

# Avoiding explosive conflict during COVID19

## Evidence-based advice for people who are angry or frustrated

### Choose ways to calm down when overwhelmed with anger or frustration



**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.



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



**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; 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 you and 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 & reduce drama.**

## 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.**

## 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”. \* Australians: 1800RESPECT Lifeline: 131 114

More info & video online here: <http://www.socialchangelab.net/covid19.html>

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