

How to keep love alive in the midst of a pandemic

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Credit: Kelly Sikkema/Unsplash

Couples who are cooped up by COVID-19 are getting the rare opportunity to spend more time together, but also discovering the downside of having too much of a good thing, said an expert in romantic

relationships at a Harvard forum.

But don't despair. There are ways to keep love alive in the time of [coronavirus](#).

"COVID-19 has created an environment that has changed and often strained [relationship](#) dynamics," said Joanne Davila, professor of psychology and associate director of clinical training in the Department of Psychology at Stony Brook University.

One of the biggest challenges couples face now is deciding how much closeness and how much separation they want from one another. Some people may find it hard adjusting to having their spouses in the house all day long. It's important to carve out [personal time](#) to help preserve both partners' mental sanity and the relationship's strength.

"Maybe you're used to getting up early and doing your yoga quietly, but now your partner is there, and they're listening to the news loudly or want to have coffee with you," said Davila, director of the Relationship Development Center at Stony Brook. "There is no private time unless you make it these days."

Davila spoke Wednesday at the latest installment of a series of forums on COVID-19 and mental health sponsored by the Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health. She shared her research on how to achieve "romantic competence," which could help people navigate relationships amid the pandemic.

According to Davila, romantic competence requires three skills: insight, mutual understanding of both partners' needs, and [emotion regulation](#). These skills have to be used all at once because they inform each other, but the most important thing is to remember that a couple is made of two people.

"First of all, we need to remember that both people in a relationship have needs" said Davila. "This is the core, and it's so hard to remember this. Sometimes when we're struggling, when there are challenges, we're really focused on ourselves, or there are times when we're actually really focused on the other person, and we lose sight of ourselves."

When there is a mutual understanding of both parties' needs, couples find it easier to put themselves in each other's shoes, but both partners must communicate their needs to one another in a clear, direct, and calm manner, without making assumptions or expecting the other to read their minds. They should also avoid holding things in or blaming the other and instead focus on how a partner's behaviors are affecting them.

"If we tell somebody that we're feeling hurt, they're going to take that a lot better than if we tell them how angry they are or what a jerk they are," said Davila.

It's also important that partners make an extra effort to control their emotions. Unregulated emotions can create turmoil in their love lives and their physical and mental well-being.

"We may be feeling more tense right now, more short-tempered, more anxious and afraid, or more sad," said Davila. "These are emotions that are going to be heightened in the face of everything we're dealing with, and it's really important that we know how to handle them."

Love during a pandemic is hard. Domestic-violence victims are at a higher risk as they are forced to hunker down with their abusers. According to reports, divorce and break-ups are on the rise in China, the U.K., and the U.S. Davila warns against making quick decisions during times of upheaval.

"Things are going to be worse now probably than they were, or they may

get better when the stress goes down," said Davila. "We don't want to make impulsive decisions, but we do want to look across time and across situations to see the consistency in whether our needs are or are not getting met."

Davila said perhaps the healthiest piece of advice for a wholesome relationship is to give up the idea that people should strive for a perfect relationship, in which one's partner will meet all one's needs. People should strive to have healthy relationships in which each person gets their needs met as best as they can.

"On average in the U.S. we have this idea that our romantic partner should meet our every need, and I think that that is unrealistic," said Davila. "Romantic relationships should meet some basic core needs, but those needs that may be different depending on who you are and what relationship you're in. We all do have needs that can get met and perhaps maybe even be better met by friends, extended family members, therapists, and other people in our lives who can really support us in different ways."

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