

A dozen great tips for couples dealing with COVID-19 cabin fever

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The stay-at-home measures needed to curb the novel coronavirus pandemic are pushing couples and families across the socio-economic spectrum to their limits. Here, UC Berkeley experts with decades of

research and clinical expertise in intimate and family relationships provide tips on how to weather COVID-19 cabin fever.

Don't beat yourself up. Be kind to yourself and your partner

Serena Chen: Treat yourself with kindness the same way you would treat a friend. This is a pandemic, so tamp down on self-criticism and judgment about what you're not getting done or how you're not doing as much as you should be doing with your kids' lesson plans. You are certainly not alone.

Our research has found that self-compassion makes us not only more accepting and less critical of our own flaws, but it also benefits our partners and our relationships because it makes us more accepting of our partners' shortcomings.

Iris Mauss: Keeping up a positive mood and being resilient is perceived to be an important value, maybe even a moral obligation, and so for many people, there's a tendency to try and avoid negative emotions and to pile negative self-judgment on top of their stress when they fail at that. My research suggests it can actually be beneficial to accept negative emotional experiences as a valid and natural response, not to judge them as a sign we're bad or otherwise lacking.

It's OK to grieve. We have lost a lot

Robert Levenson: It's easy to talk about fears and anxiety, but it's also important to talk about the sadness and loss, the friends we're being cut off from, the friends we'll lose, the things we looked forward to that we won't be able to do, at least for some time. None of us asked for this. So many decisions are being made by people in Washington and leaders

around the world and we're really feeling helpless.

Carolyn Pape Cowan: Every day, we hear the numbers of serious illnesses, and so many deaths. This is serious. We have seven grandchildren, and one of them has the symptoms and has been quarantined. We are, of course, anxious about it, and it brings home the pandemic. And yet, we have six other grandchildren who are not ill, so that's heartening. It's all hard, very hard.

Kids get stressed when parents argue, so don't scare them

Philip Cowan: Couples will inevitably have conflict. But remember, you do not need to hash out conflicts in front of your kids, especially ones that are intense and unresolved. This stuff scares and worries them. And if you do storm off, make sure to come back and resolve things, or make a date to resolve things. Let the kids know you're working it out.

Carolyn Pape Cowan: Include older children and teenagers in your conversations. If there's a family dilemma, take everyone's concerns into account. It will help to let everyone have a say.

Work through the hard stuff, and show vulnerability, not anger

Robert Levenson: This is a serious time for relationships. Don't just coast through it and assume that everything is going to be OK. Getting through this requires intentionality, curiosity, empathy and planning ahead. It's important to talk about the anxieties you are feeling. It's important to talk about how you're going to spend this unique period together.

Carolyn Pape Cowan: Open a discussion not with an accusation, but with a question: "Can you tell me more about how this is making you feel?" Talk about your fears and your worries. And if you're both at loggerheads, and it feels like you can't get through to each other, try to start a conversation about something you both are comfortable discussing. Maybe that conversation won't solve all your problems, but it might lead you to feeling closer, not more distant. Be experimenters rather than problem solvers.

Philip Cowan: The issues people are fighting about are true dilemmas, it's a matter of collaborating on a solution rather than winning. American psychologist John Gottman who, along with Bob Levenson, studied marital stability and divorce prediction for 40 years, said "Always ask what the fear is behind the anger." Meanwhile, Dan Wile, a [clinical psychologist](#) at UC Berkeley who recently died, used to say, "If you can be vulnerable, that can lead to the start of a productive conversation. If you come out with anger and accusations, you will become the enemy. And if you withdraw, you will become strangers."

Be open to adjusting your usual roles in the relationship

Robert Levenson: Usually in a relationship there's a brave partner and a more fearful partner. These are roles that we fall into out of habit. Maybe your partner sees you as a scaredy-cat and you see your partner as a Pollyanna. So how do you talk about issues of safety? If you are the one who is more prone to anxiety, ask your partner to take on more of the safety measures so you're not always cast in the role of saying, "No, too dangerous." At the same time, you should be able to say "Let's go out and have some fun."

Carve up space for time alone and togetherness

Robert Levenson: Intimate relationships need a lot of together time and a lot of separate time to recharge. So, it's a good idea to plan how to approach both the together and the private time in the next months. Also, remember, people have private selves that they don't always reveal to their partners. You may learn things about your partner that are just delightfully wonderful, or you may learn things that are unsettling. Regardless, we all need our privacy.

Arthur Aron: Set up times of the day when you can separate, ideally work in different rooms. But after you're done with work, spend time together. Watch a video. Or, you can be in the same room peacefully without interacting. Do not take it personally if your partner wants space away from you. One may want space more than the other, but that doesn't mean you both don't need it.

Split up housekeeping chores in a way that makes sense

Arthur Aron: If you ask each member of a couple how many chores they do, they will typically overestimate the portion of what they do. So the partner who does 20% of the chores might think he or she does 30%, while the partner who does 80% thinks he or she does 90%. It's not out of egoism. It's that what you do is more vivid, so you remember it better.

You don't need to split the chores 50/50. Maybe one of you is more comfortable cooking and the other is more comfortable washing dishes. You can do meals together. And don't forget to express gratitude for what each of you does. One way is to emphasize how much sacrifice the other is making, and the other is to express how many wonderful benefits you are receiving from what they do.

Robert Levenson: If, in the next two months, I'm the one doing all the

housework, I'm going to become increasingly bitter. Yet, it's amazing how a partner's small acts of charity can really change that dynamic. If you're the one who does all the cooking, and your partner plans the fun, mix it up a little. Have your partner do some of the cooking, and you plan some fun.

Instead of catastrophizing, do things together that you enjoy

Arthur Aron: One thing we know from our 'fast friends' research is that having close friendships with other couples is really beneficial. This can be done on Skype or Zoom. Or take online cooking classes or dance classes together, or meditate with your partner. And think about some of the positive things that are happening. Kids are getting to spend more time with their parents. I read about a dog (Rolo in the UK) who was wagging his tail so much with his owner home all the time that he sprained it and had to go to the vet.

Robert Levenson: It's important to plan activities that are the equivalent of dates, where you put aside your work and your anxieties and don't rehash every scary statistic you read about. Watch something on Netflix together. Sit quietly and read together. Reminisce about your life together.

Don't be afraid to seek advice or professional help

Robert Levenson: It's important for a couple to talk about how they're going to disagree. Maybe you need help. Maybe you're a couple who doesn't have the skill set to work through conflicts. Is there someone you can call? A mediator, trusted friend, relative, a telehealth counseling service that you can connect to? Look into this.

Fantasies about being single are just that

Robert Levenson: There's a moment in every couple's life when you get so angry at each other that you say, "I wish I were on my own dealing with this. I wish I was stranded in, I don't know, Toledo."

If that happens, think about the people who are alone, and what that's like if this pandemic drags on for two or three months. Think about what it's like to sit in a small space by yourself when the lights go out, and Zoom goes off, and there's just silence and solitude. Reach out to people who are alone who you know. Couples often reach out to other couples and forget about the singletons. Think about what you can do to help them get through the darker moments.

Domestic violence is a real threat. Take it seriously

Arthur Aron: People behave badly when under stress. They might not treat their partner well or misinterpret what their partner says. So if you're under that level of stress, try to step back, and give yourself a break and seek help.

Robert Levenson: There are couples who are volatile by nature, and that anger may escalate to violence and fighting, which is extremely harmful. If you're in an abusive relationship, but leaving your home also puts you at risk, you're in a really tough place. There are resources for people who are experiencing domestic violence, so connect to them.

Philip Cowan: We're born with the need to be in nurturing relationships, to be heard, understood and appreciated. But a lot of people grew up in families where that's not what they got, so it's harder to do it in the family they're creating. The way to help is not to hold them to unrealistic standards, but to get them to work together at becoming closer to the

families they want to be.

Parting words

Robert Levenson: There will be hard moments for you as a couple, but it's also a great gift to go through something like this. Go into this with humility. You don't have all the answers. You will discover a lot about yourself and about your partner, some of which you will find troubling, and some of which will bring you indescribable joy. So, be prepared.

Carolyn Pape Cowan: Take the time to talk to the people you're close to. Reconnect with people you haven't talked to in a long time. You're not the only ones in this soup. Just hearing other people's voices can be reassuring, and lending someone else a hand can take your mind off yourself briefly.

Arthur Aron: Reach out to others by phone or Skype. Make friends. Connect with people and go deep.

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