Communication is key in any relationship especially in times of stress

The Coronavirus pandemic has brought added stress to daily routines, including for some spending many more hours with their significant others.
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Julie Leventhal, a senior lecturer in the College of Education’s Department of Educational Psychology, says communication is important for maintaining a healthy relationship, especially now as people navigate living through this health crisis.

She discusses how to ease the stress that can strain relationships and shares ideas to make this expanded time together more enjoyable.

**How can stress put strain on a relationship?**

Any time we experience negative stress, whether it’s a daily hassle (i.e., when traffic is a little worse than usual) or a major life event (i.e., unemployment due to a pandemic), it can impede our ability to manage even the smallest task. Stress occupies our mental and emotional spaces; it pulls us away from more positive emotions and can lead to increased anxiety, frustration and self-doubt. Think about a time when you have had a work or school deadline. That might be the only thing you think about for hours or even days at a time. Then, once that deadline has passed, you realize how narrowly focused you have been as a result of that stressor and how you might have missed other parts of your life as a result. When we experience multiple stressors we may feel overwhelmed and lose sight of our relationships or may not have the emotional capacity to focus on the aspects of our relationships that can help us overcome stress.

**What are ways we can offer support to ease the stress felt by our partner?**

I think the best approach is to communicate with your partner regarding their needs. Once you’re able to determine what they need you’ll be better equipped to either meet those needs or figure out a way to be supportive. For instance, if they need a dedicated amount of time during the day to work free of distractions, then you can work toward setting up that space or time for them. If they need you to take care of lunch because they have a meeting or are working with the kids, then maybe you can call in a food order. Remember though – that goes both ways. It’s important for partners and family members to openly talk about where they’re at and what they need in order for everyone to be able to work toward more harmonious interactions.

If you have children, be sure to share responsibilities equally. Discuss creative ways to parent and break up the monotony of being homebound with special events like a parent-child date. Use this opportunity to create lasting memories with fun activities like a scavenger hunt; a movie night with tickets, popcorn and theater seating; or try something new like a backyard camp out. Special family time gives children something to look forward to and eases their frustration and anxiety.

**In this time, when we are spending more hours than ever with our significant other, little annoyances may balloon into bigger issues. How can we deal with these without alienating each other?**

You need to communicate. If I don’t express my concerns and frustrations to you, how are you supposed to know that I’m feeling them? It is tough because with so many things going haywire in the world right now (job insecurity, homeschooling, changes in routines, etc.), we might feel bad speaking up because we don’t want to add to the stress. However, speaking up and connecting with your partner may actually help reduce tension and worry. You need to open the door in order to actually walk through it.

**Should we feel guilty about wanting to spend time alone?**

Not at all. Each of us has our own needs in terms of quiet time vs. interaction with others. If you need emotional space or physical space away from a partner or family member, work toward creating that in whatever way you can. If that means you are sitting in your car for 10 minutes just enjoying the silence, then go for it. Or maybe you like walking or hiking? Take a walk around the block. Need to stay in the house? Take a bath or find a private nook/space for you to be on your own for a bit.

My fiancé and I are both introverts so we love co-existing in a shared space, but not necessarily talking to each other. He also works from home occasionally and I’m frequently around when he does. As a result, the quarantine hasn’t been too challenging because we have periods of quiet and are both used to one another being in our shared spaces during the day. However, we both still drive each other crazy sometimes. I have had a few moments where I’ve needed to volunteer to go grab some food or run to the store simply to have 15-20 minutes of quiet without a work call in the background or an endless stream of comments on a video game he might be playing.
Other times, I’ve leashed up our dogs and walked them around our building. All of that is perfect for me because in the moment, that’s what I needed. My fiancé knows that and also knows that if/when he ever needs a break, we will figure out space and other options to make that happen.

**How important is open communication right now?**

This is a special moment in time where you are basically stuck with a partner day in and day out. Why not open up those lines of communication and take advantage of this opportunity? This may be a chance for you to learn more about your partner whether you’re just starting out in the relationship or you’ve been together for years. Take some time to really connect – TV off, work on hold until tomorrow – ask each other questions, play trivia games, journal together, start a new hobby that one or both of you have been contemplating. Make an opportunity here rather than viewing it as something that has happened to you (“I get to be with my partner all the time” rather than “I have to be with my partner all the time.”)

**What are ways we can keep our relationship healthy?**

Make sure to take time for each relationship, regardless of what type it is. Romance in a romantic relationship? Schedule a stay-in date night… have a picnic in the front yard, watch a movie together in a space that is separate from where you normally are or that is removed from others in the family, cook a special meal or just have some quiet time together.

*Julie Leventhal* [5]

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