

How to maintain social distance when others don't

As the world begins phased re-opening, some will take that to mean we can return to life exactly as it was before the pandemic.

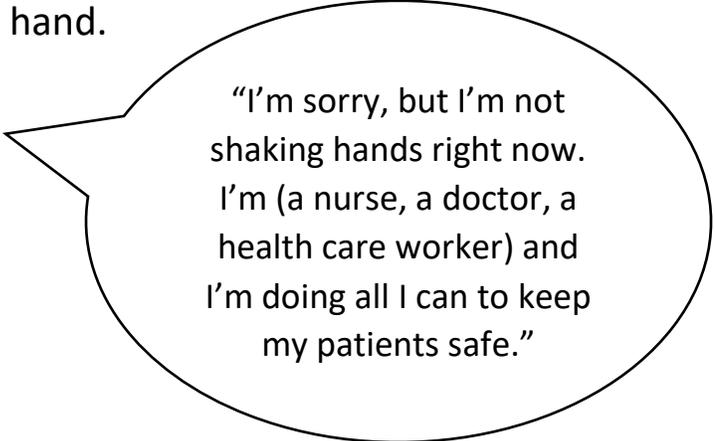
Those of us in health care know it's important to continue taking social distancing precautions even as we begin to do some of the things we did prior to the pandemic such as dining in at a restaurant.

So, how do we handle people around us who don't practice social distancing? It can be really hard to override years of social training and speak up about our needs without feeling like we're being rude.

Unfortunately, there is no magic language that will work all of the time. Remember: We cannot control the actions, thoughts, or opinions of others; only our own.

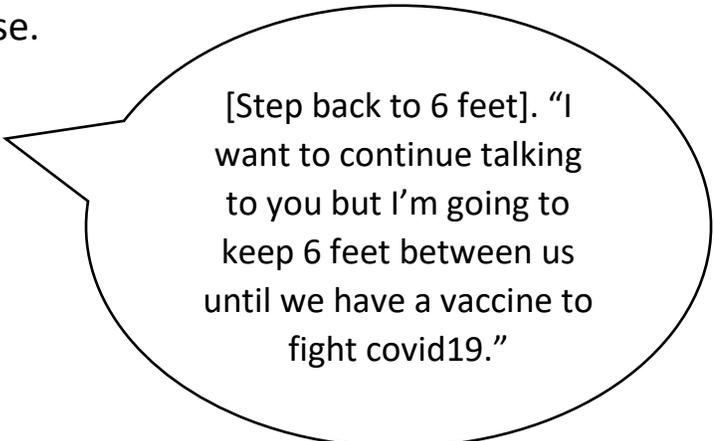
Try role playing these words with a colleague or a family member. Make adjustments to them so they fit your personal style and level of comfort. Smiling before you speak is often the quickest way to communicate warmth to another person.

If someone tries to shake your hand.



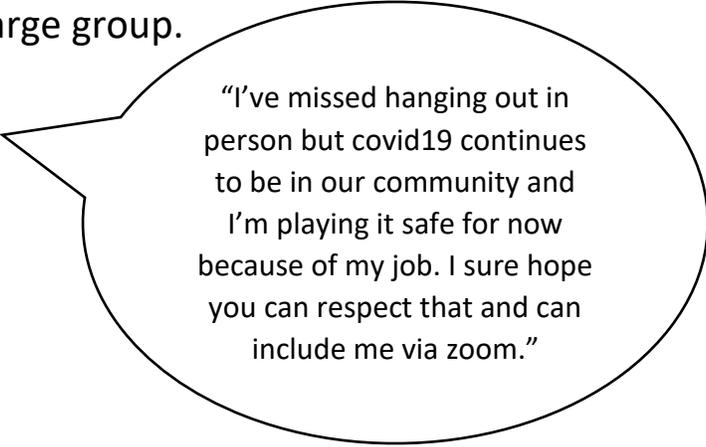
"I'm sorry, but I'm not shaking hands right now. I'm (a nurse, a doctor, a health care worker) and I'm doing all I can to keep my patients safe."

If someone is standing too close.



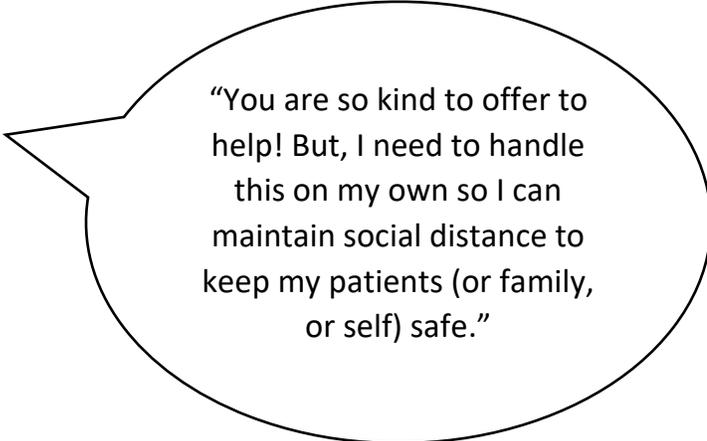
[Step back to 6 feet]. "I want to continue talking to you but I'm going to keep 6 feet between us until we have a vaccine to fight covid19."

If someone wants you to join a large group.



"I've missed hanging out in person but covid19 continues to be in our community and I'm playing it safe for now because of my job. I sure hope you can respect that and can include me via zoom."

If someone offers to help you carry something (or in some other way).



"You are so kind to offer to help! But, I need to handle this on my own so I can maintain social distance to keep my patients (or family, or self) safe."

Hopefully, others will hear your simple and direct message and give you some space. If another person wants to mock or ridicule your decision, it's probably not likely that you're going to change their mind with information about the science of social distancing. Don't engage in an argument. You can always move farther away if someone is being belligerent or argumentative.

Oftentimes, the worst that can happen is that you're embarrassed. But remember: Embarrassment is not fatal; it's just mildly uncomfortable for a short period of time. If you are taking steps to protect yourself, your family, your patients, your friends, and even complete strangers, *you have nothing to feel embarrassed about!*

Practicing new or uncomfortable phrases is the quickest way to get your brain comfortable with saying them. It also increases the likelihood that if one of these scenarios happens, you will not be in as big of a state of surprise so it will be easier to remember your boundary statements.