Whether virtually or in person, it is important to be aware of how family members push each other’s “hot buttons,” and that these hot buttons normally get more sensitive under stress. (UBS)

As we proceed in this journey, we have tried to identify a framework for making wise choices, so as not to feel entirely at sea. This whitepaper from the Family Advisory and Philanthropy Services team sketches out this framework. It begins with practices central to family health: empathic communication and governance.

Empathic communication

Empathic communication is crucial for talking about serious matters that might have felt low priority or hard to discuss before the current crisis. For example, access to food, needed medications, safe clinical environments, as well as personal security. Many of us have been reviewing our emergency plans. Who are older family members’ medical proxies? Who will watch younger children if parents are sick or need to quarantine themselves?

Families are also clarifying matters that are not urgent but are still important. “What matters most to you, and why?” How would you answer this question—and how would your closest family members? If you’re not sure, consider using a video call and asking each participant to share his or her responses. This conversation could truly deepen your understanding of and appreciation for each other.

Whether virtually or in person, it is also important to be aware of how family members push each other’s “hot buttons,” and that these hot buttons normally get more sensitive under stress. To manage interactions that intensify when hot buttons are pushed, there are several things you can do:

- If you feel things are getting heated, give yourself a “pause.” An easy way to do this is to count to 10 before replying to something that’s been said.
- During the pause, try to recognize what part you are playing in the exchange. Emotional interactions are never one-sided.
- Cultivate your own good intent. At a time when everyone feels some fear and sadness, kindness and empathy might be our most important assets.

Togetherness and separateness

Adult family members have suddenly found themselves living together, or in close proximity, for the first time since childhood. In-laws may be living closer to their spouse’s parents or siblings than they ever imagined they would. This
sudden togetherness can add significant stress to an already stressful situation.

In this situation, we recommend that families thoughtfully discuss these points:

- What “ground rules” would make close living more enjoyable?
- How can family members who are working remotely maintain a quiet, distraction-free workspace?
- What signals can family members use to indicate to each other, respectfully, that a conversation or interaction is becoming too much and that they need some space, physical or psychological?
- Reflect for a moment: what mix of family togetherness and separateness do you think that your closest family members want now?

A crucial element of empathy is empathizing with yourself. Everyone needs some fun. Finding moments to celebrate and enjoy each other makes empathic communication easier, and it is crucial, now more than ever.

Governance

Take a moment to ask yourself: “What specific decisions does my family face in the current crisis? How can we best make those decisions?”

The current crisis has led many families to look hard at their governance. Some are realizing that it is time to advance long-standing plans to devolve decision-making from the family elders to the rising generation, often in the form of a sibling council or partnership, perhaps with a subset of members as an executive team. Other families are recognizing the true value of involving non-family experts, such as trustees or other advisors, in their deliberations and decision-making. Still others have had difficult conversations about curtailing their more inclusive governance structures to make quick decisions in fast-moving areas (such as emergency preparedness). Many families have recognized that more centralized authority also requires more regular communication.

Governance can and should adapt to circumstances. The key is that your family feel able to discuss and make those changes openly and thoughtfully.

Practices for individuals

Healthy families are made up of healthy individuals. The family practices we have described rely upon resilient individuals to pursue them. There are three keys to individual resilience: physical care, quality social connections and making your mind work for you rather than against you.

One more practice can strengthen us all: the practice of gratitude. In times like these, when we all feel at risk, when so much has been taken away, remind yourself, through gratitude, of what you still have and what really matters to you.

See the full whitepaper, Navigating stress and the impact on family, April 2020.

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