

# 7 tips for ameliorating tension in relationships

During this time of quarantine, many relationships are being tested, whether it be with family, roommates, or a partner. The following tips, based on evidence-based principles, are designed to help ease tensions and improve effectiveness in coping, communication, and conflict-resolution. These are specific to relationships that are typically healthy and safe. See other resources if you do not feel safe.

# 1

## Take time for yourself.

Sharing your living space with another 'round the clock is challenging. One way to increase tolerance for one another is to take time for yourself when possible.

**Do more:** When planning your day, schedule in some solo time to do work-related or leisure activities on your own. Even if space is tight, you could engage in a self-care ritual (e.g., relaxing shower), exercise on your own (e.g., a walk), or connect with other friends/family. Take time even if you're not sure you need it. Tensions can build without us even realizing it.

**Do less:** Don't forget that your housemate has this need as well, so avoid crashing their alone time.

# 2 Build on shared strengths.

There may be times when it feels like all you can see are the things that you'd like your housemate to change. Building on existing strengths or shared interests is one way to help proactively ease tensions.

**Do more:** Consider what initially drew you to this person (if not family) or what you enjoy most when you're with them. Intentionally reflect on this time to build love, kindness, and warmth towards them. Engage in those activities, if possible. Other ideas for joint activities include puzzles, board games, outdoor activities, or cooking.

**Do less:** Because current thoughts and feelings can influence how we recall the past, avoid re-writing history or allowing present frustrations to dampen the bright moments in your relationship. These moments of shared strength are precious, so try to enjoy and maximize them when they occur!

# 3 Choose your battles.

Whether it's with family, friends, partner or a roommate, many in quarantine are experiencing repeated squabbles, slights, and frustrations. Let go of instances or habits that you can tolerate, and address the behaviors that you identify as elephants on your chest.

**Do more:** Make a list of the behaviors or interactions that really bug you. Bearing in mind that this quarantine is temporary, identify which you can live with or at least learn to tolerate. For those identified as the elephants on your chest, naming and addressing it could lead to joint problem solving and deepened understanding (see next tips for *how*).

**Do less:** Avoid asking for unrealistic change, this can lead to greater frustration and disappointment. That being said, picking 1-2 high priority and changeable items is an important step in getting your needs met.

# 4 Effective communication is critical.

When behaviors need to be addressed, it is most effective to communicate assertively (i.e., direct and clear) to get your needs met, while exercising respect for others and for yourself (e.g., avoid aggressive or passive communication).

**Do more:** Describe the situation (*stick to the facts*). Express any related feelings/opinions. Make your request assertively. Reinforce how this will be appreciated/positive in the long term. Be confident and maintain focus on the objective. Ignore any attacks or efforts at diversion. Be fair and prepare to compromise, but not on your self-respect or values.

**Do less:** Avoid demanding, attacking, or shutting down (e.g., silent treatment), this includes body language. Doing so undermines your position, loses your audience, and may damage your relationship. Instead of raising your voice, try being repetitive.

# 5 Active listening is key.

When frustration gets pent up, we can get so focused on what we're feeling and experiencing, we can miss or undervalue other perspectives. A common barrier to progress in conflict resolution is when we prepare our next retort instead of listening and building understanding.

**Do more:** Assume a relaxed posture/facial expression and appear interested in what they are saying. Taking a stance of curiosity may open your mind to alternatives never considered. Validate their perspective by showing understanding like "that makes complete sense," or "it's terrible that that happened." Find the kernel of truth in their perspective.

**Do less:** While it can feel almost automatic, avoid assuming the worst about their intentions. Making assumptions about how someone feels or why they did something can intensify disagreements. Avoid fixating on being right, and instead work towards common ground.

# 6 Cool off when you need to.

When you start to feel yourself get so upset that the conversation can no longer continue effectively (Tips 4+5), it could be useful to take a 'time out' and regroup on your own. Cooling off avoids damaging the relationship.

**Do more:** State that you value this conversation and want to continue, but you need to step away for a set time frame (e.g., 10 min, 1 hour). You can also agree on a word or sign ahead of time to signal this. You can cool down with physical exertion (squeezing every muscle from head-toe), splashing cold water on your face, or identifying the emotions getting in the way and refocusing on the immediate objective at hand.

**Do less:** Do not use the time out to express anger, shut-down, punish, or intimidate. This is a tool meant to function as an emergency break, followed by continued work towards common ground.

# 7

## Exercise compassion.

In these unprecedented times, we are all under more stress than usual. Any relationship is tested when we have to adapt to more intense living arrangements, shifting work or familial demands, and worries related to uncertainty of the future.

**Do more:** Let go of judgmental thinking about yourself and others. Forgive honest mistakes easily. Exercise acceptance if others disappoint, while validating those emotions with self-compassion. Try starting each day with a loving kindness meditation, and as unhelpful thoughts arise, just notice them and let them go.

**Do less:** Avoid holding onto a narrative too tightly. This can blind us from reality and alienate others. Hostility and inflexibility can lead to a vicious cycle of pain, stress, and exhaustion. When you feel these things, try to slow down and find a wise approach to your situation.