

# Celebrating love in a pandemic: Tips from an affection expert

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The COVID-19 pandemic is impacting many aspects of our lives, including our romantic relationships. Some couples may be feeling the strain of living and working in the same space day after day. Other

people may be feeling especially lonely this year as the pandemic disrupts traditional dating rituals and creates the need for physical isolation.

As Valentine's Day draws near, some may be wondering if or how they should celebrate.

Kory Floyd, a professor in the University of Arizona Department of Communication in the College of Social and Behavioral Sciences, studies the communication of [affection](#) in close relationships and its effects on stress and physiological functioning. He has written 16 books, including "The Loneliness Cure" and "Affectionate Communication in Close Relationships."

Floyd talked with UArizona News about how Valentine's Day can serve as an important reminder to express love, and stressed that the holiday need not be reserved for romantic relationships. He also talked about the benefits and challenges of showing affection, and why this year—or any year—it's OK to de-escalate Valentine's Day expectations and create new traditions.

**Q: During the pandemic, cohabitating couples have been spending a lot of time together—some might say, too much time. Do you have any tips for how to approach Valentine's Day this year?**

A: As with many holidays, I think it's useful not to allow expectations of the holiday to be a source of stress.

We heard a lot of advice this last holiday season about recognizing that you're probably not going to have the huge blowup Thanksgiving or Christmas that you normally have. And it's OK to let go of the

expectation that the holiday has to be "perfect."

I would say the same thing about Valentine's Day, this year and any year. What matters isn't things like the value of the gifts or how fancy the restaurant is or any of these sort of material markers of commitment. What matters is that you do something that is meaningful to you and to the other person.

And, so, in the days leading up to Valentine's Day, you and your partner might talk about, "What could we do that could be a really fun and meaningful way for us to mark this tradition? What do we want our pandemic Valentine's Day to look like?" Think of something you can co-create.

You might create a meaningful new tradition. If you've been spending a lot of time with your significant other, you may decide to open up the celebration to family and friends.

My advice certainly would not be to ignore Valentine's Day because you can't do what you normally do or because you just don't feel like celebrating this year. I think that's all the more reason to stop and celebrate the things that are going well, including what's good about all this family togetherness, this dedicated time to be with each other.

**Q: One criticism of Valentine's Day is that it's this forced, high-pressure, commercial celebration of love. But you think it's not a bad thing to have a day that encourages us to show affection in a concrete way. Why?**

A: Our manner of celebrating Valentine's Day, traditionally, has been to take our feelings of love for somebody else and make them manifest,

make them behavioral, turn them into expressions—whether that comes in the form of a card or a gift or a special night out. Now, whether you do that on Valentine's Day or create your own ritual is immaterial.

We can use Valentine's Day as a motivator to show affection, recognizing that there's benefit above and beyond just feeling affection. And, interestingly enough, a lot of my research has shown that we benefit not only from receiving expressions of affection but also from giving them.

## **Q: What kinds of benefits?**

A: What's come out of my research is that there are benefits for health and well-being when you express affection. It's one of the most immediate things that will reduce, for example, your levels of stress hormones and your blood pressure when you are stressed. So think about a situation when you've been stressed and how hugging somebody does a lot to calm you down.

Assuming that I'm expressing affection in ways that does not make the other person uncomfortable, they can accrue many of these benefits as well.

So, people who have more affectionate behavior in their lives tend to have stronger immune systems, and, of course, it does a lot for our relationship and solidifies our feelings for each other.

**Q: Recent research of yours revealed how some people—often women—are naturally more affectionate, and part of that difference is attributed to genes. How can that variability in affectionate**

## behavior impact a couple?

A: It's actually fairly common that people date or pair up with others who have a different "set point" for how affectionate they are. We've come to understand that, although a large part of what accounts for that difference between people is learned through our environment, some portion of that variation between people is genetic.

The key is adapting to those differences. On average, women tend to be more expressive of affection than men are. I can't tell you how many times I've given talks on affection and had women in the audience come up to me after and say, "How can I get my husband, boyfriend, father to be more affectionate?" Sometimes they'll say things like, "You know, I've tried everything, and I'm just ready to put my foot down and just demand that he be more affectionate." And I, usually, will say something like, "Well, I know that probably seems like it would be an effective strategy, but trust me, it wouldn't." Because you can't just demand that somebody become comfortable with behaviors. There are much better ways to do that, and the most important way, I think, is through the process of modeling affectionate behavior.

You can ask the less demonstrative partner, "What are the things that I do or that people in your past have done that have made you feel loved?" Particularly with men, the answer will often be something like, "Well, I know somebody loves me when they help me with a project or when they do favors for me—expressing love through the doing rather than through the saying."

The less expressive partner may just have a different repertoire of behaviors for expressing love, and so if you can discover what they are, then it opens the possibility for you to tailor your expressive affections in a way that is going to be meaningful to the other person.

You can reciprocate in that conversation by saying, "Well, let me tell you now about the things that make me feel loved. It makes me feel really loved when you hold my hand in public, for example."

It opens the door then for that person to say to themselves, "I'm going to make the effort," especially as they see you making the effort to do things that are meaningful for them.

**Q: For some, Valentine's Day may be depressing or a reminder that they lack of a romantic partner, especially during a year that has made traditional dating such a challenge. You've also written about how many people are experiencing "skin hunger" during this time. How can people feeling lonely approach the holiday?**

A: Yes, many people are missing touch, because that's the one thing that this kind of computer-mediated communication can't accommodate. I can see you, I can hear you, but I can't put my arms around you.

If people who are single choose to recognize the holiday, there's still so much benefit to be gained by using it as an impetus for sharing affection with all of the other people who matter to them in their lives, with their families and friends and co-workers. Send a love letter to your parents or to a sibling or to a niece or nephew. Send a note to a long-lost friend on Facebook.

Valentine's Day does not need to be, nor should it be, only about one particular kind of love.

Provided by University of Arizona

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