Whether our conversations are IRL or on the internet, it can be hard to know the right thing to say right now. Mindful communication teacher Oren Jay Sofer shares his advice.

Despite the easing of restrictions in some places, we will likely be under the pall of COVID-19 for the [foreseeable future](https://www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2020/03/how-will-coronavirus-end/608719/). Wanting to better understand how to communicate with those around me (both the people I’m sheltering with, and the faces I see on Zoom), I reached out to Oren Jay Sofer, a meditation teacher who combines the tools of [mindfulness](https://tricycle.org/beginners/buddhism/what-is-mindfulness/) with the practices of Nonviolent Communication, a system of communication strategies meant to attune our capacity for cooperation. Sofer’s book,[Say What You Mean](https://more.orenjaysofer.com/book/?_ga=2.146586228.1518549098.1589211523-1002641772.1589211523), is an excellent primer on how one can engage with others with intention and clarity.

**Let’s start with our roommates, housemates, and families. How can we maintain civility, autonomy, and compassion in the inevitable friction of quarantine?**“Civility” isn’t a perfunctory social behavior; it’s not about being polite. It’s about connecting with the depth of our values and allowing those to animate our words, choices and relationships. The place that our these values arise from can be a powerful guide for our speech and action. One way to find out what our values are is by asking ourselves, What is in our hearts that recognizes the possibility of harmony?

For Buddhists, figuring out what we value in our relationships with others may involve exploring what it means to live in an interdependent world. There is a Buddhist text called the Sedaka Sutta, or The Bamboo Acrobat, in which [the Buddha](https://tricycle.org/beginners/buddhism/who-was-the-buddha/) presents the analogy of the exquisite balance required by two acrobats to perform a complex act. Each performer must be firmly rooted in their own center of gravity, while simultaneously staying attuned to the subtle adjustments of their partner. In the same way, healthy relationships strike a delicate balance between autonomy and compassion through sensitivity, awareness, and on-going investigation. If we err on the side of autonomy, we can become cold, indifferent, or self-centered. Yet if we put all of our focus on others out of fear, habit, duty, or self-deprecation, we neglect our own needs, build resentment, and burn out.

**Do you have any recommendations for handling a heated disagreement with someone you’re living with?**First and foremost, try not to take it personally. We’re all under so much stress right now, which means much of the time we may not be at our best. The more we can bear this in mind—to give others the benefit of the doubt, and be forgiving when we fall short of our aspirations—the easier it will be to navigate disagreements.

Another essential factor in doing our best is to take care of our own heart and mind. When we’re feeling stressed or under-resourced, it’s that much harder to have a meaningful, productive conversation. Be willing to set limits when you know you’re not in the right frame of mind for a difficult conversation. Tell the other person that you care for them, that what they want matters to you, and that you don’t have the bandwidth to discuss it right now. Then, propose another time for the conversation that would be better.

Once you’re in the conversation, try to slow down and pause. When we take a breath and slow down a little, we have more access to our good intentions, and can make better choices in the conversation. Even a moment or two interrupts habitual speech patterns and may help to break the cycle of blame and disconnection. Next, experiment with more active listening. Periodically say back what you’ve heard and check if it’s accurate. Even if you’re confident that you understand, it may still be helpful to offer a reflection in a heated moment in order to give the other person the experience of feeling heard. This can help to build trust, and slows the pace of a conversation down so there’s more space to reflect.

Finally, when it’s your turn to share, speak from the heart with as much honesty and as much care as possible. The two are not mutually exclusive. Do the work you need to do to get underneath any stories of blame or judgment to what really matters to you. Then share that with as much love as you can muster.

**How can we find balance between our increasingly digital lives and our need for closeness? Research suggests our devices, rather than connecting us, lead to feelings of isolation and**[**disconnection**](https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2017/09/has-the-smartphone-destroyed-a-generation/534198/)**. Now we are relying on them more than ever to maintain relationships, both professional and personal.**So much of this comes down to two things: presence and intention. It’s so easy to get lost in a screen—my body disappears, the people around me disappear. I can even lose my sense of time. Yet I’ve found that meditation can help us steer clear of falling headfirst into this kind of disembodiment by teaching us how to bring mindfulness, or presence, to the moment. The more in touch we are with the body, the greater capacity we have to experience joy and connection. This allows us to notice more subtle internal signals about our energy levels, such as a need for movement or a break from the screen. While sitting and looking at a screen, can we remain aware that we are sitting?

The other key factor here is intention. To give someone or something our full attention we have to want to be here. I can spend half an hour on a video chat with my parents (both of whom are in their 70s, with multiple high-risk factors for COVID-19), and feel mildly distracted the entire time. Or, I can take a few moments before the call to the calm myself, and consciously choose to be as fully present as possible. Then, even if the conversation is mundane, the time spent can be nourishing because my own heart and mind are imbued with presence, appreciation, and care.

**How would you recommend speaking with someone you know who is sick with or recovering from COVID-19?**Take the time you need beforespeaking with them to clear your head and open your heart. The less stressed and distracted you are, the more you will be able to engage and respond intuitively from your heart.

Ask them how they’re doing and then listen. Do your best to show empathy for what they are going through, authentically expressing your understanding. Then try to sense what might be useful. They may be more interested in catching up, talking about something else meaningful, or just chatting. The more open you are going into the conversation, the more flexibility you will have to meet them right where they are.

**Many coming out of quarantine are fearful of the virus, others are grieving loved ones. How do you recommend speaking with people in these situations?** It all comes back to allowing ourselves to be human with each other. It’s OK to feel afraid; it’s natural to grieve. The more we can honor the power and truth of these emotions in one another—rather than shunning or avoiding them, trying to fix them or make them go away—the more we can feel like we are truly in this together.

**For those that live alone, or those that crave a deeper connection but cannot get it right now, where can they turn to satisfy this need?**If you have fewer people to turn to—maybe they’ve passed away, you’ve been estranged, or separated for good reasons—there are other ways to find connection. Any act of service or generosity, however small, can strengthen our sense of belonging. I’ve found that when I contribute time, energy, skills, or resources, I begin to recognize my own value and experience myself as embedded within a community.

We also can turn inward to discover the connection we long for. The practice of lovingkindness, or [metta meditation](https://tricycle.org/beginners/decks/meditation/?continue=1" \o "" \t "_blank), reveals the depth of love in our hearts and the vast potential for connection we have as human begins. In fact, Insight Meditation teacher Sharon Salzberg (who popularized lovingkindness meditation in the West) often translates the word metta as “connection.”

Mindful communication takes two premises as its starting point: 1) that speech and relationship are a powerful vehicle for spiritual transformation; and 2) that effective communication is a learned skill. This sets up an inner orientation to conversation that’s conducive to learning—one of humility, interest, empathy, and patience. When we approach our conversations and relationships as a world of learning, we gain a world of benefit—both internally and relationally. Our practice is no longer limited by the amount of free time we have to sit on a cushion. Every interaction becomes an opportunity to strengthen wholesome qualities of mind and heart.