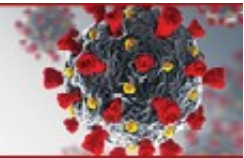


# APS Backgrounder Series: Psychological Science and COVID-19: Pandemic Effects on Marriage and Relationships

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Human behavior is one of the most important factors dictating the severity of pandemics for both the spread of the disease and the psychological impacts it triggers, such as anxiety, isolation, and uncertainty. Through an ongoing series of backgrounders, the Association for Psychological Science (APS) is exploring many of the psychological factors that can help the public understand and collectively combat the spread of COVID-19. Each backgrounder features the assessments, research, and recommendations of a renowned subject expert in the field of psychological science. This content has not undergone separate peer review and is provided as a service to the

public during this time of pandemic.

*Expert commentary from [Paula Pietromonaco](#), professor emerita at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, whose primary research focus is to understand the processes through which interactions in marital relationships shape each partner's emotional and physical health.*

## **What does psychological science say about external stressors on marriage and other close relationships?**

A key component of close, well-functioning romantic relationships is that individuals see their partners as accepting, concerned with their welfare, understanding, and supportive. That is, they see their partners as responsive to their needs (Reis et al., 2004). The presence of external stressors—such as unemployment, economic hardship, and work stress—create a context in which it is more difficult for partners to be responsive to each other's needs. When faced with external stress, individuals are more likely to communicate in ways that are overly critical or argumentative. They also tend to blame their partner and have more difficulty listening to their partner's concerns and taking their partner's perspective. Over time, they can become less satisfied with their partner and their relationship (Bodenmann et al., 2007, 2010; Neff & Karney, 2004; Bodenmann et al., 2015).

Fortunately, these negative consequences are not inevitable responses to external stressors. Couples can strive to communicate and behave in ways that are typical of successful marriages, including overlooking the occasional critical remark, forgiving hurtful behavior, taking the partner's perspective, and avoiding expressions of blame, hostility, and contempt. Marriages also benefit when partners engage in activities that are relatively low in stress—such as playing a game together—or sharing positive experiences and memories, which enhance intimacy and closeness (Girme et al., 2014; Gable et al., 2004).

## **How does this relate to epidemics?**

Epidemics are a form of external stress for couples and families, especially for those who are more severely affected (e.g., those who develop the disease, become unemployed, experience major financial losses). As with any stressor, spouses who can communicate more effectively when problem-solving, who can be responsive and supportive to their partner, and who can still engage in some positive interactions despite the stress of the epidemic will be more likely to maintain a good relationship.

Although we know little about how epidemics might shape longer-term outcomes such as rates of divorce, marriage, and birth, research on the effects of disasters, which are similar in some respects to epidemics, suggests that the nature of a disaster may determine how it affects marriage-related demographics. After Hurricane Hugo, for example, divorce, marriage, and birth rates increased in the following year in areas most affected by the hurricane compared to areas that were not affected (Cohan & Cole, 2002). In contrast, after terrorist attacks (9/11 and the 1995 Oklahoma City bombing), divorce rates actually declined (Cohan et al., 2009; Nakonezny et al., 2004). These divergent effects may reflect differences in the contexts of the two types of disasters (Cohan et al., 2009). The terrorist attacks involved significant loss of life as well as uncertainty and fear regarding future attacks, and in the face of

such severe threats, people typically seek physical closeness, security, and comfort from close others. This idea would explain why couples might turn to each other and be less likely to divorce following the terrorist attacks. Hurricane Hugo, by contrast, did not involve a large number of deaths but did require rebuilding communities over a longer time period, which was likely a taxing, more chronic stress on marriages and families that contributed to the likelihood of divorce. How epidemics shape marriage-related demographics is apt to depend on the specific contextual features of the epidemic.

## **How does this relate to COVID-19, considering the course of events to date?**

The current situation with COVID-19 shares features with both natural disasters (e.g., the effects unfold over a period of months and possibly years), which have been linked to an increase in divorce, and terrorist attacks (e.g., many people have lost their lives, uncertainty and fear are pervasive), which have been linked to a decrease in divorce.

Couples who are able to maintain good communication and be supportive and responsive to each other throughout the COVID-19 crisis will likely remain together and possibly feel more connected for having weathered the storm. However, couples who have difficulty communicating and effectively supporting each other may feel less happy with their marriage and possibly be more likely to separate or divorce. In addition, poor and lower-income couples are apt to be at higher risk for marital distress and dissolution, given that they are more likely to experience greater losses and hardships. In addition, the divorce rate is already higher for these couples compared to middle- and higher-income couples (Neff & Karney, 2017). As a result, the divorce rate may show a decrease, an increase, or no change following the crisis, depending on the quality of couples' relationships prior to the crisis as well as aspects of their broader personal and social contexts.

Social distancing and staying home are key to reducing the transmission of COVID-19, but these safeguards disrupt couples' and families' routines. Both partners may be trying to work from home, and couples with children have the added responsibility of caring for children while working, ensuring that their children complete schoolwork and remain safe from exposure.

In most cases, support from the couples' broader social network is limited—day care and schools are closed, and friends and relatives cannot come in person to help out. Despite these constraints, couples and families can cope effectively by connecting with their spouse (and children) through positive, fun activities, lowering expectations for what can be accomplished in this unprecedented situation, and, importantly, giving their spouse and children the benefit of the doubt when edges fray.

Maintaining social connections with friends and family through phone calls and video chats may reduce feelings of isolation, offer additional sources of support and reassurance, and allow couple members to provide support to their friends and family as well. Although people have speculated that the current pandemic will increase the divorce rate, this prediction is not straightforward.

## **What are the most relevant psychological science findings the public**

## **should know and understand?**

1. Marriages and close relationships can survive the COVID-19 pandemic. Although the situation presents challenges, adverse effects on marriages and families are not inevitable. Individuals can strive to communicate and behave in ways that enhance relationships, such as giving their partner the benefit of the doubt, trying to understand what their partner wants and needs, engaging in constructive problem-solving when needed (and preferably when neither partner is overly tired or stressed), and taking part in some enjoyable, intimacy-building activities together.
2. People have a fundamental need for belonging, and they are most likely to thrive in the face of stress when they feel closely connected to significant others (Pietromonaco & Collins, 2017). Although marital and romantic relationships are likely the primary source of support for many people, maintaining broader connections with friends and family (e.g., through phone calls, texting, video chat) can help couples navigate through difficult times (Keneski et al., 2018).
3. It is well-established that having supportive close relationships, including marital relationships, reduces health risks as much or more than well-known health-promoting factors such as quitting smoking, losing weight, and engaging in regular physical activity (Holt-Lunstad et al., 2010; Pietromonaco & Beck, 2019; Pietromonaco & Collins, 2017). Couples who work to create or maintain a good marital relationship, despite the current stress surrounding COVID-19, are making an investment in their longer-term emotional and physical health.

## **What is the one message people should know that psychological science teaches us?**

Although couples will face multiple challenges from the COVID-19 pandemic, the stress need not harm their marriage, and many relationships may even grow stronger as a result of overcoming adversity together. At the same time, couples with limited resources, added stressors (e.g., caring for children or elderly parents), and significant financial or personal losses may have a particularly difficult time navigating this crisis.

## **Are there any published articles that are particularly insightful on these topics?**

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Neff, L. A., & Karney, B. R. (2004). How does context affect intimate relationships? Linking external stress and cognitive processes within marriage. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 30(2), 134–148. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0146167203255984>

Neff, L. A., & Karney, B. R. (2017). Acknowledging the elephant in the room: How stressful environmental contexts shape relationship dynamics. *Current Opinion in Psychology*, 13, 107–110.

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.copsyc.2016.05.013>

Pietromonaco, P. R., & Beck, L. A. (2019). Adult attachment and physical health. *Current Opinion in Psychology*, 25, 115–120. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.copsyc.2018.04.004>

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