

Roommates or Partner Getting on Your Nerves? Read This

By Anna Goldfarb

Talk about things early and often so they don't boil over.





Credit...Amélie Fontaine

With most of the country under lockdown, many of us are suddenly spending our entire day with the people we live with — meaning tensions can be running hotter than normal. While a small transgression, like an interruption during a work call, may not be a big deal on its own, in the pressure cooker of lockdown it can go from a minor annoyance to the source of real strife. And if social media posts are any indication, jigsaw puzzles are the new Ikea furniture: the truest test of a couple's stress levels.

Step away from the jigsaw puzzle. Give each other a hug or a high-five and let's talk about what's going here.

"I often tell people, your partner isn't the problem. *The problem* is the problem," said [Kiaundra Jackson](#), a marriage and family therapist. Forced isolation with the same people for weeks on end is offering us a crash course in communication. None of us are perfect at expressing our feelings all the time, but we can all try to be better when conflict does happen.

Of course, it's understandable if you've found yourself with a shorter fuse lately. Even the most serene among us are dealing with frayed nerves, waves of panic and unyielding stress — without an end in sight. While there's potential for more squabbles at home, there's also an opportunity to meet challenges your household is facing as a team.

This article is meant to deal with the casual, everyday spats that, in normal times, we can usually get over with some alone time or venting to a friend. If you think you are in serious danger from a partner, or you're trapped in an abusive situation, [there are resources that can help](#). The [Anti-Violence Project](#)

has a 24-hour English/Spanish hotline for L.G.B.T.Q.+ people experiencing abuse or hate-based violence at 212-714-1141. [The National Domestic Violence Hotline](#) is available around the clock and in more than 200 languages at 1-800-799-SAFE, or you can talk to an advocate [here](#) or text LOVEIS to 22522. For immediate dangers, call 911.

If those situations do not apply, here's how to handle quarantine quarrels without letting them snowball into further sources of stress.

Before a dispute erupts

Embrace a team mind-set. This might feel silly or unnatural at first, but Ms. Jackson suggests expressing positive affirmations together every morning. Say something like, "Today's going to be a good day! You're going to get your work done. I'm going to get my work done. It's going to be great!"

Every evening, share how your day went with each other. [Don Cole](#), a licensed marriage and family therapist, calls these debriefing talks [stress-reducing conversations](#), during which we listen, show empathy, stay on our partner's or roommate's side and avoid problem solving. As clinical director of [the Gottman Institute](#), an organization that brings research-based assistance to couples and trains therapists to be more effective as relationship counselors, he knows these conversations help promote a sense of partnership and closeness. So, "when the stressful moments come," he said, "we're not as reactive."

Have difficult conversations sooner rather than later. It's tempting to sweep rising friction under the rug, but that would be a mistake. Negative thoughts will fester and, ultimately, boil over. "You don't want to shy away from any issues," Ms. Jackson said. If you need the trash taken out or help with cooking or watching kids, verbalize it.

Negotiate ways to maximize your time and space. "Establish workable boundaries for all parties," said [Jenny Wang](#), a licensed psychologist. Perhaps roommates can stagger their cooking times so they don't get in each other's way, or partners can take turns doing chores while the other does something they enjoy. If you need distance, a tacked up bedsheet or closed door can give temporary reprieve. Noise-canceling earbuds or headphones can help create a sense of space, too.

You can also elect to adopt housewide guidelines to promote harmony. "Consider agreeing to a quiet time in the home, 30 minutes maybe, each day where you agree with the person you live with to keep things slow and volumes low," said [Shawna Murray-Browne](#), a licensed certified social worker and founder of [Kindred Community Healing](#). "If you have young children, consider establishing this time during nap time or teaching them independent play as a quiet activity."

[Like what you're reading? [Sign up here](#) for the Smarter Living newsletter to get stories like this (and much more!) delivered straight to your inbox every Monday morning.]

When tension is building

Carefully raise issues. “It’s hard to overestimate the importance of what we call a gentle start-up,” Dr. Cole said. Think about how to frame a concern in a way the other person can hear it and but not feel attacked. Instead of saying something critical, like, “Why are you being so noisy?” you can try, “I get really distracted when there’s a lot of noise in here and I need us to figure out a way that we can kind of minimize that. What are your thoughts?”

Sometimes Dr. Wang counsels married couples to place an object on their partner’s pillow to signal that there is something you’d like to spend time discussing. It “gets people in the head space for a conversation versus confronting them directly, sometimes at the wrong time,” she said.

Develop a shared language for checking in. Perhaps you could work with a scale of zero to 10, with 0 representing complete emotional depletion and 10 representing an openness and willingness to help others in need. If your roommate or partner says their internal rating is at a one, as they’re stressed with working from home and mounting financial pressures, then you’ll be more likely to offer compassion instead of getting annoyed that they’re not pulling their weight at home, Dr. Wang said.

When you’re angry

Accept it’s happening. Being in a heated state doesn’t mean you’re a bad person. It doesn’t mean your partner is a bad person, and it doesn’t mean your relationship is horrible. “It just means we’ve crossed a line into a red zone, and we need to get out of it,” Dr. Cole said. (Again, seek outside help if you feel threatened or in danger.)

Take a time out. Dr. Cole coaches his clients to come up with a word or phrase that means, “I need us to stop for 30 minutes and isolate ourselves, do something that will help us refocus and calm down.” And, at the end of the 30 minutes, re-approach each other to discuss the issue. That’s important because if we don’t reconnect, Dr. Cole said, “it just feels like we’re being discarded by our partners.”

Assume responsibility for your emotions. When you’re steaming mad, your heart beats faster and stress hormones course through your blood. It’s important to recognize that you are in charge of managing your anger. “I don’t care what you need to do, you need to find what works best for you to bring yourself back down to a normal state,” Ms. Jackson said. That could be taking deep breaths, isolating yourself in a different area of your home, jogging in place or taking a warm bath.

How to reconcile

Clear the air. After the dust-up, Ms. Murray-Browne suggests asking the other person, “What do you need to feel safe sharing and discussing this with me?” Come to a consensus with how to approach each other moving forward.

You can even write down what you come up with and post the agreement somewhere you both can see.

If you're having trouble getting on the same page, Dr. Wang recommends doing an exercise suggested by [Esther Perel](#), a renowned marriage and couples therapist in New York City, in which each partner restates — in their own words — what they understand about the other partner's grievances or frustrations. This should help each person empathize with the other party.

Talk about the future. In your calmer moments, Dr. Cole recommends asking each other about how the pandemic is affecting each of you. Share how current events will impact your future plans. "Really listen to those things," he said. "Because sometimes that's really what's underlying the stress and the conflict is: I'm afraid this is where our future's headed. And unwrapping those conversations can really help."

[Read more: [Why Talking About Our Problems Helps So Much \(and How to Do It\)](#)]

If you're overwhelmed, seek guidance. Explore virtual counseling sessions to strengthen your relationship, Ms. Murray-Browne said. This way you'll emerge from this experience stronger than ever. If the other person in your household isn't keen to enlist the help of a therapist, she suggests focusing on what you can control individually. Perhaps you can reach out to friends and loved ones for support. You might also consider therapy for yourself to sort through these issues.

"Remember," she said, "this is a crisis period of time. Big emotions are allowed and we will make it through."

