

# DISCONNECTION DURING A PANDEMIC:

## Connecting During Quarantine, and Beyond

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Many couples are struggling within their relationships right now. The added pressures from the effects of the pandemic, financial, emotional, recreational, have hit couples hard. People are simply trying to get through the day, let alone finding time for connection. Given all of the stressors that are occurring simultaneously, couples may have a hard time managing their relationship. Most of the focus is needed for childcare or work-related responsibilities, leaving romantic relationships vulnerable to disconnection. So, what happens when a source of comfort becomes the source of tension? This article will discuss what happens within couple relationships during times of distress and consider ways to maintain connection during a pandemic.

### THE IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON COUPLE RELATIONSHIPS

The global impacts of COVID-19 have been extensive on several levels, including health, economic, and

social systems (Stanley & Markman, 2020). Individuals, couples, and families have been greatly affected through various challenges to overall well-being both relationally and emotionally. There is an overarching sense of fear and uncertainty in today's environment, exacerbated by mixed messages about health and safety (Stanley & Markman, 2020). People are struggling and surviving on a day-to-day basis.

Stress puts pressure on relationships. During times of strain, such as a global pandemic, couples may experience more conflict within their relationships (Stanley & Markman, 2020). For example, the increased amount of time couples are spending together with little separation throughout the day may lead to more arguments. Spending more time in the family home could lead to greater conflict around household roles and division of labor. Couples may also have less bandwidth for effective communication due to the demands of work, children, and finances.



Although this period of staying at home may be beneficial for some, many are experiencing a disruption in their daily routines (Tsai, 2020). Couples are attempting to work from home and having trouble maintaining a work-life balance. There is a lack of distinction as to when the workday ends. Little to no commute, and accessibility to work-related tasks, is allowing for individuals to overextend themselves in multiple areas. This leaves couples feeling burned out, resulting in minimal time for meaningful connection and leading to an increase in conflict.

Couples with children are also having to help navigate childcare and virtual schooling. In addition to the added challenges of the pandemic, common self-care strategies and ways that couples connect have been minimized or made obsolete. For example, couples who found connection through travel or going out to dinner are no longer able to engage in those pleasurable activities. Partners are feeling additional amounts of stress and limited outlets to reduce that stress, paving the way for an increase in conflict, criticism, and blame (Tsai, 2020).

## **BRIEF OVERVIEW OF ATTACHMENT THEORY**

Attachment affects several aspects of couple relationships. Attachment has been shown to play a role in relationship satisfaction, sexual satisfaction, and communication (Yoo et al., 2014). Attachment theory is a way of describing how people connect. Human beings are social creatures born with an instinctive system that motivates us to seek closeness to others during times of stress and need (Bowlby, 1973). The goal of the system is to maintain a connection that provides a sense of safety and security. When an

individual encounters a real or perceived threat, the attachment system is activated, which leads the person to re-establish physical closeness or connection so that felt security is obtained (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2014).

Attachment bonds help loved ones feel emotionally safe with one another and help to sustain a connection. These bonds are often guided by early interactions with caregivers or attachment figures where one develops working models of self and others (Bowlby, 1973). Working models, or internal representations, help guide behaviors and expectations around relationships. They influence perceptions about relationships and future partners. Working models provide a framework for understanding ourselves and others within the context of a relationship. If caregivers are viewed as responsive and supportive in times of need, an individual develops sense of connectedness or secure attachment, and sees others as a source of safety and comfort (Johnson, 2020). A secure attachment provides a sense of interdependence and comfort combined with intimacy. However, if attachment figures are not seen as available, then there is a lack of felt security within relationships and others may be viewed as inaccessible. When this occurs, adaptive styles of attachment, anxious or avoidant, are developed (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2014). Anxious and avoidant attachment styles may be seen as strategies for emotion regulation during times of separation distress. Anxious styles tend to exhibit overt behaviors, through verbal and non-verbal cues, as a way to elicit a comforting response from the attachment figure. Avoidant individuals tend to limit emotional engagement and minimize attachment needs (Johnson, 2020). These styles are often maintained throughout relationships into adulthood.

## **INFLUENCE OF ATTACHMENT STYLES ON COUPLE RELATIONSHIPS DURING COVID-19**

Attachment styles are important because they play a role in the quality and stability of an adult romantic relationships. In adulthood, our attachment styles impact our interactions within relationships. Attachment styles in couples can suggest patterns of conflict. For example, the pursuer-distancer dynamic (Gottman & Silver, 2015), which looks like a cycle of attack and defend, is common to the anxious-avoidant dyad. This dyad typically consists of one partner exhibiting an anxious attachment style and the other an avoidant style. Ongoing, negative cycles of pursuer-distancer interactions make the relationship become a source of tension. When this happens, partners tend to turn away from one another rather than towards one another.

Adult attachment is categorized as either secure or insecure, with the insecure being broken down into anxious or avoidant. How we relate to others may be influenced by our attachment style. Securely attached individuals tend to have positive working models of self and others and view themselves as lovable (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2014). They can connect with their partner by using effective strategies to get their needs met. For example, someone who is securely attached might say to their partner, “I am feeling disconnected from you, I would like to spend time together tonight.”

Individuals with insecure attachment often experience a fear of connection and rejection that negatively impacts emotional bonds. They feel that they cannot rely on others for their safety. They may believe that they are unlovable or that they do not need others. Individuals with anxious attachment styles feel a sense

of worry that a partner will not be available in times of need. This is often based on the individual’s own self-doubts about their worthiness of love. People with anxious attachment styles tend to use hyperactivating strategies, or pursuing behaviors, to cope with emotions (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2014). Pursuing behaviors are seen as attempts to gain connection with a partner. However, they tend to come off as aggressive and have the opposite effect on the intended goal. The avoidant style is characterized by mistrust and an individual’s need to maintain independence, emotionally and physically (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2014). Avoidantly attached individuals tend to use deactivating strategies which is marked by distancing from other or avoiding closeness within relationships. They often withdraw or shutdown during conflict.

There is also information that indicates attachment style is associated with the quality of communication within a relationship (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2014). Anxiously attached individuals may inaccurately assess their partner’s emotions and intentions due to worries about being rejected or criticized. They may view a negative emotion, such as anger, as a sign of disconnection from their partner and begin to exhibit pursuing behaviors. An avoidantly attached individual may have difficulty expressing and attending to their partner’s needs and feelings (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2014). Increased and escalation of conflict between partners is also evidenced among insecure attachment styles. This may be due in part to lack of emotion regulation strategies and ineffective conflict management patterns, which in turn may lead to negative interactions. Take the case of Nancy and Tom, for example:

Nancy and Tom are a heterosexual couple who have been married for 12 years. Nancy tends to display an anxious attachment style and Tom an avoidant style. Tom, a V.P. of sales, has been frustrated with work over the last several months and has been concerned that he may be laid off due to his company's financial instability. Nancy is a teacher in a local middle school. She feels overwhelmed by the uncertainty of teaching in-person or virtually. She is also concerned about her elderly parents who are helping to watch their children while Nancy and Tom are working. Nancy asked Tom to help with the dishes while she was putting the children to bed. Tom, feeling overwhelmed and like he is failing, snapped at Nancy and said, "I'll get to it later." After putting the children down, Nancy asked Tom again to do the dishes. Tom ignored Nancy's request and went into his office to be alone. Nancy begins to notice a sense of panic in her chest. She approaches the office door and, without knocking, walks into the room. She asks Tom, "What's wrong? Why are you upset?" Tom answers, "Nothing is wrong, I'm fine." Nancy hears the dismissive tone in Tom's voice and says, "Why are you always acting like this?" To which Tom responds, "Why are you always nagging me about something?" Nancy hears this and begins to yell at her husband about how she does everything around the house and how she feels it all falls on her. However, when she begins to raise her voice, Tom withdraws and stops listening to what Nancy is saying to him. Realizing Tom is not hearing her, Nancy feels dismissed and furthers her verbal attack on Tom.

Intensified by the pandemic, this case example demonstrates the multilayered challenges couples face. It also acknowledges there are also new difficulties that people are encountering. Attachment styles may play a key role in how couples are facing these challenges. Individuals with secure attachments may be able to turn toward one another during this difficult time and offer a sense of support and safety. Those with an insecure attachments may feel as though they cannot rely on their partners. Their fears of abandonment or closeness may escalate negative interactions and further the gap of disconnection.

In addition to the struggles couples have encountered, the strain of the pandemic may also lower relationship satisfaction. Lower relationship satisfaction may be due to limited involvement in social engagement, physical and recreational activities, and lack of sexual intimacy. The current situation may also be emphasizing differences in a variety of areas including stress management, communication, and conflict styles. Problems in the relationship that were occurring before the pandemic seem to be heightened, while new issues, such as a lack of privacy due to shared spaces, are developing. When there is less support and more strain, insecure styles of attachment may be heightening negative feelings and conflict in relationships.

## **MAINTAINING CONNECTION DURING COVID-19**

Research demonstrates that connection with others is an important buffer against negative psychological consequences during times of crisis (Wang et al., 2018). Some suggestions to help couples maintain connection during this difficult time are listed below:

## TIPS FOR MAINTAINING CONNECTION

**1. This is a time to be creative.** Couples need to figure out how to spend time together in unique ways since options are limited outside the home. Research demonstrates that couples who engage in new or novel activities have higher levels of relationship satisfaction. Trying new activities together such as yoga, walking, hiking, cooking or baking, playing games, or starting a book club can build excitement within the relationship.

**2. Give each other space.** It is important to allow one another to take time for the self and for self-care. This “me” time allows individuals to reflect on their values and what is important to them. It provides a sense of autonomy that can foster connectedness in a relationship.

**3. Learn how to better manage conflict.** When the pursuer-distancer dynamic takes over, couples can get stuck and tend to focus on one point or topic. If an argument is not going anywhere or escalating, this is a sign that a time out is needed. Let your partner know, in a kind way, that you need some time to calm down. Agree on a period of time apart, at least 20 minutes, and engage separately in activities that will decrease agitation, such as breathing exercises or meditation. When you are both ready, revisit the conversation. Keep in mind, the person who asked for the time out should be the one to reach out to their partner to re-establish contact.

**4. Give each other a break, literally and figuratively.** Take turns with household responsibilities or parenting-related activities. Try to remember that you are each doing the best you can under the circumstances.

**5. Your partner is not your enemy.** Know that you are in this together. Although it may feel like they might be purposely upsetting you at times, they are experiencing similar thoughts and feelings of loss and sadness. This is a good time to join together and remember that the pandemic is the enemy, not your partner.

**6. Focus on nurturing your relationship to the best of your ability.** Kindness and appreciation go a long way. Trying to recognize your partner’s contributions and saying “thank you” can have a positive impact on both of you.

**7. Be mindful.** It is important to acknowledge our role in interactions. Awareness and acknowledgment of your own reactions and behaviors are central to moving past conflict.

**8. Seek out couples therapy for additional support.** Sometimes we need help to get where we need to be and, if this is case, a therapist is a good resource. To learn more about how therapy can help strengthen your relationship, please contact The Family Institute at 847-733-4300 or [www.family-institute.org](http://www.family-institute.org).

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