

# We Both Work from Home and We've Stayed Happily Married

By Alexandra Samuel

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How can you stay happily married when you and your partner are together around the clock?

It is a question many are asking now that the coronavirus has us sequestered in our homes. Whether you and your partner are locked up in a tiny studio apartment or rattling around together in a sprawling estate, being cut off from the rest of the world puts a lot of pressure on your relationship. While it's lovely to imagine that all this togetherness could rekindle your romance, it's just as easy for constant companionship to drive you apart.

But there are ways to handle the situation that will not only preserve your marriage—but maybe even strengthen it.

My husband, Rob, and I are fast approaching our 20th wedding anniversary, and during our years together we have often worked from home, side by side or together. For the past three years, we've not only both worked from home but also home-schooled one of our children. So, this new era of intense family togetherness is already quite familiar territory, even if we formerly enjoyed daily breaks in the form of coffee shop runs or client meetings.

Years of practice have helped us develop some good habits when it comes to sustaining our mutual affection—and helped us break habits that weren't so conducive to constant, happy companionship. Here's what has worked:

**Respect differences in pace.** My husband and I are the tortoise and the hare: I get a crazy amount of work done between 8 a.m. and 3 p.m., but by late afternoon I collapse onto the living-room sofa (or, if I'm smart, go for a walk). Rob starts his day at 8, works straight through until 6 or 6:30, then typically puts another few hours in after our son goes to bed. I used to feel guilty for collapsing, and resentful at him for not taking evening downtime with me, but I've come to realize that he just sustains a steady pace while I go hard and then crash. Respecting these differences allows us to each work in the way that works for us and contribute equally to household and child-care work.

**Get involved in one another's work.** My husband and I actually ran a business together. But even though our work is now largely separate, we help each other out with one kind of work or another almost every day. It helps us feel like colleagues as well as partners (which is nice when we can't see any other colleagues) and means we have a good sense of one another's work, which helps us feel connected.

Even if you and your partner have unrelated careers, look for points of intersection: Maybe the time-management system you use as a salesperson could be useful to your husband's work as a teacher, or your insights as a therapist could help your wife manage her retail team. Treating one another as sounding boards or resources can help your work and marriage. And if either of you loses work due to the pandemic, this familiarity with each other's jobs will make it easier for you to help one another with job- or contract-hunting.

**Cultivate a common interest that gives you something to talk about other than work, chores or the children.** It is easy for domestic partnership to turn into an unending logistical negotiation, especially if you've now got to coordinate space- and duty-sharing around the clock. Even worse is an unending conversation about the pandemic, especially if you've got children listening in and picking up on your anxiety.

For years, our relationship was pretty much one long conversation about "Star Trek" (which is why the years between Voyager and Discovery were so hard for us). A measurable portion of our marriage was spent discussing the Oxford comma. If this isn't your idea of fun romantic chitchat, that is OK; the point is that it is ours, and you just need to find the topics that work for you.

**Give yourself permission to be unreasonable about the small things that irritate you.** The anxiety of the coronavirus crisis means that many of us are already in a state of high anxiety; now add to that stress all the small irritants that arise in sharing space so much of the time. That is why we need to cut each other some slack and do what we can to reduce the stress we cause our partners. It is better to be honest about what irritates each of you, and then work together to address those irritants. I've mostly broken Rob of his puns; he's convinced me to do my TV-watching with Bluetooth headphones on. That's just one of the irritants we've been able to remove with the help of technology, along with separate voice-mail boxes (so we don't delete each other's messages) and an Amazon Echo shopping list (so we don't forget the shopping list when we go to the store).

**Make a duty schedule.** Sit down and review your schedule and calendars at the beginning of each week and day. The weekly review is to catch any moments when you both have uninterruptible calls or other hard conflicts. The morning review is to remind each other of when you're more or less available that day.

If you're jointly responsible for children or pets, consider making a standing schedule so you each know when you can book calls without risk of interruption; then just treat your weekly review as a chance to catch any conflicts that have arisen.

Sharing calendars with each other can help with all of this, but it isn't a substitute for reviewing your calendars together—plus it is nice to know a little about what you each have on deck.

**Organize unconventional dates.** Yes, we do dinner-and-a-movie dates during normal times. But we also have a range of other date activities that we can still enjoy together now. For our most recent anniversary, we bought two copies of the same novella, and read it together over a romantic dinner; we stopped at the end of each chapter to talk about how it was going, and discovered we read at the exact same pace. Now we have a few paired novels to work through,

which makes a nice change from watching TV. We even have double dates with other couples, via HouseParty: We just put the computer on the table while we visit with friends over video.

**Connect through creativity.** At a time when so many of us are turning to creative outlets to handle our Covid stress or fill the hours that were once occupied by meetings or extracurriculars, a shared creative project is a great way to reconnect and regenerate.

My husband and I are creative in different ways: While we're both writers, he's also a cartoonist, a photographer and a comedian, whereas I am more crafty—I like to knit, sew and build things. Whenever we find a way to combine our creative outlets, it brings us closer. Appropriately enough, this often happens through whatever we do as a family Valentine (we do a different one every year). One year we made a video that combined my text with his cartoons. This year we made a streetside Valentine photo booth: I planned it, then turned to my husband to letter and illustrate the signage. We keep smaller creative projects on the go, too, like a 9-foot-tall folding coloring book that we pull out and doodle in while watching TV. And we love to sing together, even if the kids object.

**Make time for playtime.** Our relationship has always included a healthy dose of playfulness; before we had kids, we kept plush animal puppets in the back seat of our compact car, and whenever we got to a stoplight, we performed puppet shows out of the sunroof. That playfulness has served us well during this phase of hyperdomestic existence because we can turn just about anything into a game. When I (rhetorically) ask my husband a question like, “Guess who I just ran into at the grocery store?”, he always takes me literally, and the next thing you know, we're playing a game of 20 questions. And on a day-to-day level, we love playing silly word games like dueling over who can continue a string of synonyms the longest. These little giggles may not seem like much, but they help leaven the stresses and irritation that are an inevitable part of living in close quarters.

**Embrace co-dependence.** Maybe it isn't healthy to outsource even part of your mental health to your spouse, but one of the things I've come to appreciate about our round-the-clock togetherness is that my husband is good at quickly assuaging anxieties that would otherwise take hours to subside; I'll just replay a conversation or decision to him, and trust in his thoughtful reassurance. Rob seems to benefit from my hustle and time-management skills; talking through a task list or project plan can help him tackle his work more efficiently.

At this moment, our co-dependence has never served us better: When Rob lost a chunk of his work, I was able to help him quickly formulate a game plan, and when I started freaking out over my dystopian anxieties, only Rob's assurance could help—because I trusted him to be not only calm, but actually smart and honest in his assessment of the crisis.

There is nothing like a really difficult situation to make you realize who your partner truly is. I can't imagine going through this experience with anyone else. Covid has reminded me of Rob's uncomplaining capacity for hard work, his keen ability to analyze any situation, and most of all, his calm and steady heart. And even 24 hours a day wouldn't be too much of that.