

Let's Get Together... but Not Too Close

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If you are like me, you have been inundated with articles related to COVID. You can read about infection rates, people's anxiety or frustration over the timing of business openings and gatherings, and how you can navigate your business or organization through the COVID pandemic. But what if you are just trying to figure out how to navigate the forces of love and need for connection among family members with different risk tolerances? How can our families both respect and protect each other without emotional drama owning the landscape?

Let's face it. Each of us has determined how we should respond as individuals to the threat of COVID. Some of us are comfortable being early adopters of the new freedoms available now that the country is opening up. We are starting to go to restaurants and are wearing our masks less often. Others of us prefer minimizing contact with anyone outside of our household. We are limiting who comes into the house, if anyone, and only run essential errands while wearing a mask and immediately sterilizing our hands upon completing that grocery shopping trip.

With this much variance among individual family members and a hidden enemy that does not tell us when we are in a danger zone, it is highly predictable that families will experience challenges in communicating and decision making about who comes in contact with whom. And an emotional outburst of "Keep away from Mom — you're probably infected!" can result in hurt feelings and frustration.

So, what can be done? Let's consider a few scenarios.

Disclaimer: The author and the Family Business Advisor make no medical recommendations.

Scenario 1: I want to travel to see my out-of-town aging parents but don't want to risk getting them sick.

The task here is to align boundaries so as to achieve a common purpose — being together. Unless I have isolated totally and not been exposed to outside risk factors for the recommended 14-day waiting period to assure no transmission of the virus, I cannot fully assure that I am COVID free. Yes, I could quarantine myself and wait for 14 days to make sure I don't have any symptoms, but as soon as I fill up with gas or order fast food on my trip to visit, infection is a possibility (though admittedly remote). If I draw my boundary as having no close contact until the virus is under control (likely from an effective vaccine), I can regularly call my parents or use video technology to meet face-to-face by Zoom or FaceTime. I may even be willing to meet with them in person, but only if we all maintain our safe distance from each other and wear masks.

In this situation, it is imperative that I communicate to my parents my deep love and respect for them, and let them know I want to see them. I can ask them if they also want to see me. If we agree on that big picture, we can move into the specifics on boundaries for our communication (e.g. video chat only or in person meeting with social distancing). If Mom says, "I am not afraid of this virus, we don't need to do that social distancing stuff," it is my responsibility to tell her that as much as I love her, I would not be able to live with myself if something happened to her due to me passing her the virus. But I need to quickly refer back to the higher order goal of seeing each other, then restate my boundaries as a condition for achieving our higher goal.

Even if Mom doesn't push back on social distancing, it is helpful to walk both parents through a preview of

our upcoming get together — especially if a personal gathering will occur. By talking through how we will greet each other (air hugs for all), how we will have our young grandchildren wave to them rather than run to them and give hugs, where we will all physically gather, and what we will do when someone needs a bathroom break, everyone will have clearer alignment about how the gathering is to take place. This reduces the awkward and potentially hurt feelings that would have happened if everyone just gathered and some wanted to hug while others pulled back.

Scenario 2: I am resuming normal life activities and I want to see my brother, but he and his family are committed to isolating and social distancing to prevent virus transmission.

As in the first scenario, if we can agree up front on our common purpose — to spend time together physically — we can then each share our boundaries. If I am comfortable going to restaurants and beaches, that is my own decision. It is not my place to demand that my sibling and his family share the same comfort. Instead, each of us will be best served by expressing our boundaries and then determining what is possible in terms of a gathering together.

For example, let's say my brother is willing to meet outside somewhere sitting 8-feet apart if we both wear masks. It is healthiest for our relationship if I respect his position, but let's say I don't like wearing a mask. If I agree to meeting outside only and sitting apart from each other, I may choose to let him know that I don't wish to wear a mask. After all, it is my right to determine my own comfort with risk-mitigating approaches. Rather than be stubborn and refuse to honor my brother's boundary, I could take a more productive approach and let him know that I prefer not to wear a mask, then ask if he is still comfortable meeting if we increased our social distancing (perhaps to 15 feet). If he agrees, both of us have succeeded in achieving our higher purpose of meeting together while at the same time respecting each other's boundaries.

The important thing we need to remember is that neither of us wants to be in the position of forcing the other to do something we are unwilling to do. Accepting each



other's freedoms limits feelings of being judged by a dear loved one.

On the other hand, consider the following:

Scenario 3: My sister and I have shared responsibility in caring for our aging mother who has dementia, and I have been isolating while my sister has been resuming life with more public activities and contact.

In this scenario, while we may have a common shared purpose to care for our aging mother, because our mother is not able to speak for herself about how much isolating and social distancing she requires, our primary duty is to care for her. In caring for another, it is important that my sister and I subordinate our own freedoms in the service of protecting our mother. Yes, we are free to go out to restaurants and such, but this is introducing a greater risk that we will fail in our primary common purpose — to care for Mom. Caring for someone who is in a high-risk group requires greater risk mitigation even if we personally feel safe to resume contact with the public. If my sister is not willing to move towards greater isolation, then I am going to need to step up as the primary caretaker until the situation changes, preferable without blame towards my sister but just letting her know that I respect her decision but mom's health comes first.

We could imagine endless scenarios, but they will likely require the same elements to achieve both family togetherness and mutual respect for differences. If we focus on the higher order goals of maintaining family relationship strength and helping each other meet

whatever boundaries are needed to assure personal comfort, we are respecting each other's freedom and at the same time can come together with a workable solution for sharing time together. A key factor is to set boundaries in advance so we avoid the awkwardness of unplanned moments and emotional reactions that may drive us further apart from the ones we love.

Families are built upon coming together. Let's not let an invisible enemy deteriorate the love and care we feel for each other by infusing fear and judgement in what would otherwise be healthy relationships.

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