

## Advice for talking to your chill parents about coronavirus

ABC Life / By Kellie Scott



It's important to be curious when talking to your elderly loves ones about how they are responding to coronavirus. (*Unsplash/Pexels*)

While coronavirus dominates our social media feeds, there's one issue that's kept popping up to the point it's become a meme — adult children frustrated by parents not taking this seriously.

With news changing every hour, hopefully some of those high-risk loved ones my friends have been complaining about will be converted; complying with social distancing and cancelling their weekend plans.

But if you're struggling with a mum still playing tennis with friends, a dad still keen to travel interstate or a grandma upset you won't visit, it's understandable you might be at

your wits' end.

I spoke to the experts for some tips on communicating your concern, and making sure you're heard.

Spoiler: if you're feeling more like a parent than a child, that could be sabotaging your attempts.

## **Be curious about their perspective**

Michael Tam is a GP so is used to difficult conversations about health with people who may not want to hear it.

He says being curious about his patients' perspectives, and listening to their rationale, is important.

"In medical education, we talk about the importance of exploring a patient's ideas, concerns and expectations, and this is necessary in patient-centred communication and shared-decision making," he says.

You can apply this same sentiment when talking to your parent or loved one.

Dr Tam references [interviewing principles](#) used in general practice:

- Resist the "righting" reflex (the tendency of health professionals to advise patients about the right path for good health);

- Understand the patient's own motivations;

- Listen with empathy;

- Empower the patient.

Elisabeth Shaw is the CEO of Relationships Australia NSW. She says it's worth bearing in mind that what's happening right now is just one of many crises they have weathered in their lives.

"Their approach might be a healthy form of resilience and acceptance," she says.

"It may be that they have always had health on their side."

The problem is they might be more vulnerable than they realise this time around.

Professor Caroline Hunt from Sydney University's School of Psychology says to not approach it as a right/wrong scenario.

"It reminds me in a sense of the conversations we were having six months ago about climate change," she says.

"If you go in and try to change people's minds and telling them that they're wrong, that isn't the best approach."

What are you craving advice on during this difficult time? Let us know: [life@abc.net.au](mailto:life@abc.net.au)

## Don't become the parent

Often our anxiety is a result of the dread we might feel around losing our loved one, says Ms Shaw.

"That can lead to us being too controlling and inadvertently disrespectful.

"As soon as we construct it as 'now we are our parents' parents', it can lead to giving ourselves permission to stand over them, like they are adolescents."

She says no-one will benefit from that tactic. Instead, Ms Shaw recommends owning the anxiety we feel and plan more softer, constructive approaches.

She suggests starting with something like: "I'm scared for you. You matter to me. I feel like keeping you locked in to keep you safe because I am so worried."

Dr Tam says not to create hysteria just to make a point.

"Communicating in a paternalistic style as an authority figure, or attempting to scare the patient into action, are often unsuccessful strategies.

"With that said, the communication style does need to be adapted for the individual. I have had the occasional patient who 'just wanted to be told' what to do."

## Lean on experts

If you feel like your advice isn't being heard, consider sharing that of the experts.

"Share a good article with them, so it's not just you saying 'This is what I think'. It's saying 'Let's listen to what the experts like Norman Swan said'," Professor Hunt says.

You may simply have access to information they don't.

"Younger generations are more in tune with things like social media, podcasts; they may be exposed to a wider range of information. Share that with them."

If there is a disagreement about appropriate actions, sharing some of the [Australian Government COVID-19 resources](#) (videos, audio, text) might be helpful, Dr Tam says.

He also recommends sharing state-based information, such as [fact sheets from NSW Health](#), and that from the [World Health Organisation](#).

If they don't have access to digital information, print it out and pop in their mailbox if you're social distancing.

Don't live close by? Mail it or ask someone in their area for help (there are Facebook community groups with people offering to lend a hand with neighbourly duties).

Hopefully, the lengths you're going to will help show how seriously they need to be taking it.

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Dr Tam says it's helpful to emphasise that social distancing doesn't mean social isolation.

"For family, urgently helping them to set up video telephony like Skype, Facetime, Google Duo, Whatsapp, etcetera, if they don't currently have access, and committing to a regular virtual catch up, will help the family keep in touch."

He says COVID-19 is a real public health emergency and we are all in this together.

"Although the rules are different in each state, non-compliance with public health directives may result in police action and severe fines and penalties."

Ms Shaw says if you don't get anywhere, you may have to let go a little.

"If they insist on not giving up certain freedoms, you have to really think about whether you have the right to insist, even if it makes you frightened for them."

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