

I Don't Know If My Relationship Will Survive the Pandemic

As domestic pressures mount inside homes, we could see an uptick in more breakups, separations, and divorces.

By Danielle Campoamor
THE NEW YORK TIMES
August 28, 2020

“I can't take it anymore,” I told my partner of seven years and the father of my two children. “Maybe we should start looking for separate places.”

Then I stormed out of our 700-square-foot apartment and took off down our quiet tree-lined street in the Bedford-Stuyvesant neighborhood of Brooklyn. Tears dampened the corners of my mask as I contemplated all that had brought me to this point: considering ending my relationship. It wasn't a twin loss at 19 weeks; it wasn't the several subsequent miscarriages; it wasn't the birth of our two children, a cross-country move, or a contentious N.F.C. Championship game between my beloved Seattle Seahawks and his Green Bay Packers in January that threatened the longevity of our relationship.

It was a pandemic that had left us sheltering in place for months, him risking exposure to continue to provide for his family as an essential worker, as I worked from home and picked up the parenting slack. Forced to live in close quarters without access to any outside support or reprieve, overwhelmed by the additional parenting responsibilities and unable to access any kind of affordable childcare, we were fighting more and understanding each other less. Amid all of this, I was left to contemplate whether or not my relationship could find a way to survive Covid-19.

I know I'm not alone. It's not uncommon for me to peruse social media and read a post from a mom asking for guidance as she prepares to tell her partner she wants to separate, or a mom filing divorce papers and asking single moms for advice. Studies have shown that financial problems, too much arguing and an unequal division in parenting and household responsibilities are among the top reasons couples separate or file for divorce.

Circumstances are ripe for the dissolution of parents' relationships with the unemployment rate at 10.2 percent, the country careening toward a recession and working moms — who were shouldering the majority of child-rearing duties before the onset of a public health crisis — being disproportionately affected by Covid-19.

Nearly one in 10 of married or partnered people in the United States say they are very likely to separate from their partner or spouse at least in part because of issues related to the pandemic, according to an Ipsos poll released Aug. 4. The same poll found one in five

married or partnered people were fighting more with their significant other during this time, and 30 percent of partnered or married respondents said they're more annoyed with their partner than usual. But the long-term effects of the pandemic on couples — however big or small — still remain unknown, and mostly anecdotal.

Aliette Carolan, a family law attorney practicing in Miami, said she has seen an increase in the number of couples filing for divorce. “If you were on the cusp of a divorce before Covid-19, this is certainly apt to push people to the edge and to fall off,” she said.

That's what happened to Melanie, 34, a business owner and mom of an almost 3-year-old boy, and her four-year-marriage. Melanie asked that her name not be used to protect the privacy of her family, as she and her husband have not yet shared their decision to separate with family members or friends. “I think the pandemic exacerbated existing problems within our relationship by forcing us to live together in what I've described as a ‘pressure cooker,’” she said.

“After the first two weeks, when the fun adventures of life without day care got boring and work started piling up, I realized it was over. I missed my friends. I missed being alone. I missed driving by myself — anywhere. I started to get really depressed, to the point where I felt like I wasn't a person anymore, and eventually I realized it was because all of my happiness came from things I did outside of my home, not from my relationship with my husband.”

Melanie said she would have panic attacks when she heard her husband wake up in the morning — a time she used to treasure when she commuted to work. “I knew I'd feel smothered for the rest of the day,” she said. “I started hiding in my bedroom after our son went to bed, just to avoid my husband.”

Cynthia Rogers, M.D., a child psychiatrist and associate professor of psychiatry and pediatrics at Washington University in St. Louis, explained: “The anxiety that many of us feel, particularly in the setting of the uncertainty from the pandemic, can place an enormous strain on relationships between parents, especially now that many are faced with making decisions about their children's schooling.”

Having conflicting beliefs on how to navigate the ongoing pandemic is certainly the main factor driving Natalie Reeves Billing, 38, a children's book author, social-media entrepreneur and mom of three who lives in Liverpool, to reconsider her marriage. Her husband, who is 21 years her senior, has been fixated on the Covid-19 crisis since its onset, and has acted, she said, extreme in his precautions.

“He is a practical and logical person,” she told me. “But his discoveries scared him, and he began to unintentionally pass those fears onto our kids. After over five months of isolation, I am ready to follow my heart and look at mental health as the most important thing for me and my children. I know there are horrible decisions ahead for me, and that is causing a lot of pain. I value stability, and family is very important to me — I came from a broken home. I

have no wish to live separately from my husband, but I also won't allow my children's mental health to suffer."

In addition to an elongated period of trauma and the politicization of the virus, which has made it that much harder for parents to agree on what is best for themselves and their children, the ongoing disparity in the distribution of parental labor has also increased the chances of relationship strife.

"The extra burden on women to manage the household and children, and the expectation that this is the case, explicitly or not, can create an unequal power dynamic that values one person's work more than the others," said Jessi Gold, M.D., a psychiatrist and assistant professor for the Department of Psychiatry at Washington University in St. Louis. "Resentment can fester and lead to strain in relationships, particularly the longer this goes on."

Some of the disparity in parenting roles is unavoidable, but some isn't. Dr. Rogers encourages couples to discuss "ways the partner with fewer responsibilities can both acknowledge and support the parent who is taking on more tasks." An open and direct line of communication is also vital for parents who know they are going to separate or are in the process of filing for divorce.

"I think the No. 1 component of a well-done, healthy parenting plan is flexibility," Carolan says. "We are living in times when parents need to be flexible with each other and have to take each other into consideration because a healthy co-parenting relationship is what is in the best interest of all children."

And since financial uncertainty, travel restrictions and an increased difficulty in accessing childcare can make separation or divorce difficult, if not impossible, a couple's flexibility and communication is more key than ever. Discussing the realities of their situation has been pivotal for Melanie and her husband, as they have been forced to truly consider the financial implications of separating during a pandemic.

"I own my business, and it's on really shaky ground right now due to Covid shutdown," she said. "My husband works for a start-up that is marginally healthier, but also shaky. The last thing I want to do is leave and then lose my job. I'm terrified of not having health insurance, and I'm terrified that I'll feel pressured to start dating or even marry someone right away for financial security if I do [stop working]. That's just not something I'm willing to consider. So, I want to make sure I have a plan and the resources I need first. Divorce or separation is something that's coming down the road, but once we know what childcare and the economy looks like."

Stacy D. Phillips, a family law lawyer and partner at Blank Rome in Los Angeles, explained that delaying separation or divorce proceedings is also not uncommon. "People's incomes are uncertain, and house values and other asset values have shrunk. People are unsure of what they can afford." And while Phillips says some couples are taking advantage of a partner's

financial hardship and divorcing while assets are down, others “want to wait to deal with splitting [when] a sense of ‘normalcy’ returns.”

As for me and my family, I don't know what will happen in the future — with the pandemic, my first grader's school schedule or my partner. When we found out I was pregnant with twins mere months into our relationship, we told one another that if we could get through this, we could get through anything. And we've said the same thing anytime a difficult situation or traumatic event has threatened our relationship. But he is still leaving the safety of our home every day to go to work at a facility where people have died from Covid-19. And I'm still stuck at home with two children, tasked with helping my son learn remotely and tending to a needy 1-year-old as I work from home. The pandemic has forced us to face existing issues in our relationship, have difficult conversations and be even more thoughtful in how we communicate.

I can only hope, like our efforts to help mitigate the spread of Covid-19, that it's enough.