

# How to function in an increasingly polarized society

November 15 2021, by Fiona MacDonald

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Political [polarization has been an increasing topic of concern](#) for people in many areas of their lives, rearing its head in everything from family get-togethers to workplace relationships and election campaigns.

The COVID-19 crisis [has demonstrated that polarization](#)—extremes in opinions and/or an erosion of a more moderate political center—[can have real life-and-death consequences](#). How to manage the stress of polarization and how to function when it surrounds us is now a necessary but underdeveloped skill for many of us.

To function in an increasingly polarized society, we first need to know the source of the division. In politics, we often assume that disagreement stems from conflicts over policy directions.

Political science literature, however, [disputes this notion](#). In fact, it's not disagreement over policy that drives polarization, but rather our [emotional feelings](#) and perceptions about the nature of the world around us.

This is the compelling argument behind the book [\*Prius or Pickup? How the Answers to Four Simple Questions Explain America's Great Divide\*](#), by [American political scientists Marc Hetherington and Jonathan Weiler](#). Their work demonstrates how our [emotional responses](#) to ideas and events is deeply connected to our world views.

## Four questions

We can gain significant insight into our own ideas on the nature of the world and how it relates to the views of others by answering some questions on childrearing:

Which of the following qualities are most important for children to have?

1. Independence versus respect for elders
2. Obedience versus self-reliance
3. Curiosity versus good manners

#### 4. Being considerate versus being well-behaved

The more focused an individual is on respect, obedience, good manners and good behavior, the more likely they are to hold what Hetherington and Weiler identify as a "fixed" world view.

The more emphasis an individual places on independence, self-reliance, curiosity and being considerate, the more likely they are to hold a "fluid" world view.

The basis for these differences is emotional or "affective." Those of us who gravitate to the fixed end of the spectrum tend to regard the world as a [dangerous place](#) full of threats, while people who gravitate to the fluid end tend to see the world as a safe place to explore.

Of course, many people in society are somewhere in the middle and our position on the spectrum may change with life experiences that influence our perceptions. What's critical, however, is understanding that the differences stem from our emotional sense of the world rather than issues or political positions.

### **Gut-level disagreement**

[As Hetherington and Weiler explain:](#)

"Why is politics so polarized if people actually don't care all that much on the issues? If people don't really care very much about politics, maybe they're not necessarily extreme on the issues. But here's the thing: What if you just completely understand the world differently from those on the other side in your guts?"

This kind of gut-level disagreement poses much bigger challenges because not only is there disagreement on how to handle a problem [like](#)

[the COVID-19 response](#), but the nature of the problem itself is disputed.

The COVID-19 polarization we're seeing illustrates this dynamic. Those against COVID-19 vaccination view government mandates, public health restrictions and the citizens who support them as the problem at hand. As a result, it's these measures and individuals that become the target for their emotional response.

Those in favor of vaccine mandates and other public health measures, in turn, are likely to view anti-vaxxers and those who violate public health orders as the source of the problem.

How then do we function when we encounter these emotionally driven divides? There are no easy fixes, but there are a few strategies that can help manage the stress and can de-escalate the impact of this kind of conflict in our day-to-day lives.

## **Strategies for de-escalation**

First, recognizing the emotional basis is key even when we consider our own views to be science-informed. Realizing that those with whom we disagree are often coming from a place of fear and anxiety can help lower frustration and is one step towards developing empathy and/or compassion for their position. This does not mean agreeing with them, but simply creating space to validate their emotional experience.

Early in my previous training to be a social worker, I discounted the [value of validation](#). Once practicing in the "real world," however, I quickly realized the value that comes from listening to someone's emotional perception, recognizing it and reflecting it back.

Phrases like "that must be frustrating" or "that must be very difficult" might seem trite in the abstract, but they are invaluable tools when

shared genuinely in various kinds of interactions, and they can immediately lower tension.

While this practice alone will not transform viewpoints, it's an important skill we can employ to maintain relations with others who hold different world views—and can help prevent further alienation.

That's a small but necessary step if we want to avoid functioning in echo chambers in which we only interact with those who already agree with us.

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