

MANAGING FAMILY CONFLICT WHILE HOME DURING COVID-19: INTIMATE PARTNERS

Physical distancing that is required to contain the COVID-19 pandemic creates opportunities and challenges for couples and families. The sudden increase in time spent together within a common living space can promote “family togetherness”, but also possible stress and resulting conflict between intimate partners. Although conflict happens in every healthy relationship,

The sudden increase in time spent together within a common living space can promote “family togetherness”, but also possible stress and resulting conflict between intimate partners.

and increased time together can provide an opportunity to build healthy communication skills, some families may struggle to address conflict constructively, creating risk for physical aggression. The following strategies may help partners manage conflict during periods of home confinement.

I. Use Active Listening

Family conflict can be reduced when family members listen effectively to one another. Feeling understood is helpful, even if there remains unresolved conflict.

- Focus on and try to understand what your family member is saying rather than rebutting their comments.
- Repeat back what you heard your partner say and ask if you understood correctly to avoid misunderstanding.
- Address any negative feedback or misperceptions about your partner (e.g., “She never listens to me” or “He only cares about himself”) which make it harder to communicate effectively.

II. Problem Solving

Come to a shared agreement that you and your partner have a full appreciation of the problem (via active listening) before attempting these steps:

- Agenda setting*—decide which problem to address
- Brainstorming*—generate a list of possible solutions, without judging the quality of any suggestion
- Agreement & Compromise*—compromise/agree on a proposed solution to the problem that includes actionable behaviors (e.g., “I will cook dinner Monday, Wednesday, and Friday night while you care for the children”)
- Follow-Up*—check in with your partner on how the selected solution is working and decide whether to keep or modify the plan

III. Self-Regulation

Active listening and problem solving may be compromised if the level of anger is too intense. Mindfulness exercises can promote self-regulation.

- Notice anger and other emotions like fear and jealousy and describe them without judgment.
- Rather than avoid intense emotions, observe and accept them at face value without acting on them.
- Identify topics likely to cause intense emotions—they may require more time (and professional help) to learn how to self-regulate.
- Once emotional intensity decreases, reaffirm your commitment to the process prior to re-engaging your partner (e.g., “I want to improve communication with my partner. Therefore, I commit to active listening by paraphrasing my partner’s comments without adding a rebuttal or becoming defensive.”)

IV. Time-Outs can be Helpful

Time-outs are opportunities to use self-regulation skills that can support active listening and successful problem solving.

- Responsibly monitor the intensity of your emotions and request a time-out when needed.
- Encourage everyone in the family to request a time-out to maintain family safety.
- Agree on a family signal for a time-out (e.g., hand gesture “T” for timeout).
- Agree to go to separate locations for a period of time (e.g., 15–20 minutes initially) prior to resuming discussion.

Continued

- e. Use self-regulation strategies to “cool off” before re-engaging.
- f. Return at an agreed upon time and resume discussion only when both partners agree they are ready.

Couples who have a recent history of intimate partner violence (IPV) and/or counseling services (e.g., victim support services, court-mandated abuse intervention programs, couples therapy) should maintain access

to community-based support even during physical distancing constraints. For example, crisis intervention, case management, and individual counseling by telephone remain available in many locations. Limited direct services may still be available in your community (e.g., supervised child visitation and exchanges). The National Domestic Violence Hotline (1-800-799-7233, thehotline.org) offers confidential assistance to callers who identify as either IPV victims or abusers.