

The Strain the Covid Pandemic Is Putting on Marriages

Coronavirus stress has produced a pressure cooker inside homes, hurting even strong partnerships and, experts say, likely breaking others

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For Kristin and Ilya Shapiro, the Covid pandemic has created new tensions. Lately, the spouses have argued about Mr. Shapiro's travel schedule: Ms. Shapiro doesn't like that it creates child-care headaches. But Mr. Shapiro says it's important to his work as a Washington, D.C., think tank director, and offers emotional respite too.

"I would be lying if I said there haven't been tears," says Ms. Shapiro, a 37-year-old attorney. She is confident they will make it through together. But for now, their stress level is high. "This has been a very difficult period," she says.

Even in the best of times, marriage and relationships are hard work. But the pandemic has produced a pressure cooker inside homes, straining even strong partnerships and, experts say, likely breaking others. Families are cooped up, with spouses trying to work while also taking care of their kids. Job losses, caring for at-risk elderly parents, arguments over what's safe, and disagreements over school reopening are all taking a toll.

"Where there was a crack, there is now a rupture," says Kathryn Smerling, a family therapist in New York City. Dr. Smerling says she has gotten about 20 calls for appointments from couples in the past four months, compared with a handful in the same period a year ago.

Susan Myres, president of the American Academy of Matrimonial Lawyers, which represents 1,600 members nationwide, says she expects new divorce filings to increase somewhere between 10% and 25% in the second half of this year. For much of the lockdown, most state courts weren't processing divorce filings or struggled to manage case flow, so it isn't currently possible to assemble meaningful nationwide statistics, she says. But anecdotally, she says, member attorneys have received more queries than normal since March.

More than one-quarter of adults said they know a couple likely to break up, separate or divorce when the coronavirus pandemic ends, according to an Ipsos poll of 1,005 people conducted at the end of July. In White Plains, N.Y., divorce attorney Leslie Montanile says her "what-if" calls—free consultations for clients putting out an initial feeler—have totaled 20 in the past four months compared with about three in that time last year.

Sodoma Law, a family law practice based in Charlotte, N.C., consulted with 263 new clients on divorce issues from April to July compared with 217 clients in that same period a year ago, says Nicole Sodoma, founder and managing principal of the firm. Summertime is usually when separating parents make the transition to two households, giving themselves time to acclimate before the school year begins. But courts have either been closed or backed up, she says, and many clients have felt stuck. “It’s added stress to an already stressful situation,” she says.

In some cases, tensions can mount into violence. The National Domestic Violence Hotline says total contacts—calls, texts and online chats—increased 9% to more than 62,000 in the period from mid-March to mid-May, compared with the same period a year earlier.

“When couples have external stress, it affects how they interact with each other,” says Paula Pietromonaco, a professor emerita at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, who wrote a recent analysis on the potential impact of Covid-19 on marriages for American Psychologist. “Interactions become less constructive. People are likelier to blame their partner.”

Dr. Pietromonaco says research has demonstrated the toll that outside stresses can take on a couple’s relationship. One recent study published in the Journal of Family Psychology observed 414 newlywed couples. Spouses who experienced greater external stress, from work stressors to financial problems, had lower relationship satisfaction than couples with fewer external stressors. “People spend years regulating their relationships—when to be together, when to be apart. They come to some kind of understanding or peace about that,” says Richard Weissbourd, a family psychologist at the Harvard Graduate School of Education. Now, quarantines and other disruptions have scrambled all of that. “You can’t regulate when to be apart and when to be together. Sometimes you confront things that you avoided for many years,” he says.

Even in the most communicative partnerships, there is more stress. “We have a strong marriage,” says Courtney Westling, a public-schools official in Portland, Ore. “But this has not been easy.” She and her husband of seven years, Mike, have spent recent months negotiating new work spaces in their home as well as child care for their sons, ages 3 and 5.

Before, routines gave them their own separate lives—and something to come home and talk about while eating dinner or after putting the kids to bed. “That was our time together,” Ms. Westling says. Now, she says, “I don’t have that time with my husband,” she says. “Everything is harder.”

Mr. Westling, a communications consultant, agrees. In a recent heart-to-heart with his wife, he said: “I am doing my best and it feels like my best isn’t very good right now.”

“There was a time at the end of the day when you would talk about some important things...It was, ‘Well, what’s been tough for you?’ ” he says. “Now it just feels like everything is tough.”

They have argued more about which parent is handling distance learning and how to expand their quarantine bubble, Ms. Westling says. She says their marriage remains strong, and they haven’t had any make-or-break fights. “It’s all things around the edges, but when you add them all up it’s a lot.”

Handling Pandemic Stress in Your Relationship

The Covid pandemic has put strain on households and is testing marriages and relationships. Here are a few strategies from experts to help.

Keep in mind that this is a unique situation. Marci Gleason, a professor in human development at the University of Texas at Austin who studies relationships, collected two weeks of daily diaries from more than 80 couples in April and May. Preliminary findings show that couples who point to Covid-19 as a principal reason for their current relationship difficulties—rather than some flaw in their partner—are faring better. “When your spouse does something that upsets you, it’s easy to veer into blaming it on some character flaw. That is not a good sign,” she says. Couples that tend to see “situational attribution,” she says, do better. “If I have the mentality that this is because of the situation and not my partner, that should be beneficial.”

Think twice about big relationship decisions during this time. White Plains, N.Y., divorce attorney Leslie Montanile says she is advising potential clients under marital duress to take a step back and pause. Recognize that everyone is under added strain, and that a partner’s on-the-surface behavior may really be about something deeper. “Maybe what you don’t recognize is that your spouse is actually anxious about the uncertainty, maybe his job or some underlying health issue, and it causes them to act out. But that doesn’t mean it’s the end of a marriage.” That’s particularly true in a relationship that had previously been solid, she says. “Recognize that we are not living in ordinary times,” she says.

Don’t forget to play. The world feels heavy right now, and so it is more important than ever to find joy. Take advantage of the added time with your partner to find moments to laugh and have fun. And if those moments don’t come to you, make them. “You need to create moments of play,” says Kathryn Smerling, a family therapist in New York City. “Go out for a run, listen to a podcast together, spend time in nature. Play is not only how children learn, but it is also how we refresh ourselves.” Creating lighthearted moments is also a useful tool in reminding ourselves what attracted us in the first place to our partners. “Remember that this is the same person, but this is just a short period in time.”