

How to Divorce-Proof Your Marriage During Coronavirus

The coronavirus is putting an unprecedented amount of stress on couples. Here are some ways to cope.

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The world is on pause as it navigates the coronavirus pandemic. Daily life has been brought to a screeching halt. Around the world, people are being forced inside as governments do what they can to try and stop the spread of the virus. As this happens, couples are also trying to exist with one another in small spaces and stop the arguments and bad habits that could implode their marriage and result in divorce.

Keeping marriages and relationships healthy is a very real concern for many couples who are hunkering down right now. Stress is extremely high. Everyone is feeling cooped up. Couples are trying to react to this new normal.

Volatility is high in the stock market but there's even more so for many at the home front. In fact, looking at the situation, most experts agree that a post-COVID-19 world will see a spike in two things: babies and divorce rates.

Stuck at home with nothing to do and nowhere to go, couples will find that the extra time together will either draw them closer together, or bring into sharp relief all of the reasons they enjoy being apart. As an example of the latter, one only needs to look at the place where the coronavirus first hit. In China, which is only just now beginning to come out from under the coronavirus nightmare, more than 300 couples have filed for divorce since February, with some divorce lawyers reporting waiting lists of up to three weeks.

Reporting in the *Global Times*, a divorce registration official surnamed Wang commented on the situation, saying, "As a result of the epidemic, many couples have been bound with each other at home for over a month, which evoked the underlying conflicts, adding that the office had been closed for a month, therefore the office has seen an acutely increasing divorce appointment."

It's not hard to see why couples springing out of isolation and might want to get as far away from each other as possible. Experts say that, when left with nowhere to go, couples lose the ability to run from the issues that may be plaguing their relationships. Unable to avoid these problems, they run headlong into them instead, and the results are pretty much what you'd expect.

"In these challenging times of staying at home together and being 'stuck' with your family, you are most likely left without all the backdoors through which you usually leave the unpleasant situations," says couples counselor and

relationship expert Katherine Bihlmeier. “In my perspective, this is a great possibility to see what is really working for you in your life, and what life you’d like to live. How are you behaving in challenging situations with your partner? What patterns are showing up and causing reactions and resistance in you?”

All you need to do is turn on your TV to know that, like it or not, this period of staying at home isn’t going to be going away any time soon. We all need to figure it out together. Empathy and understanding will go far. So will creating new rules to help you and your partner deal with the coming weeks. Here, then, are twelve tips that can help couples cope.

Understand That Everyone Needs Time to Realign

Life as know it has changed for the time being. As Louis Laves-Webb, LCSW, LPC-S, an Austin-based psychotherapist, puts it, many among us have changed from a ‘thriving’ experience to a ‘surviving’ experience seemingly overnight. This isn’t easy and requires some readjustment time. To that regard, empathy is necessary. So is patience. “This difference in mindset can create a unique tension and demand a focus on psychological survival,” he says. “The skill set that survival demands is different than what is required to thrive and can include: greater flexibility, presence of mind, a sense of urgency, and functionality over process.” His advice: “Be courageous and understand that this can be a necessary realignment during this unique time.” In other words, everyone needs time to readjust. So be as understanding as you can.

Let Structure Guide You

After events of this past week, everyone’s schedule is now basically a pile of still-smoking ash on the floor. Now’s the time to create new structures. “It is critical that a new routine be established that allows each member of the

family to satisfy some of their needs to be met in regards to personal space, virtual work, virtual communications with friends and family, groceries and meal times, exercise routines, and rest/relaxation,” says therapist Robert A. Grigore.

So sit down and hash it out. That means all the specifics. Are you working from home? Okay. Where are you working? How are you taking conference calls so that the chatter doesn't drive your family insane? What time are you getting up? Who's watching the kids and when? What time are meals? Who's going shopping? What are we doing to relax tonight? When are you taking 20 minutes to yourself? When is your partner? Who's walking the dog when? Plan it out. Plan it out again. Then plan it out some more.

This will take time and nightly meetings. But without a structure or routine, you both run the risk of slipping into bad habits and irritating each other. “All humans operate better when they know what to expect,” says psychotherapist Eliza Kingsford. “It's important to give everyone an idea of what to expect from the day.”

Set Boundaries

Most couples are now forced to occupy the same living space, however large or small that may be. There is no way around that. But that doesn't mean that you have to be on top of each other all the time. Do what you can to draw lines of demarcation. Designate a work space for one another. Give yourselves the spaces you need to be productive and active without crowding them.

Importantly, you must make sure those boundaries also apply to when you're giving your attention to your work and when it's time for family. Let your

spouse know that he or she is still a priority by putting the phone down and closing the laptop when work is through. “When you work from home, it’s easy to answer emails first thing in the morning and late into the evening,” says Kingsford. “For some, this is fine as it creates flexibility throughout the day at other times. But be aware that it doesn’t start to consume your days.” Frustrations will occur. Take note and make changes as necessary.

Be Honest About Alone Time

We all need time to ourselves to destress or just zone out for 20 minutes. The need is even more so, what with no more commuting, gym-time, bar-time, barre-time, sports-time, or whatever-time. “Simply put, we are not used to being confined to our homes,” says Laves-Webb. “This dynamic can be taxing even under the best circumstances. Take time to go outside, go to another room or shut your door for a period of time in order to reset, create mental recalibration, and to have a pressure release valve for everyone involved.”

In busy households, this need can only be made clear through proper communication. Couples need to sit down and discuss this. *What time do you need? When can we set that time in the schedule?* It’s also crucial to be understanding of your partner’s need for the same. Therapist Ben Hoogland, MS, LFT says it’s important for couples to not be passive or resentful towards someone asking for alone time. So schedule that alone time. And if your partner is being reluctant, offer to take the kids or set up something for them that forces them to take some moments alone. Everyone needs it.

Set Expectations About How to Fight

Uncertainty is everywhere. Tensions are high. So, don’t fool yourselves: fights will happen. It might sound a bit weird, but one thing we can all do is come up

with some ground rules about how to fight. “It can be extremely helpful to come up with expectations as to how to handle disagreements and tensions that will escalate into arguments,” says Grigore. “I recommend agreeing that any family member can pause a disagreement in order to return to it at a later time. This increases the felt-sense of security and control for the family unit.” A few more solid ground rules: Be as specific as possible when criticizing their behavior (and refrain from criticizing your partner as a person); don’t get defensive (instead, trust that your partner means well); try not to stonewall or invalidate your partner’s feelings (instead prioritize making one another feel heard); and don’t bring up huge issues in the moment (instead, plan time for big talks).

Give One Another the Benefit of the Doubt

Times are tough. Stress is high. Shit will hit the fan. A good rule of thumb: When you’re communicating with your partner, give them the benefit of the doubt. “You’re both dealing with increased stress and unpredictability, so it’s likely that your partner isn’t actually trying to annoy you or act selfishly — they’re probably genuinely overwhelmed and not thinking as clearly as usual,” says Jessie Bohnenkamp, a licensed professional counselor based in Virginia. “If you need to bring up an issue, focus on the specific behavior that’s bothering you rather than criticizing your partner’s character or personality.”

Here’s an example. Instead of saying something like *You always expect me to clean up after you and it’s totally selfish*. Try, *It would be really helpful if you could clean up after your breakfast before you start working*. “Remember that you’re on the same team — especially when you’re both stuck at home,” says Bohnenkamp. “So pause to consider your partner’s point of view before jumping to negative conclusions.”

Get Creative With Date Nights

Date nights provide parents with essential time to connect. Even though you can't go to theaters, bars, pool halls, or concerts, date night still needs to happen. It's just a matter of getting creative. "Just because you can't go out doesn't mean you can't create a unique experience," says Hoogland. "Support your local restaurants and order take out, have a picnic outside or inside, trade massages, and/or rent a movie." Now that theaters are closed, big production companies are pushing new movies out on demand. Act like Tom and Rita Hanks and play a bazillion rounds of gin rummy. There are plenty of things to do.

Set Aside Time to Vent to One Another

During hectic times, we often forget to touch base with one another. This needs to be avoided at all costs. So be mindful and set aside a specific time at the end of day to talk about what's happening. Bohnenkamp says that during this each partner gets ten or 15 minutes to talk about whatever's on their mind — work stress, worry about their parents' health, the state of the world, money concerns. The other person simply listens, validates, and supports ("No problem solving unless specifically asked for!," reminds Bohnenkamp.) Then, it's the other person's turn and roles are reversed. "This time to come together and support each other is a wonderful way to stay on the same page, reduce each other's stress, and stay connected and strong during this stressful time," she says.

Take Time for Self Care

A lot of emotion will run over the coming weeks. One minute you might feel fairly resigned to circumstances as they are; the next minute, you might feel highly anxious about an older loved one, your own family's health, your job, the stock market. This is natural. But it's also up to you to practice emotional

regulation to maintain calm at home. Yoga. Meditation. Deep breathing. Talking to a virtual therapist. “Taking the time to find your own center will not only help you function as well as you can during these challenging times but will also help you bring your best self forward with your family,” says Jill Spivack, LCSW, co-founder of the Owlet Dream Lab. “Bonus: Your own self-regulation will have a ripple effect on your partner and kids, too.”

Practice Gratitude

Take some time together to share things for which you’re thankful. Write them down together or share them over text throughout the day. “The more you practice gratitude, the less you practice fear,” says Kingsford. Her recommendation: Each day write down at least 10 things you are grateful for. This will train your brain to pick out things to be grateful for.” Is this a bit cheesy? Sure. But sometimes that’s what we all need.

Make Time for Other People

Socializing with others can help you and your partner vent, gain perspective, or just forget about the day-to-day for a while. Even while social distancing, we all need to find ways to connect with people outside of marriage. Be proactive. If you belong to a group or club, see if they can hang out over Zoom or another video conferencing service. If you want to connect with family members or friends one-on-one, set up a daily Facetime call. Making time for interests and connections outside of the marriage can ensure that everything stays level inside the marriage. “Community and connection are paramount to protecting your mental health,” says Kingsford. “Humans are social creatures and it’s important that we protect ourselves from emotional isolation as we are physically isolated.”

Remind Yourself That These Are Crazy Times

This lockdown is unprecedented. Everyone is affected by the coronavirus pandemic and all the drastic change and stress it brings. Perspective is key. “During times of uncertainty, we go into survival mode, becoming hyper focused on ourselves. By extension we become less tolerant of others and more likely to snap at our partners,” says Ebru Halper, a licensed psychotherapist specializing in all aspects of intimate adult relationships. “As conflict arises in a couple during this time when we are all cooped up at home, it’s important to name the context of the relational dynamics. External stressors will take a toll on a marriage, even on really strong ones.” When there’s friction, tell yourself ‘This is very stressful for both of us. We are doing our best.’” At the end of the day, your best is all you can do.

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