

PERSPECTIVES**COVID-19: To have and to hold ... in quarantine****Tips for marriage survival during a pandemic****Publish date:** May 4, 2020By [Dara Abraham, DO](#)

Most married couples vowed to stay with their partners during sickness and health, but none of us vowed to remain trapped with our loved ones behind the same four walls, all day, every day, for an unknown period of time. We didn't sign up for this! Some romantics may be titillated by the prospect, while more independent partners may panic at the mere thought of spending all day and night with their loved ones.

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Because of the swift implementation of the lifestyle-altering restrictions, couples did not have ample time to mentally and physically prepare. A lack of preparation and loss of control heightens our emotions. It can make couples more susceptible to engage in unhealthy styles of communication and destructive behaviors that are harmful to their relationships.

There are psychological reasons that “absence makes the heart grow fonder.” Distance from your partner is not just a clever way to make your partner appreciate and desire you more. It is human nature to habituate to what is part of your daily life. For instance, when your partner is away from you while on a work trip, you may find the first night or two alone relaxing; but by day 3, you begin to miss your partner's hugs and kisses, smell, and touch. And after many days apart, you may even miss the incessant nagging that secretly motivates you. Physical distance from our partners essentially gives us the ability to long for and appreciate each other. Our brains are wired to pay

more attention to things that are novel and exciting and less interested in what is in our everyday lives.

Separation gives us the ability to miss our partners, while quarantine does the complete opposite.

To avoid contemplating how to murder one's spouse before quarantine ends, partners can strengthen their relationships by using the strategies I've outlined below, which are loosely based on dialectical behavior therapy (DBT). These strategies can be useful for anyone – providers and patients alike – going through these struggles.

Dialectical behavior therapy was developed by psychologist [Marsha Linehan PhD](https://behavioraltech.org/about-us/trainers-consultants/marsha-linehan-phd-abpp/) [<https://behavioraltech.org/about-us/trainers-consultants/marsha-linehan-phd-abpp/>](https://behavioraltech.org/about-us/trainers-consultants/marsha-linehan-phd-abpp/) , to help regulate emotions for people diagnosed with borderline personality disorder. These skills help to identify thoughts and feelings, to accept one's inner emotional world and outward behaviors. The idea is that, once you can recognize and accept, then change is possible. The “dialectic” in dialectical behavior therapy implies that one is attempting to find a balance between acceptance and change. All of us can benefit from these skills, especially emotionally volatile couples who are trapped together in quarantine.

Radically accept what is uncertain in your lives

Radical acceptance is a practice used in DBT in situations that are out of our control, such as the COVID-19 pandemic. Radically accept that you and your partner are trapped in quarantine without attempting to place blame on our government, your spouse, your boss, and even yourself. Radical acceptance is exactly what the name implies. Accept your current situation for what it is and not what you hoped it to be.

Accept the unknown and unanswered questions such as when will this quarantine end? Will there be a summer camp? Will I get back to my office this summer? Will my children even return to school in the fall? The acceptance of what is out of your control will ultimately decrease your mental time spent worrying and obsessing about the uncertainties of your post-quarantine life and instead provide you more time to be present with your spouse.

Remain mindful during all communication with your spouse. To stay in the moment, you need to be aware of your bodily reactions to distress and notice when your heart rate increases, breathing becomes more shallow, stomach muscles tighten, and when your thoughts become more negative. Mindfulness skills enable us to use physiological changes in our body to become aware of our

emotions. You can use your partner's nonverbal body language and tone of voice to gauge that person's emotional reactivity.

The practice of mindfulness leads to an increased emotional intelligence. The goal is to have enough self-awareness and emotional understanding of your partner and enough empathy to know when a conversation is becoming too emotionally charged and to let it go and back off. Mindfulness is not nagging your partner to remember to change the heating unit filters with a reminder of what happened years ago when this wasn't done promptly – without first checking in to make sure your partner is emotionally ready for this type of conversation.

When we have strong emotions, we are using the more primitive parts of our brain that induce a fight or flight reaction. These emotional reactions overshadow the more advanced prefrontal region of our brain that stores our rational thoughts and reasoning skills, a concept identified by [psychologist Daniel Goleman](http://www.danielgoleman.info/) as “emotional hijacking.”

Use distress tolerance skills to deal with negative emotions

Distress tolerance is an individual's ability to manage feelings in response to stress. Distress tolerance skills are aimed at helping one manage intense emotions without worsening a situation by engaging in behaviors that are destructive and may exacerbate the problem. The goal is to tolerate the stress while with your partner and not respond negatively or in a way that is harmful to the integrity of your relationship.

To prioritize your relationship, this may mean that you choose not to react negatively when your partner makes a passive-aggressive comment on how you spent your day during quarantine since you still have a pile of laundry on your bedroom floor and overflowing dishes in the kitchen sink. A high level of distress tolerance will enable you to not overreact or withdraw from your spouse when flooded with emotions of anger or sadness.

Distraction techniques are a type of distress tolerance skill. You can engage in activities that keep you distracted and require your full attention. When things get heated between you and your spouse during quarantine, try to obtain some distance from each other to cool down and engage in an activity that involves your full concentration.

Many of us have been surprised by our hidden talents that were discovered during the quarantine. Use the time away from your partner to distract yourself with your new passion for writing, baking, organizing, and even your newfound love of balloon artistry. Do an activity that engages your mind and provides you the necessary physical and mental time away from your partner to deescalate.

You can always revisit the initial cause of the conflict when both you and your partner are not emotionally charged. You can also distract yourself with self-soothing tactics such as taking a warm bath or a reading good book. Perhaps distract yourself by giving back to others and spending time planning a drive-by surprise party for your sister's birthday next month. It can be helpful to distract yourself by comparing yourself to others less fortunate than you or a time in your life when you and your partner were struggling much worse than now, to provide perspective. The goal is not to add to your distress but instead, provide yourself a sense of perspective.

Use interpersonal effectiveness skills to establish a healthy relationship

Be gentle in all your communications with your partner, think about your spouse's perspective, show empathy and interest in what your partner has to say by your verbal communication or body language, such as maintaining eye contact, and offer recognition cues, such as "uh-huh" and "oh, really." Avoid communication that is at all invalidating. Never start a sentence with "YOU" while having heated conversations with your spouse; instead, use "I feel" statements. This type of communication avoids the blame game that gets many couples into trouble.

Instead, communicate how you feel while not necessarily blaming your spouse but rather expressing your emotions. This will ultimately lead to less defensive communication from your partner. Remember that not all communication is for the sole purpose of communicating. Much of the time, communication is used as an attempt for one partner to connect with the other partner. Couples may say that they have difficulty with communication when it is not the communication that is the issue but instead the underlying disconnect of the couple.

This disconnect usually manifests while couples are communicating, and therefore, can be misconstrued as solely a communication issue by the couple. When your partner asks you to stop staring at your phone during dinner, it is not necessarily that your spouse is attempting to control you or wants to engage in some deep conversation, but more likely a bid to try to connect with you. Your partner is attempting to tell you that he or she feels disconnected, misses you, and wants to reconnect.

Provide validation and acceptance to your partner

Focus on your partner's strengths and accept the weaknesses. Accept that your partner is scattered, disorganized, and takes at least 20 minutes to find the phone and keys every morning. Remember that during your courtship days, you found your partner's flighty attributes to be endearing. Do the same for your strengths and weaknesses.

Accept that the pandemic is unpredictable and that you may need to strengthen your ability to be flexible and more adaptable. This will ultimately lead to feeling less disappointment by your partner and more accepting of shortcomings. Acceptance of your imperfections will improve your sense of worth and confidence and lessen negative emotions, such as guilt, regret, and shame.



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Accept the fact that, as similar as we all are, we use different methods to recharge ourselves. Remember that you may require time with others, including your spouse, to feel invigorated. In contrast, your spouse needs alone time without distractions to reboot mentally and prepare for the following day. In the pre-pandemic world, if there were a mismatch in what a couple needed to feel rejuvenated, they could independently compensate and search for fulfillment outside of the home. Before stay-at-home orders were rolled out throughout the country, spouses had ample opportunities to spend time away from their partners at work, dinner with friends, or while squeezing in a 7 p.m. yoga sculpt class – barely getting home in time to kiss our children goodnight – with a few minutes to spare to engage in mundane conversation with our partners before our nighttime routine of TV commenced. Unfortunately, COVID-19 has made it very hard for couples to carve out that time for compensatory activities outside of the home.

Remember that you are a team

Remind yourself of the reason why you initially fell in love with your partner. Teammates do not keep score or compete with one another. They support each other when one player is not feeling well, and they make sacrifices for the betterment of the team.

Your marriage vows included “through sickness and health” and now should include “through quarantine.”

Dr. Abraham is a psychiatrist in private practice in Philadelphia. She has no disclosures.

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