

Decreasing the Strain on Your Relationship During the Pandemic

You Should Know

Even the healthiest relationships are experiencing strain during the COVID-19 pandemic. If you are sheltered-in-place or quarantined, you are certainly spending more time with your partner – perhaps more than ever before. While it is great to have support and comfort when you are facing these difficult times, the stress may also increase the likelihood for arguments and confrontation. When physical and emotional space is limited, even trivial complaints and disagreements can get blown out of proportion. Your partner might bear the brunt of your anxiety, anger, and upset.

A study published in the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* found that relationships exposed to high stress for long periods of time become strained, regardless of how strong each partner's relationship skills. The study recommended that each partner identify ways to successfully manage stress so they can bring their best selves to the relationship. Additionally, you can identify the positive aspects to being cooped-up with your partner. More time together means more time to focus on your relationship, reconnect, and increase intimacy – working together as a team to cope with these distressing and uncertain times.

What can you do to decrease the strain on your relationship? Here are some suggestions:

- **Voice your needs clearly and kindly by remaining calm and resisting the temptation to blame.** Pause throughout the day to reflect on how you are feeling and what you need.
- **Listen with respect, patience, and kindness.** Identify common ground. Reveal your vulnerability and fears to each other, and soften your stance to stay connected. Schedule 30 minutes each day to focus on your relationship—avoid talking about the pandemic or tomorrow's plans. Discussing “what ifs” can increase anxiety and fuel fear, leading to more conflict.
- **When things get heated take time to calm down.** Identify when you are stressed and take a step back. When you are upset it is normal to resort to less healthy ways of coping and expressing yourself. You might become irritable, critical, short-tempered, or tearful. You might even snap at your partner, or overact to minor misunderstandings. Instead, express how you are feeling and explain that you do not want to say anything you will regret later.
- **Express gratitude.**
- **Take care of yourself and tend to your own needs.** Nurture yourself and your body by getting enough sleep, exercising, eating well, and maintaining strong relationships with family and friends (virtually or by phone). Even incorporating small habits like meditating each morning for 5 minutes, doing a 10-minute stretching video before bed, or taking 2 minutes to write in a journal will be helpful.
- **Create separate workspaces.** If possible, work in different rooms. Use noise-canceling headphones to focus on your tasks. If you have kids, designate “shifts” for childcare and household tasks.

- **Have your own time and space away from your partner and kids.** You each may need to escape to a quiet spot at different times. It might be helpful to plan breaks from your partner, and time to spend together, to avoid hurt feelings.
- **Plan a project together.** The more accomplished you feel as a team, the more connected you will feel. Identify household tasks you can tackle together.
- **Rekindle romance.** Recreate “date night” at home with candles and soft music, savoring a quiet dinner after the kids have gone to bed.
- **Make small gestures to brighten your partner’s day.**
- **Respect differing coping styles.** You and your partner most likely cope with stress in very different ways. You might be calm and level-headed, while your partner is anxious or high-strung. Your differing styles can balance each other out – the more grounded partner can offer humor, while the anxious partner can ensure that health and safety guidelines are in place. View the situation from your partner’s point of view and limit your judgment of how he or she copes.

Your ideas:

What to Do

Referring to the list above, write down things you can do to decrease the strain on your relationship.

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____

Now, answer the following questions and then complete the chart on the following page.

What are some ways that you and your partner’s coping styles complement each other?

Where do you most enjoy spending time alone?

What are some of your favorite self-care activities?

What emotions do you most frequently experience when stressed?

Write down at least three of your partner's traits or characteristics you are grateful for during this stressful time.

What are some ways you can express gratitude to your partner with words or actions?

For the next week, try a few of the activities to decrease the strain on your relationship, and track how they affected your ability to cope. Note the impact you noticed in your relationship.

| Activity or Technique | How I Felt Afterward | How it Affected My Ability to Cope with Stress | Impact on Relationship |
|--|--|--|--|
| <i>Expressed gratitude to my partner for his sense of humor</i> | <i>Even more grateful</i> | <i>Put things into perspective; I felt less stress</i> | <i>My partner appreciated it when I expressed my gratitude</i> |
| <i>Did some journaling about my anxiety over being cooped-up at home</i> | <i>Felt really good to get things off my chest</i> | <i>I included ideas for problem solving and immediately felt some relief</i> | <i>I shared my ideas with my partner</i> |
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Reflections on This Exercise

How did this exercise help improve your relationship with your partner?

What did you learn about yourself or about your partner that surprised you?

Describe whether or not the strain on your romantic relationship decreased. If not, what can you do differently? If so, what activities will you continue to engage in to ensure you are effectively coping with stress? Explain.
