

# Nursing professor offers relationship advice during pandemic

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With children out of school, parents working from home, and many family members and friends apart physically, COVID-19 has presented

new challenges for both staying connected amid isolation and keeping healthy boundaries with those who we love.

Patricia Roberson, assistant professor of nursing at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville, studies marriage and [family relationships](#) and how they are linked to health outcomes. She is also the host of the podcast Attached. She answered several questions about how to maintain strong and healthy relationships through the duration of social distancing.

## **How can we keep happy and healthy relationships with our families or roommates during social distancing?**

Many of us are experiencing a very new normal where we are with our spouses or roommates 24/7. To keep these relationships from imploding, there are a few things we can do.

Try to establish boundaries. Not just physical ones. Boundaries can look like working in separate rooms, then coming together to talk at lunch and dinner. You can also set boundaries around the entertainment you watch. Do you have a show you watch alone and one you watch as a couple? You can have boundaries around conversations. Maybe there are some topics that are off limits during [work hours](#). Whatever boundaries you need as a couple so that you can maintain closeness and your individuality should be established through conversation—not just enacting them and getting frustrated because your partner isn't following them.

All couples have a unique pattern of interaction. It's often called a dance. Sometimes, especially when we are stressed, this pattern can become very negative. We may use communication tools that are damaging to our relationship like contempt, criticism, defensiveness, and

stonewalling. As we live under this intense stress, it is important to become aware of your pattern of interaction, take responsibility for your part in any negativity, and work together to communicate effectively. Remember, taking a walk alone outside while maintaining social distancing is a great way to gain perspective and calm.

Be gracious. We are all very stressed. Try to assume your partner or roommate has good intentions and not bad ones. This can help to reduce the tension in your relationship as well as your own individual stress.

## **How can we support our kids during this time?**

Kids are confused right now. They may ask you, "Why can't I see my friends? Why can't I go to school?" Answers to questions about big topics, like COVID-19 quarantine, may not all arrive in one conversation. You will likely need to explain the current situation with developmentally appropriate terms multiple times. But you can help your kids adjust to our new temporary norm.

- Make a schedule. School-age children are accustomed to a consistent school schedule. Collaborate with your children to build a schedule that includes work times in specific subject areas as well as time for creativity, meals, and free play. In my [family](#), we've tried to make our homeschool schedule special by including some things my kids couldn't get at school, like TV for 30 minutes after lunch and special afternoon projects with parents.
- Take advantage of technology. Kids miss their friends. You can use video chat platforms for them to talk to their friends or have them write cards. See if they can come up with fun ways to interact. Maybe they could make a [music video](#) to send to friends or come up with competitions like the best way to throw a paper ball into a trash can.

- Rules are rules. If we are doing this a while, you don't want your house to become the Wild West. But there is balance to everything. You don't want to become parents who are constantly scolding during quarantine. Make sure you and your partner are on the same page about what family rules need to stay and which ones might be more flexible.

## **How can we remain connected to family members or friends who we cannot be with physically?**

A lot of us will feel lonely and miss the people we are not able to see. But there are many ways to stay connected.

Schedule family video chats. You can do these with or without your children present. Vent about the day, laugh about missteps, and try to have a normal, supportive conversation.

Check in. There are friends and family who may be isolated and are prone to anxiety and depression. Maybe they just miss you. Send a text, make a call, or write an email asking them specific questions about their day and how they are feeling. Stay away from general questions, like "How are you?" that promote less meaningful conversations.

## **Are there fun activities we can be doing together while not physically present?**

With a little prep, any old parlor game can be done through a video chat. Charades, Simon Says, Pictionary, Scattergories are all great options.

You can also challenge friends or [family members](#) to any of the new internet challenges going around: the baking challenge, push-up challenge, taskmaster challenge. Or organize treasure hunts with distant

family who can give children clues and have them search for items around the house or in the yard. This could be particularly fun between extended families across multiple households.

## **If we do not have reliable access to the internet or have trouble with technology, how can we stay connected?**

School-age children can read to a grandparent over the phone or vice versa. We may be in quarantine for a while, so think long term. Write letters back and forth with loved ones. Though you may not have the internet, if you have a computer, TV, or mobile phone you can still watch movies or shows together.

## **How can we help support those we know who get sick?**

If you know someone who is sick you can still stay connected. First, make sure your loved ones follow CDC recommendations to social distance and that they only leave home if necessary for essential items. It is important you and your loved ones don't get infected. Even though our instinct is to bring food or medicine, do so only if you can maintain social distancing guidelines. If you know someone who is hospitalized with COVID-19, you will not be able to see them in the hospital. But gather virtually with other loved ones to provide comfort and support to each other through this very scary time.

## **How can we get help or support if we are feeling lonely or have mental health concerns?**

For those experiencing increased anxiety, depression, or loneliness, there are a number of hotlines available for you to get help. Several mental

health professionals have moved their practice to telehealth during quarantine. If there are friends and family members you are worried about, you can give them hotlines to call or you can call them yourself. Also, some people may be quarantined with abusive spouses and unable to leave. There are domestic violence hotlines available to you.

**More information:** Many mental health professionals are moving online or providing online resources. You can find providers on the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration website. [findtreatment.samhsa.gov/locator](https://findtreatment.samhsa.gov/locator)

If you are worried about your safety or the safety of a loved one, call the National Suicide Prevention Hotline at 800-273-TALK (8255).

If you or a loved one is confined to an unsafe home with an abuser, call the National Domestic Violence Hotline at 800-799-SAFE (7233); if you're unable to speak safely, visit [thehotline.org](https://thehotline.org) or text LOVEIS to 22522.

Provided by University of Tennessee at Knoxville

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