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Virtual counseling sessions, videos aim to ease pandemic-related conflicts

By PAM KRAGEN, THE SAN DIEGO UNION-TRIBUNE
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SAN DIEGO — Like many other people over the past month, Bonnie Clayton was so preoccupied with taking care of her children, moving her business online and trying to organize her family's food supply that she forgot to take care of herself.

So a few weeks ago she signed up for one of the National Conflict Resolution Center's new Virtual Community Circles, which are online group therapy sessions conducted via the Zoom meeting app. The free, twice-weekly sessions were created to help isolated San Diegans like Clayton learn coping mechanisms and communication tools during the COVID-19 crisis.

"Even though I wasn't in the room with everyone, their images were on screen. So I still felt pretty much like I was in community, which was delightfully surprising," said Clayton, an elder-care mediator who runs Shine Your Light Dementia Care Services. "I might not have known how low level I was getting — fearful, anxious and a little depressed — but 10 minutes after I disconnected from that first call I was walking around realizing I'm feeling a lot better. It was a striking shift."

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After nearly a month of enforced togetherness, civility is becoming strained between spouses, roommates and family members, as well as between co-workers who are communicating remotely. To help bridge these divides in a virtual way, the NCRC has launched a series of online programs, including weekly tutorial videos and the community circles, which are supported by the San Diego County Health & Human Services Agency, as part of the Live Well San Diego Exchange program.

Topics for some of the upcoming community circle meetings are self-care in a crisis and resilience in challenging times. NCRC project manager Brittney Ochira said many of the people who contact the NCRC say they feel like nobody understands what they're going through.

"What we keep hearing again and again is, 'Why am I feeling a roller coaster of emotions? One minute I'm fine and feeling productive and have gratitude for my health, and the next minute I feel like crying,'" Ochira said. "They're grieving the loss of their normal routines. People think they're alone in feeling it. But in reality, we're all having this same universal experience right now."

Every Monday for the past month, NCRC has posted a video on its YouTube channel ("NCRCSINCE1983") called "Mindful Mondays." Hosted by Ashley Virtue, the center's director of external relations, the two- to three-minute videos offer communication techniques for dealing with family and co-workers during this crisis.

In last week's video, Virtue explained how the physical distance created by social-distancing policies has led to a growing sense of emotional detachment for many people.

"When we stop holding meetings or stop engaging with friends and family members about how they're doing and how we're doing, our brains aren't activated in the same ways as they were before," Virtue said. "That can lead to a lack of productivity. It can lead to feeling depressed or anxious. So being able to hold healthy conversations with people is really key to getting through this time in a healthy manner."



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Like the in-person community circles the NCRC has been holding over the past several years, the virtual circles are open to the public and free. People can sign up for the meetings on [Eventbrite.com](https://www.eventbrite.com) (search "virtual-community-circle"). Group size is limited to 15 to 25 people and there has been a waiting list for every session so far. The circles run two hours and begin with a mediated group session followed by breakout sessions for groups of two to three people on more specific topics.

Ochira said one of the most popular circle topics so far was about keeping the family peace, which she can relate to as the mother of a 1-year-old who, along with her husband, is working full-time from a one-bedroom apartment. She said working parents are juggling so many balls these days that it's impossible to avoid some of them dropping.

"Everyone is feeling like they're not doing great emotionally for themselves and that manifests with them not being very patient with their kids and not having everything figured out," Ochira said. "The big struggle is the judgment we place on ourselves as parents and the expectations that we should also be their teacher and be working full-time."

Another popular topic is how to resolve conflicts between couples where one member is obsessed with watching the news and debating the latest coronavirus statistics while the other would rather focus their attention on helping others in the community.

"Maybe the more news-oriented person will feel you don't care about the struggles of the people who are really suffering, whereas the more action-oriented person may say, 'This is how I care, by doing something tangible,'" said Ochira, who recommends that partners facing this type of conflict practice active listening and active self-awareness skills to understand the underlying difference in their coping styles.

All of the circle meetings begin with participants agreeing to the same ground rules, which are to be present and curious, to speak and listen with respect and from the heart, and to be patient. Ochira said following these simple rules can often help couples, families and co-workers mediate many crises on their own.

"One hope for these conversations," Ochira said, "is that we all get to bring that experience of feeling heard and deeply listening to others back into our homes and into our work. As we navigate these times we learn how to give time to each other, be civil and give each other that extra support and kindness we all need right now."

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1. Hold a family meeting: Let every family member talk about what they want to get out of this "break." Agree on a plan for tackling the chores that still need to get done. Set a

daily schedule.

2. Set boundaries: If you haven't already, define a work space that is separate from home life, if possible, and establish "office hours." Make agreements as a family to stay connected and communicative, while respecting these boundaries. And recognize that encroachment is inevitable.

3. Check-in: How are things going? A daily download of what's working and what isn't — perhaps at the dinner table — can allow you to course correct before things get out of hand. Be sure to listen to each other and ask for support, when needed.

4. Maintain a sense of humor: Finding the funny is a known stress buster. Start your day with a smile (even if you have to fake it). Interject a surprise, something you normally wouldn't do as a family.

5. Be compassionate: Acknowledge that social distancing, our new normal, isn't easy for any of you. There will be good days and bad — and with them, times to give and receive special kindness.

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— From Steven P. Dinkin, president of the National Conflict Resolution Center

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