

Other People's Behavior

Noted existentialist Jean-Paul Sartre famously wrote “hell is other people.” There is other context to that quote but for the purposes here, I’m going to leave that out, because I can. It’s a quote I’ve often thought about as we manage COVID-19, in a modified form of “hell is other people’s bad behavior.” Daily, we are dealing with a virus that has likely spread faster because, despite the efforts of governments and health organizations, some people just don’t follow the directions. I’m not talking about young children, the cognitively impaired, or those who legitimately are unable to control their behavior. I’m talking about people that make a conscious choice to place themselves or others at risk. And while we have seen multiple examples of the general public engaging in obviously dangerous or ill advised activities, chances are we have some people in our own life that, despite being relatively intelligent, are engaging in behavior that make us cringe when it comes to COVID-19 safety. Other people’s lax attitude toward rules can put us in an uncomfortable situation. Anxiety, already high, goes higher.

In my non-work life, as you may have gathered from other blogs, driving is my passion. From racing to advanced car control, if it has 4 wheels and an engine, I’m interested. When teaching at a teen car control schools, one of the concepts we discuss is “protecting your bubble”. What this means is, always, protecting the space in front, behind, and beside your vehicle. This provides a cushion of safety in that it provides the space (and reaction time) needed to act should something happen that alters the desired course. Another way to put this is that I tend to drive as if nobody else knows what they are doing. Now, hopefully they do, but if not, I’ve protected myself.

Most of us are, currently, protecting our bubble, so to speak. We are taking reasonable precautions to keep safe distance from others, are engaging in public “defensively,” and have full awareness of everything going on around. People out there may be engaging in dangerous activity, but in most instances, I have enough time to react. Sure, something could happen, but it’s unlikely. Doing this protects us not only physically, but mentally.

Where this gets more challenging is when it’s not a stranger in public, but someone we know and care about. Now, protecting our bubble comes at a cost. Physically, chances are, we are still protected. A family member engaging in risky behavior (assuming they don’t live in our home) is not going to place us in greater physical risk. It does, however, affect us mentally by way of worry about their health, anger over what we see as obstinance, and the damage it can do to our relationships. In a time when every part of life seems stressful, it’s one more significant source of anxiety we just don’t need. If we could only control others behavior, just temporarily for their own safety...but alas, we can’t.



What are some ways we might manage this situation?

- Focus on you—this sounds incredibly self-centered, and is, but the reality is the only person’s behavior we can control is our own. Our ability to help others is only preserved if we are healthy.
- Discuss your concerns—all we can do is relay our concerns and fears in an honest and straightforward manner. They may be receptive to hearing them, especially if they come from a place of concern. If they aren’t, there may not be anything you can do to change their mind. That is not on you.
- Connected to the above...Look for openings—there may be times that are better than others to talk to family about your concern regarding the virus. This could be related to their emotional state (when they are calm, not defensive) or a change in the reality of the virus (for example, a spike in cases in their town or county). Delivering the right message at the wrong time is going to be frustrating for everyone.
- Disconnect if needed—Depending on how much distress this causes us; we may need to take steps to disconnect. While this is a serious decision, and one that shouldn’t be rushed, it may be a necessary step in maintaining our own health. This does not mean that any/all contact is precluded, but that we minimize the interactions that cause distress.
- Rewrite the narrative—Mentally, we build narratives and these narratives are emotionally laden. Our narrative about how to manage a family member who is engaging in behavior we find objectionable can easily skew negative, where we feel bad about ourselves, anger toward the other party, or both. This breeds more negativity, and this affects our mental health. Our narrative could just as easily be this: I was concerned about my dad and did everything I could to share that. While I could not control what he does, I realized I could control my own actions. In the end, while it didn’t end like I wanted, I can hope for things to be better in the future.

Protect your bubble, physically and emotionally. We will get through this together...

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