

# RELATIONSHIP STRAIN COVID - 19



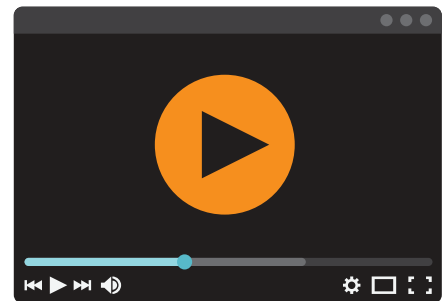
We are in an unprecedented time where there are many unknowns and tensions are, understandably, running high. With so many people experiencing high levels of stress the things that we could once ignore now have the potential to cause great irritation and disruption, especially within relationships. Social distancing has also created breakdowns in communication and routines. Maintaining clear and consistent communication with friends and family can help to strengthen and maintain healthy relationships for the remainder of the stay at home order and beyond.

## Take Your Emotional Pulse

The first step in communicating effectively with others is knowing yourself. As humans we don't like our schedules disrupted as it can take away our known emotional markers. Emotional markers are the things during our week that we rely upon to be consistent and tell us how to feel. For example, when you wake up in the morning and smell brewed coffee you typically respond by feeling joy. When all our expected turn to the unexpected, it can make managing emotions difficult. If you are unaware of these changes it is easy to misinterpret how you are feeling and miscommunicate those feelings to others. It can be helpful to think about exactly what you need and say exactly how you are feeling. You could be frustrated that your roommate has not taken out the trash, but because you are grieving the loss of your social life, a simple request turns into a large argument. Try saying "I am feeling overwhelmed right now, I would feel a lot better if the house was clean. Could you help me by taking out the trash?" Meditation and journaling are easy ways to begin to monitor your emotional pulse. Using these methods of tracking allows for you to find patterns and make positive changes. If you notice that at the end of the day your tensions are running high, try to schedule phone calls with family in the morning instead. Small changes in your routine can help you to avoid later arguments and frustration.

## Use Social Media with Care

Social media is a great way to connect with friends and family during times of social distancing but too much exposure can cause irritation. Many people have taken to social media to express their feelings about our current situation, and some may differ drastically from your own. Learning to respect others opinions while setting emotional boundaries takes practice.



Chances are that you've experience some of this irritation prior to the quarantine but with the time spent on social media increasing an average of 33% for each person, it's likely that you feel it more intensely. More time on social media means that more of your attention is being brought to those posts. Before you get upset, remember the person behind the post and try to understand their perspective at this time. If you find you are having anxiety while scrolling, it may be time to take a break. Schedule yourself some "screen free" time to decompress. It is also healthy to take a social media hiatus.

## Understand Needs

Many people are experiencing a loss of control. Avoid feelings of helplessness by talking to your family and friends about what they need to feel supported and heard. Before you settle into an hour-long call ask them "How can I best support you through this?" Don't be afraid to ask for what you need in return. Here are some ways you can show support:

- **Just listen:** Sometimes one of the greatest gifts we can give someone is to just listen. Life is full of people with suggestions and advice (often unsolicited). Listen, affirm, validate feelings, and know that you don't have to have all of the "answers" – sometimes there aren't any answers and that person isn't looking for you to "fix" anything.
- **Active listening:** Make the effort to not only hear what the person is saying but try to understand the message they are trying to convey. Asking questions will help to clarify what they are saying. Reflecting some of what they are saying will help the person you are talking to feel heard and know that you are engaged in the conversation.
- **Offer help (if asked):** if you know of a good resource share it. Be honest if you don't know the answer to the question asked, its OK to say "I don't know" and then offer to help them find a solution.

## Location, Location, Location

When maintaining and building relationships with those you are at home with it is important to set up boundaries, both physical and emotional. Set up the space that you will be using throughout the week and make sure it is clean! That stack of mail sitting on the counter may have been okay to ignore before the quarantine, but when you are in your home for almost 24 hours every day it is much more difficult to ignore. Studies show that a cluttered space will contribute to feelings of increased anxiety and stress. Take some time to declutter the spaces that you will be spending most of your time. Try to create separate spaces for working & relaxing if you are working from home.



## Be Open and Honest

Due to the nature of COVID-19 each day presents new challenges. It is important to have consistent and transparent communication with friends and family. One way to establish a communication routine is to schedule your calls or set aside time each day to talk about how you are feeling and what your needs are. If you are quarantined with others, a great time to talk is at dinner or at breakfast each day. It is also important to take breaks if you need them. If you are overwhelmed by requests from family and friends let them know that you need some time to rest and re-charge. Remember that you can't pour from an empty cup and it's important to prioritize your own mental health.

## What Do You Do When It Goes Too Far?

If you find that you are getting irritated take a break. Let the person know that you are frustrated and that you don't feel you can contribute positively to the conversation, and then ask to take a break and set up a time to talk later. Try to do something you enjoy or engage in positive forms of self-care to create a positive mindset. If you reach a point where a conversation needs to happen, try the following steps to make it constructive and not destructive.

- **Leave the past alone:** It is easy to add fuel to the fire by bringing up past mistakes and flaws. By doing this you may start to see the person through a negative filter, categorizing all behaviors as "lazy" or "unloving", will contribute to mis-perceiving their actions. Make sure you are talking only about the current situation.
- **Wear new shoes:** Know that some of the feelings you are having as a result of quarantine - your family and friends are having too. Take some time to try and understand what they are feeling and how they have been impacted. It may be a good time to ask them how they are coping with the crisis.
- **Reflect:** If you've just had a conversation and it didn't go as expected think about how you feel during the conversation. Did your feelings at the time and what you said match? It is important to recognize ways you contributed to the conversation ending badly, and what things you did well to get it back on track. Focus on the positive aspects and work on improving them the next time you talk.
- **Be open to feedback:** After reflection if you are still uncertain if what you did or said was helpful ask the person directly at a neutral time (I.e. Was what I said helpful to you? How can I improve my support in the future?) Remember, the feedback you receive will help you to communicate better in the future and is worth the moments of feeling uncomfortable. Acknowledging your flaws will be a sign to that person that you are committed to working towards a healthy relationship.
- **Talk about how you feel:** It is important that both parties have time to share how they are feeling. Make sure you are not only communicating "how" you are feeling, but also the "why". When a family member misses a scheduled phone call you could say, "I noticed that I felt sad and isolated when you missed our call. I'd like to work on feeling more secure and it would help if you communicated if you're going to miss a call"
- **Apologize:** If you noticed you did something wrong, call yourself out and admit that you were wrong. Work with the person you offended or hurt to create a plan to address the problem.

Don't forget to reach out for additional assistance by contacting Ulliance. Ulliance offers one-on-one counseling (video or phone counseling appointments available), telephonic coaching, and access to many community resources. **We're available 24/7 for crisis ► 800.448.8326**