

RELATE ADVICE - COVID-19: advice and tips for healthy relationships

Impact on relationships:

The coronavirus outbreak is leading to big changes in the way we live our everyday lives. Our relationships will be hugely important for getting us through self-isolation, social distancing and other concerns may also place them under added pressure. Our counsellors have put together some tips for looking after your relationships with partners, family, children, friends, colleagues and yourself during this challenging time.

Staying connected

- If you are self-isolating at home you may feel disconnected from others. Make use of social media, text, instant messaging, phone and video messaging as ways of keeping connected – even in the same house!
- Get creative about how you connect online. You could arrange to video message your friends for a cuppa, play online games together or share amusing memes on social media.
- Depending on where you work, meetings may still be able to happen via video or telephone conferencing. Try to pick up the phone and check in on how your team are doing throughout your time working from home.
- If you have neighbours who are self-isolating, you might offer to go to the supermarket for them or drop off some books.
- Starting a community WhatsApp group or Facebook group for helping each other out during this time will encourage people to ask for help when they need it. You can also post notes through people's door with your contact details on, letting them know you're free to help.
- While it's not advised to shake hands or hug, you could greet people with the Indian greeting of Namaste which involves holding your palms in a prayer position or bowing slightly. You could even have fun making up your own virus-proof greetings.
- Help your children to video message friends and family if they are too young to do this themselves.

Supporting your kids

- All children are different based on their experiences, upbringing, age and personality. Bear this in mind when thinking about how to talk to them.
- You may both be parenting children with lots of questions and concerns. Try to be united in what you tell them. It can be a confusing time for them and this can be made worse if they are getting conflicting information from parents.
- Stick to facts and communicate them calmly, consciously and responsibly, using simple language.
- Dispel any myths to help reassure them. Depending on their age you could look up the true facts together from a reliable source such as [the government website](#).
- Talk to them about coronavirus during the day rather than close to bedtime so they can get a good night's sleep.
- Let them know they can come and talk to you if they are worried about things they have seen or heard from friends or on social media.

- Continue to check in on how your kids are feeling. Things are changing and so may their feelings.
- Get your kids outside in the garden or park to let off some steam but do follow government advice.
- If you feel yourself getting irritated with your children, don't be too hard on yourself. This is a challenging time for everyone.
- Try to structure your day into manageable chunks. This will help to create a routine and reduce boredom.

Maintaining your relationship with your partner

- Your routines and roles may change if one or both of you are working from home. This could be a challenge or an opportunity so try to make it work for you by checking in regularly about how this is working.
- If you tend to argue or bicker then accept that you may transfer that onto what you each think about the virus. You may want to take a closer look at [our tips on how to deal with arguments](#) and apply these to the situation.
- You may want to know as much as possible about the situation whereas your partner may prefer to take each day as it comes. Remember that there are many different ways of coping in stressful situations and your way isn't the only way.
- Something you usually find irritating about your partner may become useful in a crisis or they may surprise you by how well they are handling things. Let them know how much you appreciate this.
- Big and difficult conversations may need to be put on hold while you deal with the current situation – this is especially true if one of you is ill or thinks they may have symptoms.
- If you've been arguing with your partner over a particular issue, consider calling a truce during this period to make living under one roof more bearable.
- You may have elderly parents or other family members with health problems and you may have particular worries about these people. Try to understand if your partner needs to prioritise these people at the moment.
- You may need to get creative with the space if you are both working from home. Take turns to share the most comfortable spot.
- You can leave your house once a day to exercise so try a short walk/run or walking the dog, to give yourself some space and help reduce any tensions. Do continue to [follow government guidance](#) and practice social distancing.
- If you're not in the same house, get creative about how you stay in touch. For example you could arrange a date night via video messaging where you both eat dinner together, have a glass of wine and chat.
- If you were having relationship problems already, understand that being together in the same house may bring these to the surface. You may want to consider [relationship counselling via webcam](#) to help you work through things.

Avoiding fall-outs

- Treat each other with kindness especially when the outside world can feel threatening.

- If you are self-isolating you are likely to have a lot more time on your hands. Think about how you can use this time in a way that will help the family / you as a couple in the longer term.
- If you're getting frustrated with others in the house, it might be an idea to share how you're feeling by getting in touch with a trusted friend.
- If somebody says or does something to upset you try counting to ten and taking some deep breaths. It may be you no longer feel the need to 'react'.
- Choose your battles and weigh up if they are worth it at this time.
- Remember that children will learn from how you deal with conflict. Keep this in mind when you are all under one roof together.
- Understand that with the best will in the world, rows are quite likely in these circumstances. It's how you deal with them that counts.
- If you're being abused or think you could be, make sure you get access to support to stay safe. More on this [here](#).

Reducing anxiety

- You might choose to start each day with a quick wellbeing check-in so everyone knows how others are doing and can be considerate. It will also help you to address any concerns so you can then focus on other things.
- When somebody expresses a concern about coronavirus, or any other issue, listen to them and try to understand how they're feeling. Avoid accusing them of over-reacting.
- If somebody is ill or is anxious about coronavirus, avoid bringing up other tricky issues unless really necessary.
- Take control of what you can control – your own behaviour and encouraging family and friends to follow the government advice.
- Try to avoid using catastrophising language. Brushing things under the carpet can also increase anxiety so aim to strike a balance.
- If somebody is worried, listen to their specific concerns and research the facts together.
- Remember that self-isolating isn't forever. You're doing it to keep everyone healthy so give yourselves a pat on the back.

Self-care

- Think of ways you can unleash your creativity. You might want to get started on some books you've been meaning to read for ages, try drawing, or a spot of DIY.
- If you're not unwell exercise is a good way of relieving stress and staying healthy both mentally and physically. Whether it's an online yoga class or a short, daily walk, it's likely to do your mental health and your relationships some good.
- Meditation can be a great way of de-stressing and focussing on the present moment. [Headspace is a great app](#) for getting started.
- If you feel like you have too much going on in your head, keeping a journal about how you are feeling can help you to make sense of it all.
- Make sure you drink enough water, eat regular, healthy meals and get enough sleep.

- If you are working from home, try to be disciplined about keeping to office hours and be sure to take plenty of breaks.

Getting support

- Many of Relate's services including relationship counselling, individual counselling and sex therapy are now available via webcam. Call 0300 003 0396 to book an appointment. You can also access telephone counselling via the same number. [Live Chat can be accessed here](#), allowing you to talk to a trained counsellor via instant messaging.
- [Gransnet](#) is an online community for older people to connect during self-isolation.
- Mind have put together some useful [tips on coronavirus and your wellbeing](#).
- The National Domestic Abuse helpline is available for all women, concerned friends and professionals. Call 0808 2000 247 freephone 24 hours a day.