

The Strain the Covid Pandemic Is Putting on Marriages

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For Kristin and Ilya Shapiro, the [Covid pandemic](#) has created new tensions. Lately, the spouses have argued about Mr. Shapiro's travel schedule: Ms. Shapiro doesn't like that it creates child-care headaches. But Mr. Shapiro says it's important to his work as a Washington, D.C., think tank director, and offers emotional respite too.

"I would be lying if I said there haven't been tears," says Ms. Shapiro, a 37-year-old attorney. She is confident they will make it through together. But for now, their [stress level is high](#). "This has been a very difficult period," she says.

Even in the best of times, marriage and relationships are hard work. But the pandemic has produced a pressure cooker inside homes, straining even strong partnerships and, experts say, likely breaking others. Families are cooped up, with spouses trying to work while also taking care of their kids. Job losses, caring for at-risk elderly parents, arguments over what's safe, and disagreements over school reopening are all taking a toll.

"Where there was a crack, there is now a rupture," says Kathryn Smerling, a family therapist in New York City. Dr. Smerling says she has gotten about 20 calls for appointments from couples in the past four months, compared with a handful in the same period a year ago.

Susan Myres, president of the American Academy of Matrimonial Lawyers, which represents 1,600 members nationwide, says she expects new divorce filings to increase somewhere between 10% and 25% in the second half of this year. For much of the lockdown, most state courts weren't processing divorce filings or struggled to manage case flow, so it isn't currently possible to assemble meaningful nationwide statistics, she says. But anecdotally, she says, member attorneys have received more queries than normal since March.

More than one-quarter of adults said they know a couple likely to break up, separate or divorce when the coronavirus pandemic ends, according to an Ipsos poll of 1,005 people conducted at the end of July. In White Plains, N.Y., divorce attorney Leslie Montanile says her "what-if" calls—free consultations for clients putting out an initial feeler—have totaled 20 in the past four months compared with about three in that time last year.

Sodoma Law, a family law practice based in Charlotte, N.C., consulted with 263 new clients on divorce issues from April to July compared with 217 clients in that same period a year ago, says Nicole Sodoma, founder and managing principal of the firm. Summertime is usually when separating parents make the transition to two households, giving themselves time to acclimate before the school year begins. But courts have either been closed or backed up, she says, and many clients have felt stuck. "It's added stress to an already stressful situation," she says.

In some cases, tensions can mount into violence. The [National Domestic Violence Hotline](#) says [total contacts](#)—calls, texts and online chats—increased 9% to more than 62,000 in the period from mid-March to mid-May, compared with the same period a year earlier.

“When couples have external stress, it affects how they interact with each other,” says Paula Pietromonaco, a professor emerita at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, who wrote a recent analysis on the potential impact of Covid-19 on marriages for American Psychologist. “Interactions become less constructive. People are likelier to blame their partner.”

Dr. Pietromonaco says research has demonstrated the toll that outside stresses can take on a couple’s relationship. One recent [study published in the Journal of Family Psychology](#) observed 414 newlywed couples. Spouses who experienced greater external stress, from work stressors to financial problems, had lower relationship satisfaction than couples with fewer external stressors.

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