

Coronavirus (COVID-19): Being a Caring Family Member

TIP SHEET



The coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic has caused stress and anxiety across the globe, and continues to impact on our lives, but we're all experiencing the stress differently. When we're feeling anxious or experience a moment which triggers our anxiety, it may come across as irritability, aggression, or sadness to our family members, and other people around us.

Being mindful of our own internal world is important, as this inner self-awareness can help us to be kind to ourselves. The ability to self-reflect can also help us to be aware of others, and kind to them, so that we respond in considerate and respectful ways.

The following tips can help you to be mindful of your own emotions during COVID-19 and to enable you to communicate in healthy, respectful and effective ways.

1. Be aware of yourself and others

The most valued skill of a good communicator, particularly during times of uncertainty, is their ability to be self-reflective. Be aware of how you're feeling each day, notice your mood and levels of stress, before engaging with others, including family members. This awareness will help you to choose an appropriate time to talk about an issue and will make you thoughtful in your communication with others.

Pay close attention to how others in your household are feeling each day and tune in to their feelings, so that when you talk to them, it's with empathy for what they're feeling, and not judgement. For example, if your teenager approaches you and you see that they're irritable, don't choose that moment to remind them of their chores.

2. Seek input across generations

Provide a home environment where input is sought and considered in age-appropriate ways before making changes that will impact the family. That is, have conversations with all members of your family before making decisions, but do so according to the age of each family member, as the level and type of information you give to young children will be different to teenagers or other adults.

Young people who may be experiencing feelings of anxiety, grief and lack of control over changes to their lives, will appreciate having their opinion heard, even in relation to small matters, and being listened to can provide them with a sense of autonomy and emotional security.

3. Practise active listening

Sometimes when we communicate with our significant others, we are not fully present; we may be preoccupied with other matters. In situations like these, we may be involved in a conversation, but our mind may be focused elsewhere so that we're not actively participating or listening as we otherwise would. This may be particularly common in the current circumstances, as many families are experiencing significant, unforeseen changes, which are impacting their sense of security and possibly their future. Try to prevent misunderstandings and conflict by making a concerted effort to slow down, focus your mind and concentrate on the person you're talking to and what they're saying.

If a conversation is about something personal, open your heart and try to empathise with the other person's feelings, even if they're not saying them aloud.

4. Seek to understand first

An important part of active listening is trying to understand others before we try to make others understand us. During challenging or upsetting times, our own need to be understood can cloud our ability to understand others. If you can shift the order from trying to be understood first, to trying to understand others first, it can improve your chances of feeling heard and having open communication.

5. Clarify

Show you've understood and want to hear the other person by clarifying what you've heard and re-stating the other person's point. Most people feel that, after being genuinely heard, some strong negative emotions they have been feeling are decreased, whether their issue has been resolved or not.

6. Communicate clearly, stay on topic and use "I" statements

Clearly explain what you want or need, while sticking to the issue at hand. Try to use "I" statements to ensure that you're taking ownership of your feelings and staying focused on your personal experiences, rather than someone else's actions.

Don't generalise other people's behaviour, and avoid blaming, personal attacks or rehashing the past. For example, say "I feel overwhelmed by mess in the lounge room and I'd like help to tidy it up please", rather than "The living room is a mess. You never tidy up after yourself". Using these strategies will help the listener to remain open to what you're saying rather than becoming reactive and upset if they feel criticised or attacked.

7. Remain calm

Keep conversations as calm as possible and be aware of your self-talk, which is the stream of thoughts going through your mind. Self-talk can help to keep you calm or can increase your frustrations and distress, so it's important to be aware of how this self-talk is impacting on your conversations.

If it becomes increasingly difficult to remain calm, ask the other person if you can both take a break before continuing the discussion again calmly. It can also be helpful to arrange a time to return to the discussion. If you or the other person are still upset when you return, then extend the break time. While self-isolation and increased time at home during COVID-19 can make a timeout more challenging, you can still do so by going for a walk, moving into another room, or taking some time out in the garden.

8. Recognise the effort others make

Recognise, value, acknowledge and thank family members when you see them trying to keep your family engaging in healthy ways. This could be through practical actions such as sharing responsibilities and chores, or positive behaviour such as siblings talking in a friendly way to each other.

Celebrate your family, verbally recognise good deeds when you see them, keep up the rituals that bring you together and make an effort to remind family members to value each other.



Need support?

Relationships Australia Victoria has more than 70 years' experience supporting Victorians. We're still providing counselling and other services during COVID-19, including through telephone and video appointments. [Contact us](#) for more information.

To access all our available tip sheet resources, visit www.rav.org.au/COVID19-Resources