

When Family Conflict Arises: How to Cope During COVID-19

by Patricia McGarry, PhD, LSW

Valley Youth House, Senior Vice President Prevention, Child Welfare, & Children's Behavioral Health Services

BETHLEHEM- These are challenging and scary times and everyone is impacted in some way. For many, this means work from home and online schooling. For others, it means more time being together in close quarters. Because of the close proximity of family members due to stay-at-home orders, a very common and troubling occurrence is increased conflict in the home. It could be conflict between partners or spouses and/or between children. And the impact of this conflict can be potentially devastating to all involved.

At Valley Youth House, we're no stranger to conflict. In fact, we are uniquely prepared for it. Our Intervention Programs measure their success by this key performance indicator: Reduction of Conflict. To help people cope with these uncertain times, we would like to offer some perspectives and tips on dealing with conflicts that may arise.

Many of the vulnerable youth and families we work with have experienced significant trauma. A time of uncertainty, like what we are experiencing now with the COVID-19 crisis, can heighten fear and anxiety for everyone, not just those with histories of trauma. And when fear and anxiety increase, conflict often follows suit. We know that right now conflict is not only occurring in families with risk factors, like drug and alcohol abuse, domestic violence, and mental health diagnoses, it is happening everywhere. All families are considered at risk for conflict.

With the rapidly evolving conditions related to the COVID-19 pandemic, everyone is affected in some way. Families are confined to their homes, feeling isolated, without natural support systems, like attending school, work, and seeing friends. There is worry about the virus, how so much of it is unknown, and concern about the danger it puts our loved ones in. Many are worried about loss of income and how they will afford living expenses and food for their families. It's the perfect recipe for stress and anxiety and ultimately, conflict, to occur.

At Valley Youth House, we are firm believers that increased levels of conflict within a family does not mean that families do not care about one another. In fact, often, it's because they

care so much about one another that conflict can occur, and it is heightened stress and anxiety that leads to a breakdown in communication and an eruption of arguments. For example, disagreements about going out of the house during the stay-at-home orders, or differences in one's social distancing boundaries, or about managing schoolwork at home

can lead to yelling and fighting. At a time when life seems out of control, people will cling to what they perceive as under their control, like their household and those within it. At the heart of the matter is the fact that loved ones are expressing concern, and care, and worry for one another. It's from a place of love that conflict often arises.

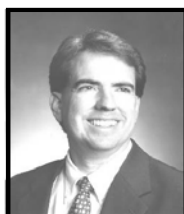
At Valley Youth House we have a team of skilled and experienced counselors and therapists who are highly trained in how to work with youth and families in conflict. Mike Ramsey, M.S., LPC., is our program supervisor for our Family Intervention Program and Functional

Family Therapy Program. He sees clients each day that struggle with tremendous conflict. He emphasizes that, just as you would take

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