

## Can your marriage survive the coronavirus?

By Matt Villano, CNN

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(CNN)Even for those of us with the happiest and most stable marriages, social distancing to combat the spread of Covid-19 provides some serious challenges to our respective unions.

We're confined to small spaces with our spouses, with little to no reprieve. We've got to balance work life and personal life, 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Throw young kids (or even teens) into the mix and it can be a recipe for disaster—or, even worse, divorce.

CNN spoke with several Licensed Marriage and Family Therapists, clinical psychologists and married people about how to make sure your union isn't a casualty of the coronavirus pandemic.

### **Communicate, communicate, communicate**

The secret to any healthy relationship is communication.

It's true under normal circumstances, and in the time of coronavirus. For some, this might mean periodic huddles to deliver updates on what's coming next. For others, it could be a daily check-in that rates how each partner feels physically and internally. Michele Weiner-Davis, a marriage and family therapist in Boulder, Colorado, said it doesn't matter as much how couples communicate during a coronavirus shelter-in-place, but simply that they try to do so.



From weddings to funerals, the coronavirus is canceling life's biggest moments

"The biggest challenges I've faced so far are the cases in which both spouses are looking at what's going on with different lenses—one person thinks the sky is falling and the other thinks people are making a big deal about it," said Weiner-Davis, who also has a busy [teletherapy practice](#).

"When people have different perspectives, they have different ideas of what needs to be done, and the only way to work around that is to communicate."

## **Embrace space**

Most spouses spend the bulk of every day apart — at least one partner leaves the house to go to work. Now, however, due to companies ordering employees to work from home and government-mandated lockdowns, both partners are required to spend almost all their time under the same roof.

Particularly for couples who live in smaller homes, this scenario can make it feel like neither partner has much (or any) personal space.

For this reason, many experts suggest acknowledging the importance of alone time. Alev Ates-Barlas, an LMFT in upstate New York, said she tries to teach members of a couple to identify whether they are individuals who need a partner to engage them in order to regulate their own emotions, or individuals who find comfort in regulating on their own.



[Here's everything you need to know about social distancing](#)

"It is important that couples know where you fall in these two categories so that you don't end up assuming your need for regulation is actually your partner's need," she said.

"If you know your partner is an auto-regulator, then you shouldn't pursue them or engage them," Ates-Barlas said. "Once you regulate yourself, engaging in reflective listening can be a good way to eliminate causes for friction and use that as an opportunity for greater understanding and learning about one another."

Put differently, Ates-Barlas said the best way to get through a tense situation with your partner during the next few weeks might be to put on headphones and meditate, or sit quietly in a corner.

Sometimes, she said, "all you need is a quiet [spot] of your house for five minutes."

## **Keep it light**

In the days following government pleas to engage in social distancing, you might have seen a Tweet from writer and editor Molly Tolsky suggesting that partners suddenly forced to work from home together should create an imaginary co-worker on which to blame disagreements.

Pro-tip for couples suddenly working from home together: Get yourselves an imaginary coworker to blame things on. In our apartment, Cheryl keeps leaving her dirty water cups all over the place and we really don't know what to do about her.

— Molly Tolsky (@mollytolsky) [March 16, 2020](#)

"Pro-tip for couples suddenly working from home together," tweeted Tolsky. "Get yourselves an imaginary coworker to blame things on. In our apartment, Cheryl keeps leaving her dirty water cups all over the place and we really don't know what to do about her."

Alexandra Fondren, a public relations professional in Northern California, took the advice to heart.

Immediately, she and her husband started scapegoating "Cheryl" for all the things one of them did to annoy the other.

"I never realized Cheryl was such a chocoholic," Fondren wrote in a recent email, her tongue firmly planted in her cheek. "I've heard it's an easy affliction to hide, but the empty wrappers that are littered throughout the 'office' are illuminating, mainly because none of their contents were once offered to her co-workers."

Other partners have found solace in sharing stories of work-related video conferencing gone wrong. Some have even embraced #CovidConfessions, a Friday night social media phenomenon through which people share truths about their lives they'd kept secret until the pandemic.

## Establish routines

Nobody is quite familiar with the "new normal" of social distancing yet, and with news about the pandemic changing rapidly, every day brings with it a new reality. Amid this constant tumult, Lee Miller, a marriage and family therapist in West Los Angeles, said it's wise to create new routines to give life meaning and purpose beyond the mundane. Specifically, Miller said to assign roles for each day: who cooks, who cleans, who answers the phone, and so on.

"This is not even close to a typical situation, which means there are a number of different roles both partners are going to have to play while they're working through the current reality," she said. "It's critically important to schedule time to sit down and talk about what your expectations are of each other during this time."



Creating an effective family routine when you're homebound

In New York City, Carrie Ingoglia and her husband Ron Richards have devised a winning strategy to balance working at home in a 576-square-foot apartment and parenting 15-month-old twins.

Richards tries to schedule work calls when the babies are likely to be napping. Ingoglia takes them for walks when Richards needs to focus. Both partners stop

working completely during baby mealtimes. The grownups also regularly go out of their way to give each other positive encouragement.

"This isn't to say we don't bicker, because we do," said Ingoglia, a creative director.

"But we know each other well enough to know a bickering moment is not a reflection of our commitment."

## **Get therapy**



You can have a virtual session with a trained therapist.

All this advice is a good start. For more comprehensive assistance in dealing with difficult and potentially sensitive situations, it's always a good idea to seek a new relationship with a trained therapist.

Holly Daniels, managing director of clinical affairs for the [California Association of Marriage and Family Therapists](#), said regular therapy can help people work through even the most intense anxiety.

"Just having someone to talk to, someone who can help you work through some of these difficult issues, is invaluable," said Daniels, a therapist with a private practice in Los Angeles. "Now more than ever, therapists are becoming indispensable for giving people the tools they need to get through any situation."

Thankfully, today it's easier than ever to connect with a therapist.

As of March 17, the Department of Health and Human Services' Office for Civil Rights, which enforces the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA), said it would not impose penalties against covered providers for noncompliance with the HIPAA rules that relate to provision of telehealth services during this time.

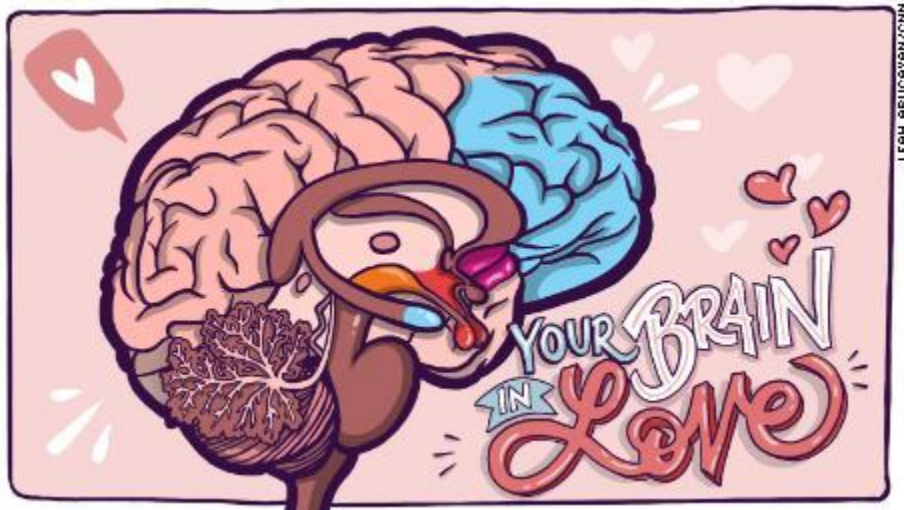
That means that a provider who needs to provide telehealth services to their patients during this time may use platforms that would otherwise not be HIPAA-compliant, such as Zoom, FaceTime or Skype. Many state governments made similar decrees.

## **Don't push for sex**

No, having sex with your partner isn't going to increase your odds of getting coronavirus.

Still, according to Britney Blair, a clinical psychologist and sex therapist in Northern California, you may find that sexual desire in the time of coronavirus falls short of what it usually is, since stress hampers libido for about 85 percent of us.

"It's normal to be less interested [in sex] during times of crisis," she said. "If you're one of the 15 percent of people who aren't affected by stress, understand that your partner might be on the other side."



Are you in love or just high on chemicals in your brain? Answer: Yes

Blair, who recently co-founded [sex tips app Lover](#), referred to this phenomenon as a "desire discrepancy," and said it occurs naturally in every couple but can be pronounced at times like this. She added that the only way around this obstacle is to create a safe and comforting environment with no strings attached.

Specifically, Blair noted that nagging or shaming your partner into sex will leave both parties feeling low.

"Play it the wrong way and the partner with more desire ends up feeling rejected while the partner with less desire feels blamed," she said. "The last thing any of us needs right now is added stress."

## Focus on the little things

It's easy to become overwhelmed with existential dread in the face of this pandemic, which changes daily.

This panicked state only further complicates your relationship with your partner.

Instead of allowing yourself to be triggered, take a deep breath and focus on the little things — especially those you can appreciate with your spouse.

Rob Bhatt, a writer in Seattle, says he and his wife, a mental health counselor, have done just this, embracing the extra time they get to spend together by living in a region that issued shelter-in-place orders earlier this month.



Looking for movies with the kids at home? What to watch beyond the usual suspects

"We used to dine out more frequently; once this thing started, I have been making pizza from scratch," Bhatt said. "We used to watch the news over dinner, but now we turn off the TV and just talk."

Bhatt continued: "Most of the time we just have these moments of gratitude for some very basic things we get to do together, and we hope that we'll all be able to get through this horrible thing sooner rather than later."

Daniels, the therapist, added that sometimes even the simplest gestures can set the tone.

"Simply taking the time to stop, look at your partner and tell them, 'Thank you,' can make a huge difference," she said.

## **If you feel unsafe**

Of course, there's another aspect to being stuck in the house with a spouse — one that can be gravely serious depending on the situation.

If you have been a victim of domestic violence, no lockdown or quarantine is more important than your health.

Police and other emergency response services are operating as normal, and if you are worried about personal safety be sure to call authorities immediately. The domestic violence hotline is 800/799-7233, or go to [The Hotline](#).

[Matt Villano](#) is a freelance writer and editor who lives in Northern California. He is on lockdown in his 1,740-square-foot house with one wife, three daughters, and two cats.

<https://www.cnn.com/2020/03/24/health/marriage-coronavirus-wellness/index.html>

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