

Lockdown easing: how to tell friends and family that you're not ready to meet up at the moment:

Recent changes to the lockdown rules mean we're able to meet up with six people outside our household in an outdoor setting, giving BBQs and garden parties a greenlight. From this weekend, trips to cafes, pubs and restaurants are also possible. For many people this is great news. After two months spent inside our homes isolated from the outside world, being able to get out and about and see our friends and family again is a welcome relief. But what if you don't feel ready to leave lockdown and socialise?

For those people who feel it's too early for lockdown restrictions to be lifted – or who feel anxious about the idea of being exposed to the virus – these newfound freedoms are less welcome. Alongside their anxiety about returning to normal life and the lockdown restrictions easing, there is a newfound pressure to meet up with other people who are keen to get out and about.

With so many different attitudes and opinions floating around at the moment, managing our friendships and relationships with family members can be trickier than ever – especially when others are finding it hard to see your side of the story. As many people who aren't ready for lockdown ease are finding, explaining why they're being so cautious – and why they're uncomfortable with the idea of meeting up with others – is a tricky task. So how can we handle these difficult conversations?

“Throughout our lives we will reach points of difference with our friends and family and learning to negotiate our boundaries is a great skill to learn,” explains The Recovery Centre psychotherapist Michelle Scott.

“My advice would be to take time to establish what feels right for you as we move out of lockdown, ensuring that you are making your personal decisions from wise caution rather than from panic and fear.”

After you've taken some time to establish what you are and aren't comfortable with, it's time to start communicating these feelings to your friends and family.

“Encourage open communication with your friends and family about this and about their healthy boundaries so that you can each feel your voices are heard and that your unique emotional needs are valid, even if they are not the same,” Scott says. “Boundaries are not about conflict or disagreeing – they are about respecting and appreciating difference. If you establish this type of communication then it will be a less awkward conversation if you want to say no to something.”

Of course, one of the biggest worries people have about having these kinds of difficult conversations with others is the fear that they might offend them. It's understandable to feel this way – after all, no one wants to upset the people closest to them – but, as Scott stresses, it's still important to take some time to consider why you're worried they might be offended.

“Check in with yourself,” she says. “Are you getting caught up in some old dynamics from your past where you have felt responsible for the happiness of others or have had difficult reactions from someone you cared about?”

“Bring yourself into the present and know that you are doing your best. Many of us have been regressing during this difficult time and might be feeling insecure, so it is wise that we are considerate about how we speak to each other. At the same time, it may not be possible to avoid uncomfortable feelings, and that's OK.”

She continues: “Be clear, calm and don’t over explain. Remind yourself this is a thoughtful decision you have made in a tough and confusing time.”

It’s important to remember that, however you decide to handle yourself during this challenging time, your thoughts and feelings are valid. While some people might be struggling with feelings of isolation and want to get back to normal life as quickly as possible, you might prefer to take a more cautious approach and take things slow. And that’s 100% OK.