



## Tips for Community Members

# COVID-19: Managing Relationships Under Stay-at-Home Orders

While we all do our best to comply with official orders to remain at home as much as possible in order to slow the spread of COVID-19, many people are spending far more time than they're used to with partners or roommates. For some it's a welcome opportunity to be together during an anxious time – but let's face it, this forced togetherness can also be another source of stress in and of itself. What can you do when being under this kind of voluntary house arrest starts to create conflict with the people you're living with?

### Address the Issues Directly

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First, remember that the real root of any current interpersonal conflict probably isn't the relationship, but the broader circumstances of the disease outbreak. This pandemic is presenting some very unique stress management challenges in that it's both an acute and a chronic stress situation, or an acute stress situation occurring over a protracted period of time. We're all operating with a higher baseline level of anxiety about what will happen next, which then spikes even further when we hear more worrying news, or we're having a frustrating moment trying to work from home, or we learn about yet another change we'll need to adapt to. People's acute distress is likely to come in waves, and when two people are living together, these waves may or may not happen at the same time.

This all means that navigating the interpersonal aspects of this complicated situation will require some intentional focus. Start by identifying the specific source(s) of your stress, and then address them directly! Given how much longer the stay-at-home policy is likely to last, ignoring the conflict and hoping to ride it out without tackling the source isn't likely to be feasible. And remember, if you're feeling frustrated or irritated with your roommate or partner, chances are the

feeling is mutual. It will benefit you both to acknowledge the problem and try to negotiate a solution, or at least agree on a compromise you can both live with.

Additionally, remember that people have different emotional needs when they're feeling particularly distressed. For example, some people need time to calm down before they're able to effectively discuss their stress, while others have a need to discuss it right away. Setting ground rules that acknowledge and allow space for both individuals' needs will go a long way towards preventing additional tension.

You might also consider setting ground rules for other potential points of conflict. This could mean discussing issues like who is allowed in the kitchen at certain times, or how long dishes can be left in the sink before they're washed. Or it could involve rules around social interactions, like when and where certain topics will be discussed. For example, you could establish dinnertime and beyond as a COVID-discussion-free period to give everyone a break from focusing on the issue.

Be aware that finding compromises around media consumption can be especially challenging as some people feel a need to be constantly connected to the news to monitor the latest developments, while others may want to strictly limit their exposure to avoid having their anxiety increased. You might try to find a happy medium where the news-focused partner reduces their time checking updates to a healthier level, while the more avoidant one agrees to read or watch selected reports the other considers essential. These agreements aren't likely to work perfectly, but at least when you see signs the other person is backsliding into their original behavior, you have an agreement to fall back on rather than just seething silently (or loudly) about it.

## De-escalate the Conflict

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When we're under acute stress, we may become emotionally triggered (in "fight or flight" mode) so we're not able to think as calmly and rationally as we would like, and we're not likely to talk through issues effectively. Again, during this acute yet chronic stress situation produced by the pandemic, two people may be emotionally triggered at different times. Acknowledging that you, and/or your partner or roommate, are in this triggered state may allow you to create some space (mentally if not physically) for one or both of you to calm down before discussing a conflictual issue. Relatedly, remembering that the other person's anger is likely not personal, but is being driven by the stress that we're all under, can help you try to keep from responding back in anger and escalating an already difficult situation.

Once both people are in a state where they can communicate relatively calmly, being direct about addressing the source of conflict can be efficient – but softening that

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directness with humor can also really help. However, humor is harder to invoke when we're really stressed or anxious, so generally trying to manage your own worries may be a necessary first step towards addressing conflict with others in the home. Easier said than done, though!

One common piece of relationship advice that's worth remembering in these circumstances is to criticize the behavior, not the person. For example, saying something like "your habit of leaving your dishes in the sink all day is causing me stress while we're both working out of the apartment, and I'd really appreciate you washing things up more promptly" is more likely to result in behavior change than "you're a slob and your dishes in the sink are driving me crazy!"

## **Carve Private Mental Space Out of Shared Physical Space**

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This is another area where you may be able to establish ground rules for when to leave each other alone, whether that's to focus on work or just to enjoy a needed period of quiet and introversion. You could agree on some visible cue that essentially invokes a virtual "cone of silence" around you, like wearing headphones or putting on a particular hat as an indication that you're not to be spoken to at that time. This can be helpful when it comes to a willing partner or roommate, though of course that won't necessarily work with children – or with adults who refuse to follow the rules. In which case, see the sections above on de-escalating conflict and addressing issues directly!

Using deep breathing techniques, relaxation exercises, or mindfulness practices can also help with centering and focusing on your internal experience in the present moment, when the external world is feeling chaotic, cramped, or overwhelming.

## **Have Fun Together**

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It may seem counterintuitive to suggest spending even more time with your partner or roommate when you're already probably together more than you signed up for, but it may be helpful to plan some fun shared activity each day. Cook a nice meal together, introduce each other to your favorite streaming show or game, have a non-virtual happy hour, and so on. It doesn't really matter what you do; the point is to do something enjoyable that reminds you why you chose to live with this person in the first place.

## And Finally...

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The old saying that “an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure” may be particularly applicable to this situation of intense togetherness during a period of high anxiety. We can start by identifying our own specific sources of stress and our own needs for navigating them. Discussing them with our partner or roommate can then allow us to make a plan that respects and balances both individuals’ needs, which may help reduce some sources of conflict before they bubble up. Of course, this won’t be a perfect process, so being as patient as possible with ourselves and the people we live with, and remembering that we’re all doing the best we can, is also essential.

## To Summarize:

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- 1) Recognize that we’re all trying to handle more chronic stress than usual, with spikes of acute anxiety occurring at different times for each individual.
- 2) Don’t try to ignore or ride out differences with your roommate or partner that are causing conflict, but address them in a constructive way – after you’ve both paused to calm down as much as possible.
- 3) Remember to criticize the behavior, not the person.
- 4) Establish ground rules that allow you to respect each other’s needs and boundaries.
- 5) Spend time collaborating on enjoyable activities that remind you why you chose to live together.



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The Institute for Disaster Mental Health (IDMH) at the State University of New York at New Paltz seeks to address the diversity of disaster mental health demands in the region, state, nation, and the global community so that all those impacted by disaster and trauma have access to the mental health support they need. To accomplish this goal, IDMH provides leadership to advance the field of disaster mental health and trauma response through training, research, consultation, and service. IDMH works to establish and disseminate best practices in order to ensure that all disaster mental health services are evidence-supported and culturally sensitive. To learn more about IDMH, please visit [newpaltz.edu/idmh](http://newpaltz.edu/idmh)

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