

Relationship Stress during the COVID-19 Crisis

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The global COVID-19 crisis is taking a toll on even the strongest relationships. Public health guidelines have sequestered most Americans to their homes, in close proximity to immediate and sometimes extended family members for weeks at a time. Many venture out only for brief trips to the grocery or short walks around the neighborhood. Households with children are tasked with helping to finish out the school curricula for the academic year. While some might be able to work from home, others are facing tremendous uncertainty with regard to income, employment, housing, and health. For first responders and their families, there is the additional stress of one partner being away from home for extended periods and exposed to the potential for greater-than-usual danger, and the other taking care of all home-related responsibilities. In some first responder families, both partners may be away from home due to COVID-19-related work responsibilities and quarantine/isolation guidelines. First responders' families and relationships are therefore especially stretched during this unprecedented time.

Relationships are suffering. High levels of stress are often accompanied by sleep disruption, irritability or anger outbursts, anxiety, mood shifts, and concentration difficulties. The general feeling of being “overwhelmed” by the unpredictability and uncertainty is common. This type of chronic stress and uncertainty often manifests in increased relationship problems, including more frequent or intense arguments, outbursts, emotional distancing, the “silent treatment,” or even violence.

An important aspect of healthy stress management is communication. For some, relationships that were deteriorating before the pandemic are now in a downward spiral. Regardless of the future of these relationships, the reality is that people are tasked with finding ‘crisis management and survival’ strategies for their relationships during the pandemic. Making space for “alone” time, even if for only minutes, to organize thoughts and dampen the intensity of difficult emotions can be helpful. Choosing to disengage (e.g., leave the room) from escalating verbal conflict can be a useful strategy if emotional connection and discussion are not possible in the moment. Reaching out to friends and family for social support to stay connected is a good way to prevent feelings of isolation and loneliness. Using “I” statements and reducing accusations when communicating can also be useful to weather the storm of emotionally charged circumstances. Reaching out to family, friends, and/or counselors for support can be a vital resource. While the pandemic will eventually come to an end, the impact on relationships may be more long-lasting. Implementing short-term crisis survival strategies, with the understanding that we are all living through unprecedented struggles, can ‘buy time’ until more sustained resolutions can be established.

Threats to safety through physical violence, however, are a major red flag that the circumstances are out of control. In such cases, none of the strategies above may be useful and might even escalate the danger level. Reaching out to the police, trained counselors, community domestic violence centers, and/or other trusted sources of support is necessary to maintain or regain safety; domestic violence thrives in shame and silence.

National Domestic Violence Hotline: <https://www.thehotline.org/help/>

Association for Behavioral and Cognitive Therapies: <http://www.findcbt.org/FAT/>

Additional Resources for Victims and Survivors of Domestic Violence:
<https://ncadv.org/resources>