimulus packages to support people and families financially impacted by COVID-19 restrictions. Seek out official financial information from trusted sources like the

Australian Taxation Office or the Federal Government. In times of financial crisis there are non-profit organisations which offer professional, qualified and independent financial counselling, so seek out these services, starting with free financial counselling from the National Debt Helpline 1800 007 007.

- **Acknowledge the challenges and losses you face**
There is a grieving process associated with any loss. Each person will work through this in their own way. Strive for understanding and acceptance of each person's experience. This is a time for solidarity in your family and relationships. Having solidarity in the face of loss and challenge will reduce the tension you may feel in your relationships.
- **Focus on the strengths of the relationship**
Though it will be difficult, don't focus continuously on what you don't have. Focus on your strengths and ability to work through difficulties together. If we focus on the deficits we perceive in others resentment may build. Instead, build a foundation of gratitude in the relationship focusing on how you got through the challenge together and had compassion for each other's experience.



Seeking Help

If you are feeling low in your mood, and you can't shake it off after several days in a row, please seek help.

RAWA is continuing to deliver support services for people across Western Australia during this unprecedented and difficult time and are providing support services over the telephone, video conferencing or online to clients.

Our counselling service provides an opportunity to discuss issues that are causing concern in a supportive, respectful and confidential environment. People can attend counselling as individuals, couples, or as a family. Our services are available to people of all cultural backgrounds, family structure, gender and sexual orientation.

Please call us on 1300 364 277 to let us know how we can support you and your family.

You can find out more about the range of support services we offer by visiting our website www.relationshipswa.org.au.

If you need immediate support, please contact:

Lifeline on 13 11 14

Suicide Line on 1300 651 251

Mensline on 1300 78 99 78

Kids Helpline on 1800 55 1800