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Family Focus

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Relationships can be strained during the best of times. Typically, most couples find ways both to spend time together and also to pursue separate interests and activities. With the onset of COVID-19 recommendations and restrictions, some couples have found their relationships tested as they necessarily spend increased time together in a more isolated capacity. With more limited social interactions and fewer fun events to enjoy and look forward to, couples may take out their frustrations on each other. Here are some issues that I have seen in the past few months:

Increased stress for couples due to juggling work commitments, child care and home schooling, and lack of alone time

A big strain has been on couples who both work full-time and have young children who require attention. Prior to the virus, these couples had reliable day care. Some can now continue with their arrangements. But others are reluctant to send their children back to a day care setting or have their nanny or babysitter return to their residence. Fear of exposure to the virus for themselves or older members of their family or their child interferes with a smooth transition back to day care provisions.

One couple, whom I first met with for couples work in April, both have high-level responsible positions that require 50- to 60-hour work weeks. "Kevin" and "Jocelyn" have an 18-month-old child, "Beau," who had been in day care for over a year prior to the coronavirus. Kevin has diabetes and must now be extremely careful. Both Kevin and Jocelyn currently work from home and alternate caring for their toddler.

This couple, who have been together for eight years, never experienced relationship problems until recently. They were extremely stressed because of their job demands and were much more irritable with each other while trying to juggle childcare responsibilities. Instead of working together as a team, they argued and blamed and generally had a high level of resentment toward each other. When both partners are very stressed, the ability to feel compassion for the other is compromised. Not having much individual time takes its toll as well. If life suddenly becomes all about work - job, childcare, household chores - our mood and outlook can be greatly affected.

One solution was to develop a daily schedule for each partner that allows for work, childcare, and some individual time. Kevin and Jocelyn could try to cover for each other occasionally, but it was important to delineate time they each could count on for their specific needs. Other sessions addressed their unexpressed, distressing emotions - feeling helpless, overwhelmed, worried and fearful. Once they understood the larger picture of what was triggering their negative interaction, they could feel more united and supportive of each other.

Strains on your relationship while being socially isolated

There can be more pressure on your relationship now that you need to rely more on each other for companionship. One drawback is that personality characteristics can become more evident and pronounced. Existing conflicts can be heightened with more exposure to each other and because there are not as many ways to avoid them. One client, "Liz" complains that her husband has now become more of a worrier. She is already somewhat worried about their finances and health considerations for her elderly father and for themselves. Liz actively tries not to worry, however, since she knows it doesn't help and only makes her unhappy. So, when her husband, "Mitch," uses her as a sounding board for all of his worries, she has a difficult time listening and giving support. She knows he has more time on his hands for reflection and few others to turn to. I suggested that she encourage him to also talk to a therapist during this time, both to alleviate some of his anxiety and also to help Liz.

It is important to incorporate others into your lives at this time. Whether you visit remotely or in person at a distance, it is up to all of us to maintain relationships with others as best we can. If you are accustomed to a variety of people and activities in your life, it is understandable that you miss having a full life. This is a time of challenge to try to find ways both to fulfill yourself and to help keep your relationship strong.

Disagreement on precautions for safety from the coronavirus

This is a new development that I've never dealt with before as a therapist - couples and families living together who have different views on how to be safe in view of a potentially dangerous virus. I have seen and heard of many heated disagreements, all of which are really fear-based and not about control. Children and teens may regard parents' concerns and restrictions as a way for them to be intrusively controlling during this time. This viewpoint is very unfair to parents and needs to be explained and challenged. Older children need to read and hear much of the information available about the virus so that it comes from an objective source and not just from their "overly-involved" parents.

When couples differ on how to manage during this time, the cost in relationship satisfaction can be considerable. "Brad" and "Linda" have been married for 44 years and are both in the high-risk population for the virus. We have been working together for over a year, and now the issue of safety has loomed large. Linda wants to be extremely cautious and not take any risks. This means not venturing out among people to shop, go to restaurants, or socialize. Brad has a different attitude and thinks the incidence and potential dangers of the coronavirus are somewhat exaggerated. Linda is afraid that if Brad contracts the virus because he's decided to play golf or fly to visit his brother, then she will be at risk. She is worried for both of them and would like Brad to be more concerned as well.

Because of their different approaches, both Linda and Brad built up resentment toward each other. Each felt the other didn't care enough about his or her feelings. Linda was too fearful to do anything different, while Brad felt too stifled. The only solution was to compromise. Brad agreed to list current activities he wanted to engage in, and Linda agreed to select three of them that she could try to tolerate. Brad agreed to take all of the safety precautions that Linda urged. And Brad also agreed that he would not do anything that caused Linda to have deep fear; in other words, he was willing to give her veto power. With each yielding some and showing understanding of the other's needs, this couple has been able to overcome much of their virus-related conflict.

If you are experiencing difficulty in your relationship at this time, it is important for one or both of you to get some professional help.

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