

How to maintain relationships when you have opposing views on COVID-19 mandates

Psychologist says to listen and debate, but walk away if conversation turns heated

[Aly Thomson](#) · CBC News · Posted: Feb 13, 2022 6:00 AM AT | Last Updated: February 13



Experts recommend trying to maintain decorum when having a conversation with someone who opposes your views about COVID-19 mandates. (Shutterstock/Antonio Guillem)

As the pandemic drags on, now more than ever people are facing tough conversations with loved ones who don't share the same views on COVID-19 restrictions and mandates.

The anti-vaccine mandate protest in Ottawa has appeared to polarize people across the country, with strong emotions attached to each side of the debate.

So how do you maintain relationships when you don't see eye-to-eye with your friends or family?

It starts with mutual respect and civility, said Halifax-based registered psychologist Dr. Simon Sherry.

"I think people struggle with being empathic when they encounter someone who has an opposing view, and they'd be better off if they were curious and patient as opposed to argumentative and confrontational," Sherry said in a recent interview.

"I think we need to learn to tolerate and accept that differing views are a healthy part of public discourse, and competing ideas are a core aspect of scientific progress."



Dr. Simon Sherry, a registered psychologist in Halifax, says to have empathy when you speak to your loved ones about COVID-19 mandates. (Submitted by Revolve Branding and Marketing)

Sherry, who is also a professor in the psychology and neuroscience department at Dalhousie University in Halifax, said there is no doubt the pandemic has been corrosive to social relationships.

He recommended trying to approach each conversation with patience and a willingness to explore different perspectives.

"Without that tolerance and acceptance, we tend to lapse into incivility and argument, and a lot of the argument is not governed by scientific thinking or logical analysis," said Sherry.

"It's an ad hominem argument which comes down to a bunch of name-calling."

He also noted that some people's opinions and arguments are ingrained in their identity, and so it's important to realize that it would be difficult during a five-minute conversation, for example, to shift their identity and school of thought.

Control yourself, not them

Sherry said this is especially true for so-called "science deniers," such as people who believe the Earth is flat. He said while it's fine to push back, at a certain point you may realize it is not going to be a constructive conversation.

"Someone who has that investment in these ideas is not going to quickly relinquish their position, if at all," said Sherry.

These conversations can be especially problematic because scientific facts are not self-interpreting, he said.

"You have to debate and deliberate on the meaning of what was found because it doesn't inherently carry meaning," said Sherry.

He said it's important to try and control yourself during these interactions, as opposed to trying to control the other person.



Jane Donovan, a licensed professional counsellor in Halifax, says if people are getting emotional and defensive, you should think about ending that conversation. (Submitted by AlterEgo Photography)

Jane Donovan, a licensed professional counsellor at Insight Mental Health Counselling in Halifax, said after two years of restrictions and mandates, people are on edge and tired.

She said these emotions are then often inherently brought into our conversations about the topic.

"It makes sense that people are really getting heels dug in around their opinions and we're getting polarized about how we feel about things," said Donovan.

Like Sherry, she said these discussions should be rooted in respect for one another.

"I think we often think about communication as talking and expressing ourselves, but listening really is the key," said Donovan.

"So I think if we know we're going to come up against someone that is going to have a very different view than ours, it's important to listen with an open heart and mind.

"Don't just be thinking about how you're going to rebuttal their responses. Actually listen and be understanding."

'Caring and kindness'

Even Nova Scotia's chief medical officer of health acknowledged that arguing is not productive.

In a recent interview, Dr. Robert Strang said he tries to live his life "practising caring and kindness."

"You can disagree about things but you still have to show someone that you care for them and that you respect them, even if you fundamentally disagree around the choices they are making," said Strang.

He said that's why the government has taken a collaborative approach to vaccines, trying to encourage people to get vaccinated through education.

Sherry said just as people should be mindful of the diversity of their communities, they should also be conscious of the diversity of thought.

"Most of us would enthusiastically support diversity. But does that also include people who hold different ideas than we do?" he said.

He added that when engaging in debates about COVID-19 mandates, try and keep your blood-alcohol level as low as possible.

"Alcohol is unlikely to promote civil discourse," he said.