

How to Connect with What Matters: Vaccine/Mask Edition

D.A. Graham, Ph.D., M.Div., MHR - Interim Vice Provost - University of Kansas

In the face of the pandemic, it is not surprising that fear gets the upper hand at times. Now, with the vaccine, we might feel pushed by fear to take a side and dig in at the cost of staying connected with your heart. We might notice colleagues, students, family, and friends arguing over whether to get the vaccine or not. We hear ourselves cite research and hear others cite statistics.

We will always have views and biases. This is a part of being human. It is not these views that matter. What matters is how we relate to them and how they affect our ability to care for those around us and meet differences with compassion and equanimity.

There's so much information to consider. Behind all these details is what really matters most, love, care, equity, inclusion, connection, and community. The question the pandemic asks us is, "How will we care for each other? How will we move past me and mine and expand into a greater sense of us?"

FEAR

Fear is contraction and leads to alienation and disconnection. It narrows our vision. It keeps us stuck in our biases. It makes us imagine that survival is all that matters. It pushes us to wrap our attention around the leading cause of suffering: attachment to a view.

When fear is taking over, we might not necessarily be conscious of a feeling of fear. Especially when fear gets us stuck in attachment to our view. A few of the ways fear might manifest are:

Anger	Dismissiveness	Using synonyms for right or wrong like: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• appropriate or inappropriate• informed or misinformed• mainstream or alternative• conservative or progressive• gullible or honest• fearful or confident
Judgment	An attitude of "I know better, and others are ignorant"	
Lack of curiosity	Labeling others as with you or against you	

FEAR-BASED THINKING CHANGES THE QUESTIONS WE ASK

When fear takes over, the central question of how will we care for each other is replaced with fear-based questions like:

Who is right?	What is the right way?	How can I stay safe (regardless of the impact on others)?
What should people do?	Who is threatening my . . . freedom, safety, family, views, lifestyle, etc?	What side are you on?

ANTIDOTES TO FEAR

The antidotes to fear are the same as for a trigger from any cause or crisis: naming the fear as it arises, grounding ourselves, bringing curiosity, giving and receiving empathy, allowing grief, offering care, and accessing gratitude, to name a few. In the heat of the moment, three key skills will help us stay connected to ourselves and the other person.

1. Track your reactivity
2. Shift your attention to universal needs (Respect, Autonomy, Fairness, Security, and Belonging)
3. Connect about it later

1. Track our reactivity

In the face of someone attaching to their view and not meeting our needs for mutuality and consideration, we might become foggy and disconnected from our sense of choice or we might get angry and start to challenge and argue. As soon as we can, recognize that we are becoming reactive and withdraw our attention from the other person. We might do this by calling a pause to the interaction and getting a drink of water, for example. We might also just remain as we are and internally withdraw our attention.

Immediately begin an internal narration of the signs of reactivity. This brings mindfulness onboard. Once we feel some mindfulness return, engage an [anchor](#) or a [regulation strategy](#). Then decide about how we'd like to connect either with yourselves or the other person.

2. Shift our attention to universal needs

Placing our attention on [universal needs](#) is a simple way to reconnect with our heart.

We might begin with self-empathy and identify what's most important to us at that moment. Needs most likely present for us might include mutuality, connection, consideration, being seen and heard, autonomy, or safety.

Once we are grounded in our needs, we might choose to access honest expression. Here are some possibilities for what an honest expression could sound like:

- If you are invested in the relationship, you might share vulnerably, "Hang on, I am wanting to connect, and this isn't so connecting. I am willing to talk about this and I want it to be mutual. Would you be willing to hear what's up for me around this topic?" Or "I notice I am feeling reactive, and I don't trust that I can respond in a way that would be helpful. Let's continue this conversation tomorrow at lunch.
- If you have a specific role with this person, you might speak directly from that purpose, "My role here is to help you get the information you need. Would you be willing to tell me your specific request right now?"
- If you would like to create more connection through empathy, interrupt with your honest expression about your intention to connect, then offer an empathy guess, "Hang on, could you pause, I want to connect to what you're saying. In sharing this, I wonder if you are feeling grief and concern and really want to be heard about what matters most to you?"

All these types of responses come from grounded self-connection and clarity about our needs and desires now.

3. Connect about it later

If we do want to cultivate and maintain a connection with the other person, it is sometimes easier to address the difficult interaction at another time when we have a sense of connection and rapport. Bringing up anything from the past can sometimes trigger defensiveness for the other person, so it's helpful to state our intention first. Perhaps it sounds something like this:

"Remember the other day when we were preparing samples and you started talking about the vaccine? I want to be able to talk about this issue with more connection. Are you up for trying again with me saying what I understand about what you said, and then you offer the same for me?"

Here are some examples of other types of requests that could help create mutuality and consideration in the next conversation:

- “Next time, would you be willing to ask me if I want to hear about the research you found on the vaccine before you start telling me about it?”
- “Would you be willing to take ten minutes now and hear what comes up for me about this topic?”
- “Would you be willing to find others to talk with about it?”
- “Next time we talk about the vaccine; would you be willing to ask me how what you are saying is landing for me?”
- “When you see my hand on my heart, would you be willing to pause and ask me how I am doing?”
- “The next time the topic comes up would you be willing to ask yourself to use the same voice volume that we are using now?”
- “When you see me raise my hand, would you be willing to pause and hear what's coming up for me?”
- “Would you be willing to offer a suggestion about how the conversation could have more mutuality and consideration next time?”

Regardless of how we approach the next conversation, we don't need to assess whether the other person is reactive or apply any other label. What's important is staying grounded in our experience so that we can respond authentically.

We will always have views and biases. This is a part of being human. It is not these views that matter. What matters is how we relate to them and how they affect our ability to care for those around us and meet differences with compassion and equanimity.

PRACTICE

Take a moment now to set your intention to engage in your grounding practice the next time you encounter a challenging interaction about the vaccine, mask, or any other hot issue. If you have a guess about with whom that interaction might be, imagine the situation vividly, focusing especially on the grounding practice and your authentic response. Take time to identify the universal needs you think might be up for the other person and those that are alive for you.