

Avoiding explosive conflict during COVID19:

Evidence-based advice for families

In this resource, we talk about ways that people who are angry and frustrated can calm down when they're overwhelmed; how to manage the build-up of tension; and how to think differently about triggers. In each case, we also talk about how family members can help others who are overwhelmed to avoid explosive conflict.

We have provided a video going over the content and some other resources online at <http://www.socialchangelab.net/covid19.html> . There is a separate PDF and video which only covers the material for people who are angry and frustrated.

One point that needs stressing at the start is that if you are experiencing being scared or hurt in your home, then even if you find this resource useful, it's good to get professional help! You don't have to do this on your own.

Choose ways to calm down when starting to be overwhelmed with anger or frustration

Some simple strategies that work include:



Breathe – When we're angry, we breathe faster and more shallowly. Breathe in while counting to three, and breathe out slowly counting to six (or 2 in, 4 out). Repeat 10 times.

Count – Counting to 10 (or 100!) before you react can stop you from lashing out.



Hands on heart – Put your hands on your heart and simply wait until you are calmer.

Break – Leave the room and take a break from the conflict. Plan to deal with it another time. (Or if you feel frightened or unsafe, do you need to get help?)



Distract – When you're on break, engage in a pleasant or productive activity. * Get yourself a drink, go and wash your hands. * Listen to music. * Look at a beautiful picture. * Put a video game on your phone to play. Puzzle games that are absorbing work well. Choose one that isn't too frustrating, and isn't action-based or violent.

Friend – Call a friend who will help you to chill and get perspective.



Try, Try Again – If at first you don't succeed, keep trying. It's the same as anything, you learn what to do and practice, practice, practice. It's worth it. You can get help too.

Limit alcohol – It's associated with more conflict, and more explosive conflict. Australian national guidelines suggest no more than 4 drinks at any one time, and no more than 10 in a whole week! Drinking safely keeps your family safe.



How others can help the angry person calm down



Use the same tools when you're frustrated! – Usually it's not just one angry person in the room! By keeping your own cool, you can make choices to avoid escalation.

Don't chase – If someone is trying to back away from the conflict, to calm down and take a break, this can feel like they're running away or disrespecting you. You can make a plan to talk about the issue again later (e.g., set a definite time – in half an hour, or tomorrow morning). But give some space now, and plan to talk later.



 **Self-care** – Related to the above, as the other person takes space, try to turn your attention away from the issue or the other person, to yourself or to your family. What can you do right now to take care of yourself and the rest of the family? To feel better emotionally, to calm down, or to do something different?

Beforehand – Make choices to reduce the build-up of tension

Before the explosion there is usually a period of tension that you can manage actively, to lower and avoid risks. Some evidence-based strategies include:



Know what's freaking you out – Take time to list some of the things that are upsetting you right now. It's likely that everyone in your family is more tense because of the COVID crisis, maybe due to losing work or money stress; losing contact with friends and fun; worry and sadness; disrupted exercise and coping; lower fun stimulation and higher hassles; or being on top of each other for days on end. Everyone's in the same boat. So, it's not just one trigger that's affecting your family, it's the whole situation! When you remember that, it's easier.

In psychology we talk about problem-focused coping and emotion-focused coping.

There may be some **problems that you can fix** – E.g., you have no privacy, but you can get some screens or hang some sheets; you have no workspace but can set one up; the kids are bored but you can get or download some new games or books, or set up contact online with friends; for exercise we can check out exercise or dance vids, or go for a walk.



 But when we **see the big picture**, a lot of the problems right now can't be fixed. The world pandemic. Maybe your business or job or money stress. **It is what it is**, and it's not going away any time soon. So plan B is trying to manage your emotions. Just because things are hard or even terrible doesn't mean you have to 'lose it' with loved ones.

Grow your toolkit - Your family's toolkit of things that make you feel calmer and happier needs to grow because 1) you're under more pressure and 2) some of the things you used to do may not be possible. So what are some things that work for you now? What works for your kids? It could be spending some time thinking and talking about what is going right and what is ok; working with your



hands; long walks; meditation or prayer; a cup of tea; time with your partner; reading, and so on. When tension builds, **choose what's in the toolkit to chill out.**

How others can help to manage tension in the family

When the tension is lower, you can help to keep it that way by:



Naming stresses – Taking the time to say out loud what all the pressures are that everyone is under can be really helpful. It may seem obvious, but naming things like “this is a stressful time” or “things are really different and scary” or “you’re under so much pressure” or “I miss my friends” or “It’s depressing now” can help others to process their emotions. **Listen and repeat back what others** say too, so they can feel heard.

Celebrate strengths – It’s also good to say out loud some of the things that are good and positive about the family, and about each family member, and to affirm how you love each other. This is comforting and reassuring, and builds up emotional energy that is drained by conflicts. Praise people for being calm and when they take steps to chill. 



Find solutions – You can brainstorm as a family about problems that need fixing and creative solutions. At the same time, some of the problems the family faces right now may not be fixable in the short term, or at all. Then you can try to help people to accept **it is what it is.** (It’s good if this follows a period of naming stresses and listening though – if you jump to “it can’t be helped” and “let’s feel better”, people can feel cut off or silenced.)

Seek to **plan ahead** for the times that need extra care, like when people are tired, or if difficult tasks that need doing. Let others know what to expect. 



Brainstorm ways to chill for everyone – help to grow your family’s toolkits. What helps to relax?

Choose to change how you think about triggers

Over time, the most powerful thing to avoid explosions is to practice **noticing when your anger is building**, and when it is heading towards problem anger. You can often ‘head it off at the pass’.

Even though it might feel like you “snap” or “lose control” because of triggers like noise or clutter, if you can stop and **be clear what you are angry about**, you change the way things play out.



People think that their reaction is automatic when they’re triggered and they lash out, but you don’t have to do the same thing everytime something pushes a button. If your boss, or your mother, or a police officer, were standing beside you, you probably wouldn’t lash out, you would **talk sense to yourself.**

People will lash out more if they think: - This always happens - They're doing it on purpose - They're disrespecting me, pushing my boundaries - I'm going crazy. These are fairly unhelpful thoughts.



To keep your cool, try to use **helpful thoughts** like: - Will this matter in 20 years? - Am I taking this too personally? - What outcome do you want for yourself and those around you? Is what you are doing helping you achieve this? - Everyone's under pressure – Is it worth the drama? - Things will be better if they (or you) get more sleep, or eat something, or take a break... - Everyone's stressed.... (This assumes things aren't regularly awful! Again, if you are being frightened or hurt, do get help.)



And what would it look like if you described just the actions, using unemotional language, like a **neutral observer**? You can problem solve when you focus on actions. E.g., if your child keeps banging a toy on the wall, and you are getting a headache, then you might replace the plastic toy with a soft toy, leave the room, or get some painkillers, not lash out....

The more aware you are of your triggers, the more control over how you think about them.

How others can help to think differently about triggers

Talking about triggers is best done when the tension is lower. You can:



Help someone to identify and redefine triggers – It's good to ask questions about what's bothering people. You can try to draw out some of the unhelpful thoughts that people are having, and listen and repeat back what the other person's saying, so they feel understood. You're wanting to use a caring tone, not sarcastic. Then you can ask, what are other ways to think about that? **Help to see the positive** in the situation and to **accept what can't be changed**. You can ask, what are the goals are for our family in this situation? Are these thoughts helping to accomplish our goals? What are some other ways to react?



Do note though that if you find that you keep having conversations that go nowhere, even when the tension is low, it's really good to look for professional help.

Common choices that don't work as well



Avoiding all conflict – It's ok to let something drop to be kind, or because it's not important. But that can lead to explosions if resentments build up over time. When everyone's calm, it's good to talk about your feelings and brainstorm solutions. If that never works, it's good to get help. E.g., you can google "help family conflict".

Rumination (dwelling on it) – Sometimes you have a circle of dark angry thoughts that keep running through your mind in a loop. These increase conflict. Some things that help: distractions; using your toolkit to reduce tension;



putting your tongue on the roof of your mouth (which interferes with self-talk); and writing it down so it's concrete and out of your head.



People used to say go punch a pillow, or do some vigorous exercise like shadow boxing to let it all out. But research shows that this actually can increase your anger and even risk violence. You want to calm down. **Do not rev yourself up.**

Limit your alcohol – As we have been saying, drinking increases conflict.



Smashing things, scaring people – Frightening your loved ones (e.g., by breaking things) hurts them and damages trust in the relationship. If you're scaring people, leave the room to calm down.

Threats, hitting, biting, kicking – These are all illegal, and they can result in grave consequences. Even if your children hit or bite you first, it's not ok to hit back. If your family conflict gets to this level, it's good to get help.

Resources:

* Google "help family conflict" for resources near you.

* Australians:

1800RESPECT

Lifeline: 131 114

Crisis line 000 for emergency

1800737732 (1800 RESPECT) for sexual assault and domestic violence helpline

Men's Referral Service 1300 766 491 and livechat at <https://www.ntv.org.au/>

DV Connect 1800 811 811

The Family Relationships Advice and Information Line (FRAIL) website and number (<https://www.familyrelationships.gov.au/talk-someone/advice-line>, 1800 050 321) provides guidance 6 days per week 8 to 8 Mon to Fri, 10 to 4 Saturdays.) FRAIL can provide referrals for online or telephone based advice or counselling around family relationships, separation and violence.

Also available:

<https://www.dcp.wa.gov.au/CrisisAndEmergency/FDV/Documents/2015/Howdodealwithdomesticviolencebooklet.pdf>

<https://www.dcp.wa.gov.au/CrisisAndEmergency/FDV/Documents/2015/Factsheet-HowdolknowifImabusive.pdf>

More info & explanatory video online here:

<http://www.socialchangelab.net/covid19.html>

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