



COUPLES & COVID



Did you know that there are well-researched predictors of whether a marriage will last or not?

Dr John Gottman and Dr Amir Levine spent over 25 years studying these predictors and found that they can predict with up to 80% accuracy as to whether a relationship will last. They say that for every negative factor in a marriage, there needs to be five positive ones in order for it to survive. And that's without the added stress of a pandemic!

COVID-19 has brought much uncertainty to our lives including illness, grief, and added responsibilities such as caring for family members or home-schooling. One of the biggest factors in relational disputes is finances and COVID-19 has seen financial strain and both the threats and reality of unemployment to many families. These external stressors can make us less likely to be able to communicate in helpful ways. You may have noticed that you have become more critical and argumentative within your relationship, or even unable to attend to your spouse's needs as you navigate your own fears and stress.

These big moments in history affect marriages differently. Terrorist attacks have seen divorce rates decline, as people sought comfort and closeness, whereas hurricanes saw marriage, divorce and birth rates increase – as the pressure of rebuilding the community takes its toll on marriages. Regardless of whether you feel the impacts for months and years to come or draw closer together during this time there are some helpful tips as you move forward.

Firstly, relationships can survive COVID-19 despite the challenges and adverse effects on marriage and families. One of the most important components of healthy relationships is that individuals see their partners as willing and wanting to respond to their needs.

Secondly, in order to be a healthy couple, learning how to take care of your own mental health needs and stress levels becomes very important. Check in with your stress levels and ensure that you are staying mentally well and healthy. There are plenty of resources to help you navigate how to do so and dealing with your own stress is a priority if you are to have a healthy and meaningful relationship and home life. <https://www.masterspsychology.com.au/blog/2019/10/28/keep-yourstress-bucket-from-overflowing>

When you need to resolve a problem, choose your moment. Don't try to do so if either you or your spouse is overly stressed or tired. Focus on seeking to understand your spouse, and the essence of what they are saying is key and then take a collaborative problem-solving approach to the issue. While communication and resolving conflict is not easy, there are many resources that can help.

Did you know that having a strong relationship at home makes you healthier? And while people fundamentally need belonging and are going to cope best when they are in close connection with significant others, it may be helpful to lower expectations and extend grace to others during stressful times. Sometimes we all need the benefit of the doubt.

Here are some things to watch for that are likely going to be at an all-time high during times of stress and challenge. They make up the negative factors that need balancing out with positive factors that determine relationship success.

1. Criticism

try not to criticise your partner and view their personality as defective in some way. E.g. "Can't you see I'm upset? What is wrong with you?"

Do: try and communicate what you want without criticism. E.g. "Honey I need to talk something through with you as I'm upset?"

2. Defensiveness

when a problem of some sort is discussed, try not to be defensive and meet the complaint with a counter-complaint or whinge.

Do: Listen for the part you can take responsibility for and apologise.

(See Podcast: Unlocking Us by Brene Brown and Harriet Lerner – I'm sorry: How To Apologise & Why it Matters. Part 1 & 2).

3. Disrespect and Contempt

be careful not to take a stance where you view yourself as higher than the other person. Contempt or disrespect occurs when one-party views themselves as higher than the other and talks down to the partner - this includes name calling.

Do: Show respect verbally and communicate that you are proud of the person you love. Find opportunity to praise and appreciate your spouse which communicates affection and respect (this goes for children too).

4. Stonewalling

try not to put up walls so that the speaker is ignored or doesn't feel heard. If the speaker does not feel heard they are likely to "amp" up the volume of the complaint and continue until they get a response/reaction.

Do: Acknowledge when you are being spoke to, even the minor seemingly insignificant comments. E.g. "Oooh look at that tree", rather than a sound or grunt, respond with a comment, "Yeah its beautiful" – this is what is referred to as turning towards.

While we are all doing the best we can as we face unprecedented times, often we need to give some attention and reflection to those areas in our life that really matter most - and relationships are no exception. For further information on how you can improve your relationship see, Making Marriage work by Dr John Gottman www.youtube.com/watch?v=AKTyPgwfPgg and additionally their website is full of wonderful resources www.gottman.com

Be blessed!

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