

'Honey, I'm home': Pandemic life for married couples can lead to sadness, anger

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Maybe space is tight in your home and you share a remote office with your spouse.

Or your partner asks you to step away from work to watch the children because they have an important call to jump on. Then you may wonder, 'Well, what makes his/her job more important than mine!'

There have been no shortage of conflicts arising from the era of COVID-19, and that includes the challenges at home between [married couples](#).

In fact, the more a person felt that their spouse disrupted their daily routine, the more they viewed their relationship as turbulent, according to West Virginia University research.

Kevin Knoster, a third-year doctoral student in the Department of Communication Studies, led a study examining 165 married individuals and how their partners interfered with their [daily routines](#) in April 2020, a month into the pandemic. Their findings are published in *Communication Research Reports*.

"When you are impeding your significant other from accomplishing their goals or are disrupting their daily routines, there will be emotional responses," Knoster said. "Based on our findings, more interference from your spouse leads to sadness and anger, and that's independent from one another. This can lead to perceptions of a turbulent relationship."

Knoster was joined by fellow communication studies doctoral student Heath Howard and faculty Alan Goodboy and Megan Dillow on the project. Knoster noted that he and Howard, who are both married and living with their [spouses](#) in Morgantown, decided to explore the issue as they studied relational turbulence theory for exams while the world was on lockdown.

Relational turbulence theory argues that transitions or periods of

instability can create ripples within a relationship. Previous studies have focused on military spouses returning home and empty nesters, for instance. A shift in the makeup of a relationship, therefore, can influence a change in behaviors.

Couples working remotely due to the COVID-19 pandemic presented a novel approach to researching this theory, Knoster said.

"Like a lot of people, we, too, had to adapt on the fly all of a sudden to working from home," Knoster said. "Our routines were in a state of a flux."

The age of participants in the study ranged from 18 to 74. Of those with adult children, 64 of them moved back home during the pandemic.

The research team measured participants' level of agreement on statements such as "My spouse interferes with the plans that I make." Also, the survey questions prompted respondents with "During the past month of the COVID-19 pandemic, when I have interacted with my spouse, I have felt..."

Based on the results, researchers reported that husbands and wives who had everyday routines disrupted by spouses felt negative emotions toward them and perceived the marriage to be turbulent. The negative emotions reported—sadness and anger—were specifically directed toward interactions with their spouse.

The findings fit into a larger body of research connecting partner interference with feelings of instability and a turbulent relationship.

Knoster himself has recognized his own interferences into his wife's daily routine.

"I step on her toes every now and then," he said. "I teach classes from home (on the computer) and her office is through a closed door behind me. If she needs to go to the restroom, she has to walk behind me so she may be thinking, 'Do I need to coordinate with his schedule just to wash my hands?' It's interesting. It's changed our [professional lives](#) and personal lives in more ways than we think."

But, for couples who can strategize and remain cognizant of each other's schedules, any [negative emotions](#) can drift away.

"Maybe my wife has a meeting that overlaps with my workout time," Knoster said. "I could decide to go ahead and pick up weights and drop them or I can adapt my routine. In contrast, maybe my wife doesn't care about my fitness goals. If you're getting in their way or have a 'my way or the highway' attitude, well, that's going to facilitate more negative emotional responses.

"But when you and your partner support each other's goals and accommodate routines, that elicits positive emotional reactions. We need to remember to catch our breaths for a moment and work together. It's more important now that we're sort of sequestered inside at all hours of the day and starting to feel like rats in a cage."

More information: Kevin Knoster et al. Spousal interference and relational turbulence during the COVID-19 pandemic, *Communication Research Reports* (2020). [DOI: 10.1080/08824096.2020.1841621](https://doi.org/10.1080/08824096.2020.1841621)

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