



COVID-19 PSYCHOLOGICAL WELLNESS GUIDE:

COUPLES

Version 1, 5/04/20

During the COVID-19 pandemic, many couples are finding it more difficult to connect amidst the uncertainty and change. In addition to dealing with health concerns regarding the virus, couples may be experiencing financial stress, struggling with changes in routines and schedules, and feeling concerned for vulnerable loved ones, etc. Couples who are also parents may experience additional strain from balancing their own schedules with childcare and schooling responsibilities. Finally, one or both partners may be coping with the quarantine and related stressors in a way (e.g., increased substance use or irritability) that strains the relationship. As a result, you may be finding it more challenging to connect or may be experiencing more conflict. Even when you feel stressed and overwhelmed, there are things you can do to maintain closeness with your partner. Here are some tips to help couples effectively cope with ongoing stressors and nurture connection and intimacy. Helpful resources are also included.

Make a Plan

- Schedule a weekly meeting to make a plan, discuss challenging topics, and problem-solve.
 - Find a time when both of you are less stressed and children, if present, are occupied or asleep
 - Schedule a shared positive activity to enjoy following the meeting
- Designate time for work, childcare, household tasks, connection and intimacy, as well as self-care (see Wellness Guide: Living Alone for ideas)
 - Create a family calendar that includes each partner's meetings/obligations, children's school meetings, family meeting, etc.
- Discuss what makes sense as the "new normal" for you as a couple while sheltering-in-place
 - Identify an arrangement that works for both of you (e.g., dividing and conquering household chores, trading off with childcare, scheduling self-care time, etc.)



- Discuss finances if one or both of you are bringing home less income than usual or is newly unemployed
 - Provide one another with support around the added financial stress that COVID-19 may be causing you - and many other couples
 - Develop a realistic plan for meeting your household expenses

Make Time for Connection and Shared Enjoyment

- Balance time spent discussing COVID-19, related concerns, and problem solving with activities meant to boost your mood and reduce stress or tension
- Generate ideas for having fun, relaxing together, or being intimate
 - Start a fun project together, watch a movie, or play board or card games
 - Learn a new skill together (e.g., language, cooking, music instrument, gardening, home remodeling)
 - Exercise together (e.g., walking, yoga, or other online and [app-based](#) fitness program)
- Find opportunities to laugh together – whether it’s watching a funny movie together or noticing the humor in everyday aspects of life, humor can be an effective stress reliever
- Be intentional about setting aside time for such connection – this is especially important since other responsibilities, such as working and caring for children, are now home-based
- Make use of options for connecting virtually if you are in a long-distance relationship or living separately during this time
 - Try some of the many [apps and video platforms](#) available
 - Watch a movie, cook the same meal, play games (e.g., using [Houseparty](#) or [Jack Box](#)), or brainstorm [other ideas](#) for having fun together from afar

Acknowledge and Accept Differences

- Identify and discuss differences in how you are responding to COVID-19
 - Review best practices for staying safe and healthy during the pandemic - make sure to get your information from a trusted source (e.g., the [CDC](#))
 - Talk about concrete behaviors and your feelings, wants, needs, and beliefs



about them - use [effective communication strategies](#) rather than making judgments or criticizing your partner, which can lead to increased conflict

- Listen actively to your partner so that you can hear their viewpoint and make sure they feel understood
 - Reflect or summarize what you hear your partner saying to show you are listening (e.g., “I’m hearing that...”)
 - Take a moment to pause and be curious about their perspective and feelings (e.g., “Tell me more about...”)
 - Validate your partners feelings (e.g., “It makes sense you would feel...” “I can understand...”)
 - To listen and take their perspective does not mean that you approve or agree with their point of view
 - Refrain from offering your own thoughts and opinions until your partner feels heard

Discuss Needs and Boundaries

- Identify your individual needs – physically (e.g., alone time, intimacy) and emotionally (e.g., extra support or understanding) - during this time
- Discuss your respective needs
 - Accept that, as partners, you may have differing needs for space, communication, and social connection
 - Communicate boundaries and personal needs in a clear and supportive way - don’t rely on your partner to read your mind – explain and be specific (e.g., “I would love it if we could alternate making dinner”)
- Make time for check-ins and shared validation

Extend Appreciation and Patience

- Cultivate appreciation for your partner
 - Look for what your partner is doing right (e.g., making coffee)
 - Develop a daily practice of sharing your appreciation for your partner
 - Consider journaling your gratitude if you are finding it hard to identify things your partner is doing right in the moment – for example, every night you



might reflect on your day and note a few things you are appreciative of, sharing one or two with your partner

- Extend kindness to yourself
 - Notice if you have been more triggered, anxious, or angry lately
 - Imagine what you might say to a loved one who was stressed
 - Extend the same understanding about any fears or anxiety you may be having to yourself
- Remind yourself that your partner is likely doing their best
 - Practice giving kindness to them
- Recognize that moments of annoyance are inevitable when cooped up together - remind yourself that your partner is not responsible for this virus and shelter-in-place order, and practice gentleness and patience with them
- Ask your partner if you are concerned about their mood – try not to internalize or read into it but rather ask them about how they are doing directly and calmly

Nurture Intimacy

- Build intimacy and strengthen communication skills through curiosity and conversation, using apps (e.g., [Gottman free relationship app](#), COVID Coach) or by asking and answering Dr. Art Aronson's [36 questions for building intimacy](#)
- Learn more about the way you and your partner communicate by identifying and sharing your [love languages](#)

Safety

- Prioritize safety if there is a risk for violence
 - Respect a partner's need for space if conflict escalates and emotions become intense
 - Visit the [Survivors of Domestic Violence Guide](#) for resources and recommendations
- Know that the disruption of everyday life, routines, and structure can be particularly difficult for people with a substance use disorder, those who are in recovery and working to maintain sobriety, and their partners
 - Visit the [Managing Substance Use Disorders and Substance Misuse Guide](#) for resources and recommendations



Seek Additional Help If Needed

- Complete an online couple's program or retreat
 - Stay relationship-minded even when stressed or having trouble coordinating schedules. Online, evidence-based programs, such as [OurRelationship](#), [Hold Me Tight](#), [The Art and Science of Love: Online](#), or [ePrep](#), provide helpful, easy-to-access options for interested individuals and couples
- Seek out the services of a qualified couple's therapist if you need extra support as a couple during this time
- American Family Therapy Academy: <https://afta.org/afta-therapist-search/>
- Association for Behavioral and Cognitive Therapies: <http://www.findcbt.org/FAT/>

Helpful Resources

- In response to COVID-19, Emory University's Department of Psychiatry has created and continues to develop and update a series of psychological wellness guides. Find more tips for maximizing wellness and managing anxiety and stress here: https://med.emory.edu/departments/psychiatry/covid/wellness_guides.html
- Time: <https://time.com/5811146/coronavirus-married-relationship/>
- NBC: <https://www.nbcmiami.com/news/local/patience-and-compromise-keeping-relationships-alive-during-covid-19/2210312/>
- University of California at Berkeley: <https://news.berkeley.edu/2020/04/14/tips-for-couples-on-how-to-weather-covid-19-cabin-fever/>
- Forbes: <https://www.forbes.com/sites/erikaboissiere/2020/03/19/covid-19-lockdown-how-to-manage-your-relationships-in-tight-quarters/>
- Ohio State University: <https://wexnermedical.osu.edu/blog/tips-for-couples>
- University of Nevada at Las Vegas: <https://www.unlv.edu/news/release/love-under-lockdown-how-couples-can-cope-during-covid-19>
- Psychology Today: <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/healthy-eating-healthy-relating/202003/eight-tips-avoiding-covid-19-divorce>
- Conde Nast Traveler: <https://www.cntraveler.com/story/7-couples-on-navigating-long-distance-amid-coronavirus>



- Mercury News: <https://www.mercurynews.com/2020/04/08/sex-love-and-covid-19-tips-on-staying-close-from-bay-area-sex-expert/>
- Relate: <https://www.relate.org.uk/relationship-help/covid-19-advice-and-information>
- The Bold Italic: <https://thebolditalic.com/6-relationship-tips-from-a-therapist-to-help-deal-with-covid-19-stress-4a68c0250740>

Book Resources

- [Eight Dates: Essential Conversations for a Lifetime of Love](#) by John Gottman, Julie Gottman, Doug Abrams, & Rachel Abrams
- [7 Principles for Making Marriage Work](#) by John Gottman & Nan Silver
- [Hold Me Tight](#) by Sue Johnson
- [Reconcilable Differences: Rebuild Your Relationship by Rediscovering the Partner You Love – without Losing Yourself](#) by Andrew Christensen, Brian Doss, & Neil Jacobson