Coping with Conflict

The United States is a country full of diverse opinions and the freedom to share those opinions. As we grapple with a global pandemic, we’re seeing opinions vary widely on how to respond. There’s conflict about what policies should be enacted at the federal, state and local levels. And there’s conflict over what behaviors we as individuals should adopt; namely wearing a face covering. You’ve probably seen the many videos online of fights breaking out in stores about face coverings. For every video that goes viral, there are likely hundreds of small interactions in our own communities that reflect the same conflict.

While the science is clear, maintaining six feet distance and wearing a face covering does dramatically reduce the risk of COVID-19 transmission, some people are resistant. Their resistance may stem from personal beliefs about freedom or feelings of physical discomfort. On the other hand, many people recognize the personal and public health imperative of following the guidance being provided by government and medical professionals. So, as with so much in the United States, we’re left disagreement, conflict, and often, anger.

Here are some tips to help you cope when you find your perspective on this topic varies from that of friends, family, colleagues, or even strangers:

- **Summon Empathy.** Approaching a conversation from a place of empathy is crucial for any conversation that involves conflict. Before you get into any discussion, take a breath and a moment to consider that the individual with an opposing view is also trying to do what’s right, they just have a very different opinion of what that is. Recognize that they have a different set of life circumstances than you, and probably a different set of priorities, demands and worries. By trying to empathize with them, you are less likely to go on the defensive and escalate a conflict—and you will be kinder in your dealings with them, no matter your disagreements.

- **Don’t Over-personalize.** It is easy to take things personally when tensions are high. But often, that only escalates a conflict. If a friend or family member gets angry at you because you don’t want to travel with them, for example, or if a stranger makes a snide comment about your wearing a mask, recognize that they are probably not mad at YOU, but mad that the circumstances. Their frustration at being powerless is being sent your way. But really, it’s not about you.

- **Don’t Engage.** If you think someone can communicate rationally, then by all means, have a discussion with them about the differing decisions you are making and why you feel your decisions are healthy. But if you see that they are not open to a discussion, and definitely not going to change their mind, then leave it. Let them have their peace and you can simply state “we’ll have to agree to disagree”.

- **Follow Up.** If you have the email address of the person you are having conflict with, feel free to send them a follow up email in which you don’t engage in more back and forth, but simply provide them with some of the resources you’ve found helpful. You can say something like “I know we disagree, but I just wanted to share with you some of the health information sources I’ve found useful.”

- **Do What’s Right.** In the end, you need to follow your beliefs and values and make decisions that will protect your health and welfare, and the health of those you care about. Try not to let the high conflict environment that we’re in influence the decisions you’re making that you know are right for you. The reality is, there are a lot of people whose minds we cannot change. So spend time focusing on the people who are open to learning, and avoid the conflicts that you know are going to just end with you feeling more angry and frustrated.

If you are struggling with conflict, or any other stress, give Family Services EAP a call. Our counselors are available for **FREE** and **CONFIDENTIAL** appointments! Contact us at 978-327-6666, info@FamilyServicesEAP.org or submit an inquiry online at FamilyServicesEAP.org.