

## **COVID-19 RESOURCES**

### **LIVING WELL TOGETHER IN LOCKDOWN**

As the UK 'Lockdown' continues, couples and home sharers in general are having to face extreme challenges in how to get on and cope. Here we offer you psychological help and support in understanding and dealing with tension and conflict in the home.

Living with someone 24/7 and sharing a small space, even for the most harmonious of couples, is likely to create tension and distress. Disagreement about the smallest of issues can blow up and lead to feelings of not being understood or respected. Bickering is common and everyday living much harder to handle. Arguments may turn into rows leading to feelings of frustration, anger, fear and loneliness.

If you are suffering from low mood, depression and/or anxiety you are likely to need more than usual understanding and support from those you live with. But when others at home are also suffering, you may not get the support you want. When this is the case, how you talk and listen to each other can make a difficult situation much easier to cope with. Arguments cannot always be avoided in these stressful times.

**A note of caution. If you feel you are in an abusive relationship or one in which alcohol or drugs are an issue or living with anyone who leads you to feel unsafe, we recommend you seek further help (see Further Help section at the end of this leaflet)**

Here are 10 important 'getting along' tips which will help relationship satisfaction in these difficult times.

#### **1. What is Normal?**

People often worry that their negative feelings, mood swings and volatile behaviour are a sign of not coping. But in these unsettling and uncertain times, such reactions are normal, natural and even to be expected. Fears about the virus spread are almost certainly going to create insecure feelings whether expressed or not that make communication more difficult.

Even in these extreme circumstances you can help your relationship and prevent escalating conflict by considering both your self-care and how you talk and listen to each other.

#### **2. Living with loss and uncertainty**

Prolonged uncertainty can be very stressful. Loss of familiar routines and disruptions to our way of life can lead to feelings of helplessness. In addition, worries about health, children, work, housing and finances are bound to affect us all and even couples whose normal coping styles are good.

#### **3. Self-Care and Self Calming**

Emotional self-regulation refers to the ability to manage disruptive emotions and impulses. Find ways of dealing with your feelings without involving your partner, housemate or family member. It is all too easy to blame them when you feel bad. The wish to resolve things quickly by talking it out can be tempting but is sometimes unhelpful. When you both are feeling stressed and upset, it isn't the time to make decisions. Instead be kind to yourself, take some deep breaths, agree to take time out and set a future time to continue the discussion.

#### **4. Our subjective make-up**

Living together 24/7 we hope that our home sharer(s) are reasonably like-minded. But in fact, they are likely to be very different and in the face of uncertainty, many unexpected differences are likely to surface. You may have to face and tolerate many deep-seated perhaps conflicting ideas about living and coping.

#### **5. How your past affects your present**

As children we learn from our families, background and culture how the world works. We tend to absorb unspoken rules about expectations about what we 'Should' and 'Shouldn't do.' For example, 'You should be polite, think of others, be reliable,' 'You shouldn't be rude', 'You shouldn't be selfish', 'You shouldn't show your feelings'.

Whether we are aware of this or not, we follow different values, customs and rules. Home sharers can get into conflict when certain rules about what is permissible or 'right' collide.

#### **6. Agree Practical House Rules**

Housekeeping and hygiene routines are a common area for clashes. Agree a plan together about who does what and when. Remember that you may approach tasks differently so try to be flexible about how things are done. Play to each of your strengths. Try to negotiate and compromise.

#### **7. Dealing with Conflict by Tolerance Building:**

In 'lock down' it is vital that you remind yourself of your longer term future and find ways of reducing stress both individually and together. Try to keep the bigger picture in mind. Make an effort to tolerate what frustrates and irritates you about the people you are living with. One person may favour discharging emotion and getting it off his or her chest whereas the other prefers logic and reason.

These are common unhelpful behaviours we all get into when we are feeling stressed or insecure. Consider your own behaviour which you can at least try to control.

- Taking things personally
- Defensiveness
- Inability to express needs and wants
- High reactivity
- People-pleasing
- Not taking responsibility for behaviour, feelings, and needs
- Undisclosed expectations of others

#### **8. Using soft language and expressing soft emotion**

Expressing hard feelings pushes partners away from each other whereas expressing soft feelings opens the door to sharing and greater intimacy. We recommend that you focus on how you are communicating and try to use 'softeners'. i.e. be tentative and qualify what is said, for example "I'm not sure but I am wondering if..."

#### **9. Rules of Engagement**

It is helpful make up rules of engagement in advance. Planning when, where, and how you deal with disagreement. It greatly helps if you talk together about your different ways of coping to understand where each of you is coming from. If you do so, it will prevent the chance of conflict escalating. The objective should be to resolve differences to the satisfaction of both of you. It's

not about winning and losing. You can “win” an argument, but the relationship may suffer if the other person feels discounted, deflated, or resentful.

When people in conflict get stirred up, anger and criticism can quickly escalate into insults and accusations. Or people cut off, withdraw and ignore problems. When you become aware that an argument is becoming personal, signal to the other person what you notice. Agree the need to pause.

## **10. COMMUNICATION DO'S AND DON'TS**

Here we offer 12 Do's and 12 Don't's. You won't be able to achieve all of them or any all the time, but they're guidelines to strive for:

### **DO:**

1. Make it okay to “agree to disagree.” You don't have to agree on everything. Try to accept irresolvable differences that don't violate your innermost values.
2. Have time-limited discussions and stick to the pre-set time. A half-hour is plenty. You can always reconvene.
3. Work through things as they come up. Don't stockpile resentments; otherwise, each postponement becomes a block to the next communication.
4. Remember to maintain goodwill by separating the person you care about from the behaviour. Assume he or she is doing their best and isn't hurting you intentionally.
5. Take responsibility for your behaviour, needs, and feelings. Use “I” statements to share your feelings and thoughts about yourself. This doesn't include “I feel you're inconsiderate.” Instead, say “I feel unimportant to you.”
6. Examine what unmet needs are making you angry. With I statements, be direct and honest about your feelings and needs in the relationship.
7. Listen with curiosity and a desire to understand your partner, and to see the world through his or her eyes. When you don't understand, ask for clarification. Remember that your partner is telling you his or her experience. It reveals the truth about them, not you. You're free to disagree, but first see where the person is coming from.
8. Use a “we” approach. “We have a problem,” not “My problem with you is . . .”
9. Rather than demand your way, brainstorm solutions. Request your partner's input, especially when it comes to changing his or her behaviour.
10. Take a time-out if you start to get angry. This allows you to calm down and stop reacting. Reassure your partner that you'll resume, and if possible, suggest and agree a time.
11. Use breaks to take responsibility for your part, think about solutions, and to self-soothe any hurt feelings.
12. Communicate your fears and guilt in the relationship.

### **DON'T:**

1. Don't have controversial discussions when you're tired or in the bedroom, which should be kept a safe place.
2. Don't make accusations or use the words, “always” or “never.”
3. Don't bring in allies – other people's opinions – or make comparisons to others.
4. Don't switch topics, or retaliate with, “but you did . . .”
5. Don't judge, blame, belittle, or be sarcastic or dismissive in words or facial expressions, such as rolling your eyes or smirking.
6. Don't expect your partner to read your mind.
7. Don't analyse your partner or impute motives or feelings to him or her.
8. Don't interrupt or monopolise the conversation.

9. Don't react or defend yourself. Instead communicate your point of view.
10. Don't bring up the past – anything more than a few days old.
11. Don't bring up grievances. Stick to the current one. You don't need more "evidence" that you're right and your partner is wrong.
12. Don't compromise your bottom lines in the relationship, if they're non-negotiable. It will lead to more conflict later.

Mo Ressler. NHS Couples & Relationship Counsellor April 2020

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## FURTHER HELP

### Domestic Violence Website and Links:

#### **National Domestic Abuse Helpline:**

<https://www.nationaldahelpline.org.uk/>

**0808 2000 247**

A confidential, 24-hour service run by Refuge. Call on 0808 2000 247 or access the service online. You can set a codeword and send a message to the helpline to either contact you by phone or email. They can also contact an alternative number you provide, such as for a friend's phone. If you are asking them to contact you by email, it is important your email is safe and not checked by the abuser.

[Women's Aid online support](https://www.womensaid.org.uk/) [\\_ https://www.womensaid.org.uk/](https://www.womensaid.org.uk/)

Where telephone support is not safe, Women's Aid have an online service supporting victims and survivors. This includes an instant-messaging service (Mon to Fri, 10am to noon), email support (response within five days), a survivor's handbook (to get help on housing, safety planning, dealing with police and more) and a community of survivor's forum.

**CHAYN Website.** <https://chayn.co/>

CHAYN is a global volunteer network addressing gender-based violence by creating intersectional survivor-led resources online. We started in 2013, and have since reached more than 300 000 people and 1.2 million views across the world.

[Domestic Violence Assist External Link - 0800 195 8699](#)

Specialises in assistance to obtain emergency injunctions from being further abused.

[Women's Aid Domestic Violence Helpline External Link - 0808 2000 247](#)

Free 24-hour national helpline run by Women's Aid and Refuge.

[Men's Advice Line External Link - 0808 801 0327](#)

Confidential helpline for male victims of domestic abuse.

[National LGBT Domestic Abuse Helpline External Link - 0800 999 5428](#)

Emotional and practical support for LGBT+ people.

[National Centre for Domestic Violence External Link - 0800 970 2070](#)

Specialises in assistance to get emergency injunctions from being further abused.

[National Stalking Helpline External Link - 0808 802 0300](#)

Guidance on the law, how to report stalking, gathering evidence, staying safe and reducing the risk.

[Victim Support External Link - 08 08 16 89 111](#)

Free and confidential help to victims of crime, witnesses, their family and friends.

RELATE Advice and Information for Couples

<https://www.relate.org.uk/relationship-help/covid-19-advice-and-information>