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## Family Focus

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take this risk. Marcy feels disrespected and marginalized within her family, and now avoids contact with them.

Many people I've talked to during the past year have experienced difficulties with family and/or friends over how to handle the threat of COVID-19. Not only has this been a difficult and scary time, but many relationships have suffered from differing approaches and attitudes about this virus.

The most significant problem involves those people who are trying to be extremely cautious. Some may have increased risk for this virus, while others who are not in a high-risk group want to protect loved ones and/or are just plain scared themselves of contracting COVID. When those around them - friends, family, co-workers, or neighbors - show disregard for their concerns and fears, they naturally feel hurt, upset and alienated.

A friend who lives in another state, "Marcy," is not talking to her brother and sister-in-law who live nearby. While Marcy and her husband, "Jack," have been very cautious and haven't been going into stores or inside anyone's home, her relatives have ridiculed them for their behavior. They try to poke holes in Marcy's beliefs about the virus and are highly judgmental. They continue to urge Marcy and Jack to participate in large family get-togethers inside, without masks, even after they have repeated many times that they don't want to

A client, "Laura," has gone into her office once a week this past year. Laura has a young child who has asthma, so she naturally has been worried about risking exposure to COVID. At work, her supervisor insists on in-person indoor meetings each week and not everyone wears a mask. The meetings are mandatory, and Laura has developed anxiety and depression because of this alarming situation. She has difficulty sleeping, concentrating, and has become more irritable with her family. In addition, she has started eating large quantities of sweets, which is new behavior for her.

First Laura talked to her supervisor and explained her concerns. She asked if he would require everyone to wear a mask, sit at least six feet apart, and if windows could be open during these meetings. When he refused to cooperate, she went to the human resources department to find out what she could do. She was able to get an accommodation where she could attend meetings remotely on Zoom. However, now she feels like a pariah in her workplace and fears her supervisor will find an excuse to replace her.

A neighbor, "Melanie," lives with her husband and two teen children. Her older son, age 17, has a history of defying his parents' wishes. Melanie is naturally worried that her son is engaging in risky behavior concerning COVID and will expose himself and the rest of the family. He says he's being safe when he gets together with his friends, but sadly she can't trust him to tell her the truth. Melanie is upset that she can't trust her own son. And her son is furious at her because she doubts him. Their relationship is now more strained than ever.

It's hard enough to maintain smooth relationships with everyone in our lives, but COVID-19 has increased complications for many. Personal safety ranks high along with other political, economic, social and racial worries.

How can we ultimately heal from the damaging effects of people in our lives disregarding our desire for protection from COVID? Fortunately, we will soon be able to be vaccinated and hopefully much more protected. But the ruptures in some relationships won't automatically be repaired. The closer the relationship, the more difficult it may be to recover from disregard for our feelings.

When we have been deeply hurt by those close to us, it is important to express this hurt and not keep it suppressed. Therapeutically, this means we won't remain victims of others' intentional or unintentional disrespect. By not suffering in silence, we can empower ourselves and at least give ourselves the respect we have been seeking from others.

How we speak up is very important. Because hurt can quickly shift into anger, often we sabotage our efforts by communicating with angry words and/or body language. At least 70% of our communication is nonverbal

- especially reflected in our volume and tone of voice, our facial expressions, and our body positions. Since anger tends to beget anger, nothing is accomplished and usually the relationship suffers.

Instead of expressing anger, it helps to tell people close to us that our feelings are hurt because we have tried to be safe from COVID and it seems that they have been judging us for this. Check out this assumption by asking if they have been critical of us in this way. We need to say all of this in a calm, non-accusatory way.

It will help if the ones who have hurt us will acknowledge our feelings. Of course, if they express remorse, it can be much easier to heal. But, even if they don't offer us signs of regret, it is possible to repair the relationship.

As with many other issues - most notably politics and religion - we are not going to see eye to eye with everyone in our lives. Once we can accept our differences while looking for what we value in each other, we can move past a good deal of our hurt feelings. Of course, we want to be understood and accepted for who we are. But this concept is a reciprocal one; we also need to try to understand and accept others as best we can. As we need to do with other issues, we can agree to disagree and move on from there.

If we can meet each other in conciliatory ways, we will be able to rise above the tensions and upset from our different approaches to the threat of this virus. Just as we need to take good care of ourselves physically, we always need to look out for ourselves emotionally as well.

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