

# Helping Couples in the Shadow of COVID-19

SCOTT M. STANLEY\*  
HOWARD J. MARKMAN\*

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*The pandemic caused by the SARS-CoV-2 virus (coronavirus) and the associated illness, COVID-19, has caused a level of worldwide upheaval unlike any most people now living have seen in their lifetimes. This crisis affects people in their most important, committed, and intimate relationships. Although this crisis has damaged the health and well-being of individuals, crushed economies, and led to an extensive period of uncertainty about the future, there may also be positive outcomes in the motivation people have to protect their relationships. In this paper, we focus on strategies that therapists and relationship educators can use to help couples preserve and protect their relationships during such a time. We describe four foundations of safety that allow relationships to thrive: physical, emotional, commitment, and community. We then highlight three keys from our body of work that can help guide individuals and couples in protecting their relationships on a day-to-day and moment-to-moment basis: (1) decide, don't slide; (2) make it safe to connect; (3) do your part.*

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Humans have struggled throughout history with calamities caused by storms, earthquakes, volcanos, draught, war, economic shock, and disease. Some of these hardships, such as hurricanes, are local to a region while others are worldwide, such as the pandemic caused by the spreading of the coronavirus and its resulting disease, COVID-19. Although large outbreaks of infectious diseases have affected many in some regions of the world, this is the first worldwide viral threat in the lifetimes of most people now living. The health and economic impacts of the current pandemic have been enormous and will be ongoing for a long time to come. There are also challenges and negative effects on both individual well-being and intimate and family relationships. Our focus here is on the challenges facing couples and strategies to help them during such times of uncertainty and upheaval.

In this paper, we will describe four fundamental needs regarding safety that support strong, healthy relationships: physical, emotional, commitment, and community. We believe these reflect universal needs, that when unmet, are associated with risk for relationship problems and distress. After defining these, we will describe three keys from our

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\*University of Denver, Denver, CO, USA.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Scott M. Stanley, Department of Psychology, University of Denver, 2155 South Race Street, Denver, CO 80208-3500. E-mail: scott.stanley@du.edu.

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work that we believe can guide couples in efforts to protect and nurture their relationships during times of great turmoil. They are as follows:

- Make it safe to connect
- Do your part
- Decide, don't slide

Throughout this paper, we refer to the “COVID-19 crisis,” a term we mean to apply to all of the negative impacts and changes being caused by the virus and the illness. We will cite findings from early studies on relationships during this crisis, some findings from prior studies on large-scale upheavals, and note patterns from an unpublished survey of 400 people about their relationships conducted by students in a class of (co-author) Howard's at the University of Denver (DU) during the height of the first wave of the COVID-19 crisis in the Spring of 2020. His class fielded a survey on how people were dealing with the challenges of the crisis. Those data are not from a representative sample nor will they be published. Since the participants of that survey were largely in the social networks of the students, they represent younger couples (average age 30 for male and 29 for females) who have generally completed at least some years of college. Nevertheless, those data provide some examples of what people are reporting from the front lines of their relationships during the first few months of the COVID-19 crisis. Hereafter, we will refer to observations from these data as from the “DU class-conducted survey.” Howard also directs the University of Denver's Couples Clinic, and we will provide some insights based on how some of the couples in the clinic seem to be doing during the first 3–4 months of the crisis.

We are writing this article in the early stages of a global event of enormous magnitude (in mid-June, 2020). Research based on strong methods, including the use of long-term follow-up and some ability to form causal inferences, is simply beyond the science that anyone in our field has to inform their efforts at this time. Anything we report here about early survey data should be taken for exactly what it is: insights based on simple, single time-point methods, lacking in the ability to describe or assess trajectories that may be influenced as a result of the pandemic and COVID-19.

Despite these limitations, and that we are in the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic, our hope is that what we write here may be useful to those who work to help couples as the crisis continues, and, more generally, at times of large, external stressors, whatever the cause. We use the term crisis since it represents “a stage in a sequence of events at which the trend of all future events, especially for better or for worse, is determined” (Dictionary.com, June 9, 2020). We want to help couples get more of the better and less of the worse out of such a time. While many in the western world often note that the Chinese symbol for crisis is combined of two characters meaning danger and opportunity, numerous scholars have corrected this interpretation, noting that the symbol mostly means danger (e.g., [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chinese\\_word\\_for\\_crisis](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chinese_word_for_crisis)). Nevertheless, we focus on both the dangers associated with the COVID-19 crisis and the opportunities for professionals to help couples deal with crises in their lives.

### **ESSENTIAL NEEDS: SAFETY**

At times of significant societal and economic disruption, there is added fear and uncertainty, and a decided reduction in the sense that the world is safe and predictable. Although some almost never experience that, many do, and for much of the time. A pandemic such as we now see causes many more people to find themselves in a world that feels unsafe, fostering high levels of stress and anxiety, which is rarely associated with good things for relationships. Stress and anxiety also spring from ongoing concerns about

family well-being, including, for some, the need to deal with the sickness and death of friends and family members, and for still others, long-lasting damage to their own health from COVID-19. On top of everything else, people are having to cope with mixed and complicated messages about health and safety, with varying responses by government officials and institutions. Thus, it is not surprising that there has been a large increase in prescription of anti-anxiety and sleeping medications during the early stages of the pandemic (Tribune News Service, 2020).

We see safety as having various dimensions that are important in couple functioning, whether in a time of crisis or not. This is evident from literatures on adult attachment (e.g., Cowan & Cowan, 2007; Hazan & Shaver, 1987), intimate partner violence (e.g., O'Leary, 1993; Straus & Gelles, 1990), economic stress (e.g., Conger & Elder, 1994), economic upheaval (e.g., Cohen, 2014), and couple and family interaction (e.g., Cordova, Gee, & Warren, 2005). We have long focused on the need for a number of types of safety for relationships to thrive (Stanley, Markman, & Whitton, 2002), and emphasize four types of safety in various adaptations of the Prevention and Relationship Education Program (PREP; Markman, Stanley, & Blumberg, 2010; Stanley et al., 2017). Space precludes us from making an attempt to review the extensive literature that can be attached to each of these aspects of safety. Here, we will describe these in enough detail to frame what couples need to understand and take action to protect their relationships—especially in times of societal and economic upheaval such as we now face. They underly important parts of the rationale for our emphasis in the balance of this paper on three keys for protecting and preserving lasting love.

## Physical Safety

Our focus on physical safety is on a relationship being free from the fear, threat, or experience of physical harm between partners. It is bottom-line safety. We recently wrote a paper on best practices in relationship education, and that paper provides an accessible review of some of the issues in understanding and thinking about the implications of types and intensity of intimate partner violence, as well as issues related to screening (or not) in services such as relationship education (Stanley et al., 2020). Here, we note that large increases in stress and discontinuity will raise the risks for some people to behave aggressively.

We generally ascribe to a typology model when it comes to understanding aggression in intimate relationships (e.g., Holtzworth-Munroe & Stuart, 1994; Johnson & Ferraro 2000), such as the distinction between situational aggression (or what we and colleagues call “arguments that get physical”) versus controlling violence used to subjugate a partner. It seems likely that aggression that is more based on two partners who do not manage stress and conflict well will increase during difficult times because of the increased stress and uncertainty. Although not our main focus here, for victims of more control-oriented forms of domestic violence, governmental and societal restrictions on movement because of COVID-19 can mean spending more time at home with a partner who is prone to engage in instrumental violence for the purposes of instilling fear and control. These factors may be further compounded by increased use of drugs and alcohol as coping strategies for dealing with extraordinary levels of stress. Indeed, there are some reports of recent increases in people reaching out to domestic violence hotlines (Taub, April 6, 2020), although it will be some time before such claims are well vetted or studies document increases in intimate partner violence.

The long-term economic damage and upheaval resulting from COVID-19 not only creates massive, added strain on relationships and families, it also leads to victims of domestic violence having fewer options in dealing with relationships that are dangerous and

damaging. Therapists and relationship educators should be prepared to help some couples handle conflict better while helping others, especially individuals in high danger, to obtain the help they may need to safely leave an abusive relationship. Practitioners should be acquainted with resources for those who need immediate help getting to safety, or for those who are starting to consider how they might leave a dangerous relationship as safely as possible.

## **Emotional Safety**

We believe that emotional safety is the essence of what people want in a lasting, loving relationship. Emotional safety speaks to the ability to be relaxed around the other, to speak and be heard, to listen, to be accepted, and to work together as a team to support personal, relationship, and family health and growth. At its greatest potential, it means two people are able not only to handle issues well but also feel supported and cared for. The patterns of communication and conflict management so often noted to be hallmarks of present and future problems (e.g., Gottman, 1993; Markman & Hahlweg, 1993; Stanley et al., 2002) are the antithesis of emotional safety. We put a lot of attention in our work on four communication danger signs: escalation, invalidation, withdrawal, and negative interpretations. Whatever these patterns are called, they reflect a lack of emotional safety and they actively harm it.

There are obvious ways that such negative patterns will be increased in the COVID-19 context for some couples and families. First, as already noted, increased stress and strain will lead many couples to argue more. In particular, especially when spending more time together and having increased challenges to deal with, it will be easy to escalate. Second, although some couples may find new patterns evolving from distancing and restrictions that invigorate their relationships (as described later), others will experience a significant loss of intimacy and connection because of changes that limit their access to ways they typically have stayed connected, such as through travel or merely going out to dinner without fearing catching the virus. For many, changes that must be made in light of COVID-19 will replace quality time together with preoccupation with how to cope with other changes in their lives.

Findings from early research on the effect of the pandemic on couples' relationships are mixed when it comes to how people are coping during the COVID-19 crisis. In a national survey (U. S.) conducted between April 30, 2020, and May 4, 2020 (well over a month into widespread stay-at-home orders), Lewandowski (2020) found that most people in romantic relationships felt that their relationships were largely unchanged. Among those who thought there had been a change, over three times as many people indicated their relationship had gotten better than had gotten worse. Further, despite the obvious changes in routine, most indicated that they were arguing about as much as usual. These findings parallel what respondents said in the DU class-conducted survey. There, respondents generally reported lower levels of destructive conflict than was typical. At the same time, there was a possibly important gender difference in reports of daily hassles. Among those who reported change, both men and women reported that women had increased in pushing for change or for the couple to deal with things. But, in the main, most people reported less conflict compared to their sense of pre-COVID-19 behavior. This may indicate that some couples are making an effort to handle conflict better, knowing that they will be together for the foreseeable future. They are feeling safer at home.

We do not mean to discount such possibilities in the least, but we should consider how very early we all are in what may be many years of social, health, and economic upheaval that will cause lasting problems for many people. There is a well-established association between stress and relationship functioning, with much of this specific body of work

having a strong focus on economic strain (Bodenmann, 1997; Conger et al, 1990). Using the stress spillover model (e.g., Bolger, DeLongis, Kessler, & Wethington, 1989; Neff & Karney, 2004), Balzarini et al. (2020) conducted a worldwide survey as part of the “Love in the Time of COVID” project—a survey with a large international sample of respondents from 57 nations. Their survey was conducted from the end of March 2020 to the nearly the end of April 2020. Thus, similar to Lewandowski’s survey, their survey was undertaken during a time that many people, worldwide, were affected by stay-at-home orders and heightened awareness of the possible magnitude of the present crisis.

Balzarini et al. (2020) asked people about overall stress levels and social isolation in recent weeks, and if the COVID-19 outbreak had negatively impacted their financial situation (as a measure of economic strain). They found that people who reported greater social isolation and financial strain related to COVID-19 were modestly more likely to report higher levels of conflict and lower levels of relationship satisfaction. More importantly, they found that perceived partner responsiveness moderated these associations, buffering the effect of the stressors on the relationships. This responsiveness was defined as one’s partner “really listening” or seeming to be interested in what the respondent had been thinking and feeling (using a measure by Crasta, Maniaci, Rogge, & Reis, 2020). Balzarini et al. found that those who perceived their partners to be responsive reported low levels of impact of COVID-19-related stress on their relationships. Closely aligned with such findings, as Balzarini et al. (2020) note, Reis has long argued that the feeling that your partner understands, accepts, and cares for you is profoundly important in understanding intimacy and closeness (e.g., Reis, Clark, & Holmes, 2004). We could not agree more. Being able to maintain this ability, or even have it grow during a time of crisis, will strongly support an overall sense of a relationship being emotionally safe.

These early findings from the COVID-19 era suggest that many couples are coping relatively well, but that stress is negatively impacting some relationships and that such effects are buffered if two people know how to manage conflict and maintain a supportive connection. Of course, many people may respond relatively well in the early stages of such a crisis, and this does not mean that they can sustain this in the face of chronic lingering stress as all these changes unfold. It is early, and many couples will need help.

## **Commitment Safety**

Although many people associate us and PREP with both research and strategies to foster better communication and conflict management, one of the other engines of our work is a focus on commitment (Stanley & Markman, 1992; Stanley, Rhoades, & Whitton, 2010). (A third engine is focus on positive connections, which we will come to later.) One of the hallmarks of the type of commitment that produces the best relationships is having a sense of “us with a future.” Couples do best when there is a sense of a future and a past that allows more give and take about their present exchange. Without a clear sense of a future, people are naturally more oriented toward taking than giving, evaluating everything in the here and now. Long-term relationships that are most likely to be happy, fulfilling, and beneficial to both children and adults are characterized by having both partners feel secure about a future. Having a strong sense of a future is partly believed by experts in commitment to foster more give and take as well as a willingness to sacrifice for one another in healthy ways (e.g., Wieselquist, Rusbult, Foster, & Agnew, 1999; see Fincham, Stanley, & Beach, 2007).

In their review of the literature on the concept of commitment, Stanley et al. (2010) argued that the primary psychological function of commitment is to secure the attachment between committed, romantic partners. Historically, and at least in modern times, this is a central aspect of what people seek in marriage. A clear, positive commitment can

reinforce a sense of security, trust, and safety not only about the present but also about the future. That allows for investment in the present. Contrast that with what happens to many couples when stress or circumstances overwhelm their equilibrium. Many couples threaten the future of their relationship when frustrated in the moment. This is just one of the ways that communication patterns like escalation directly intersect with the preservation of commitment. We have often observed in working with couples that, when deeply frustrated, it is all too easy to make comments such as, "I knew this would never work," "Why did we ever get together," and "There's the door, you can leave anytime you want." Such comments often reflect the frustration of the moment but also undermine the foundation of the future. Perhaps especially during such stressful times as presented by COVID-19, couples may need help to recognize this danger so that they can protect the sense of a future even when everything around them says the future is uncertain. Couples need both to circumvent escalation that compounds such threats and reinforce that they are a team and that they have a future.

There is research on times of crisis and the effects on relationships that bears on commitment. Cohan and Cole (2002) noted that disasters "unfold in the context of close relationships," and that it is important for there to be more focus not merely on individual well-being but also on the personal relationships of couples and families (p. 14). They conducted a rare study on how natural disasters affected marriage, birth, and divorce by comparing parts of the state of South Carolina that were hit hard by hurricane Hugo in 1989 with parts of the state that were mostly untouched. They suggested that stress theory would mostly predict that marriages and births would decline while divorce would increase, and that attachment theory would predict that marriages and births would increase, and divorces would decline. They found all three to increase. They concluded that life-threatening events may motivate people to take action about their most important, close relationships. In other words, people may conclude that, if their time is fleeting, it will be best to get on with what they most want to do. For many, it appears that they had a surge in motivation to increase their investment in their relationships, but, for others, the surge was in their commitment to move on. The COVID-19 crisis could produce similar responses to commitment, although the characteristics of the stressor are quite different and are likely to be stretched out over a long period of time.

In a similar vein, sociologists have studied the probable impact of the great recession of 2008 on the divorce rate. This was a crisis with a decided economic focus that may be relevant to the economic effects of the current crisis. Cohen (2014) used data from the American Community Survey (U. S. Census Bureau) and found evidence for a downward spike in divorce after 2008. His findings suggested some suppression of divorce that may have occurred for several years following the crisis. There were possible further, complicated and moderating factors such as if a person has a college degree or not. Wilcox (2011) used a national survey of Americans conducted from 2010 to 2011 to study the effects of the great recession, finding that many people reported that it had deepened their commitment to their marriages, and that a considerable number of people who had been considering divorce postponed or discontinued those plans. More than half those surveyed reported that the recession had strained their marriage, but an even greater percentage (58%) reported that the recession had deepened their commitment to it.

These findings are entirely consistent with what Lewandowski (2020) reported from his national survey, noted earlier. In the DU class-conducted survey, the few partners who were thinking about breaking up before COVID-19 did not do so (at least, so far as the time of being surveyed), and the vast majority reported that breaking up was not an option. These sentiments were not expressed as a matter of commitment as constraint (having limited options to go somewhere else), but in a manner more consistent with increased dedication to their relationships and the future, in line with what Wilcox (2011)

reported about the great recession. In fact, many in the DU class-conducted survey reported that their relationship was more important because of the COVID-19 crisis.

Across these various findings, there is evidence that many couples become more committed during times of crisis. However, we have yet to see how this massive upheaval affects the long-term future of existing marriages and committed relationships. At least in the early stages of dealing with a large, externally driven, crisis, many people may double down on their commitment to their partner. If that is generally true in relatively healthy relationships, it suggests an opportunity for relationship therapists and educators to work with couples to capture this surge in desire to protect their relationships. It may be a time to capitalize on an increase in motivation, wherein practitioners can help couples reinforce skills and strategies for protecting the relationship from the effects of stress and strain over time and build strategies for providing support to one another.

## Community Safety

In our work, we most often emphasize three types of safety already listed (e.g., Markman et al., 2010), but add emphasis on this fourth type of safety in contexts where people do not live in a matrix of adequate resources and security, such as in working with those who are economically disadvantaged. This type of safety speaks to context, which, as numerous scholars have noted, matters a great deal for what happens between two partners, especially when there is scarcity or stress (e.g., Karney & Bradbury, 2005). Economic strain, in particular, has a long been associated with negative effects on marital quality (e.g., Conger et al., 1990). A particular dynamic of the COVID-19 pandemic is the sudden, extraordinary amount of job loss. Unemployment has soared, although there are strong theories (and a hope) that this type of external shock (compared to long-term, underlying, structural weaknesses in economies) can be followed by strong recoveries, especially if the shock is not long lasting. That could be an overly optimistic view. Regardless, in all ways and at all times, investment in the present requires a belief in a future in which those investments build gains and not losses—including in relationships. What we all see at this time is massive uncertainty and some couples will have trouble investing right now in their relationship.

It is not merely that many types of work and job placement simply stopped or got put on hold, the COVID-19 pandemic is likely to change many ways we do things in the future. Some of this can be anticipated (more work from home, less emphasis on office spaces), but other changes can only be guessed at. For example, what will be the long-term impact on the retail, travel, and restaurant industries? Although many couples have been relatively less affected, some are strongly affected, and dramatically so. Imagine a couple where he works in some element of the hospitality industry and she works in sales at a department store. Will those jobs come back? Dramatic shrinkage seems likely, which means uncertainty, reduction in income, stress, loss, and change. One key issue for far too many families is the stability of their housing situation. People may be moving in with other family members or moving to lower quality housing, which puts them more at risk for getting the virus and passing it on. Further, it is well understood that close quarters also makes for more fragile tempers.

There is another challenge for couples that is directly related to community-level changes associated with COVID-19. We had already been going through a prolonged period of couples becoming more isolated at home, or “Alone Together,” as Amato and colleagues put it (Amato, Booth, Johnson, & Rogers, 2007). Couples have become less likely to engage in civic or other community-based activities in a kind of “Bowling Alone” for two phenomena (to adopt the phrasing of Putnam (2000)). Consider how dramatically the current crisis reinforces this trend. Eli Finkel has written about the ever-increasing focus

people place on finding a partner where the two can be everything to one another (Finkel, 2017), not only meeting basic needs for safety and provision but expecting a partner to be a vehicle of self-fulfillment. The couples who are able to achieve such relationships may do fine, of course, but others may experience a reality that exceeds their ability to be completely supportive in the context of increasing social isolation. Many other couples already had a fragile system of mutual support as well as supportive others around their relationships.

At the present time, it is clear that some have found ways to expand or at least supplement their social connections through online meetings and systems. But many other people have to be more socially isolated than were before COVID-19, placing increased stress on the internal dynamics of relationships of their relationships at home as their community connections shrink. If the trend is not countered by the increased use of electronic or other emerging ways to connect, many couples will see a decline in their network and social capital—which, like economic disadvantage, is associated with increased risk (for more on the importance of social connection and capital for couples, see Halpern-Meekin, 2019). This is yet another way in which COVID-19 threatens the external resources of couples. Practitioners should consider ways they might help or encourage couples to maintain or rebuild social connections given the way things are now.

Other challenges face couples associated with the processes of our societies “opening up,” which is in progress in many places as we write this paper. Will the restrictions and new community norms around safety further restrict couples who have relied on being “out and about” as part of how their relationship works? Will customs around wearing masks, and the potential peer pressure to do so—or not to do so, depending on one’s social circle—cause increased strife for some couples, leading to avoidance of going out? How two partners deal with the challenge of external stress related to community safety will depend on both external resources but also on their ability to talk safely about important issues, support each other emotionally, and work together as team.

### **ACTIONS TO PROTECT AND PRESERVE SAFETY: THE THREE KEYS**

We and our colleagues emphasize these three keys in all our work designed to strengthen couples because they are easy to remember, and they imply strategies that can protect and build their relationships. In the moments that count, remembering and acting in some way on one of these keys can make the difference between drawing closer together in emotional connection and support or experiencing anger, distance, and damage. We cover these in a particular order, here, reflecting the way we prioritize messages and strategies with couples for dealing with extraordinary challenges such as seen in this pandemic.

#### **Decide, Don’t Slide**

This key finds its way into our work with couples via all the research we have done with our colleagues (especially Galena Rhoades) on cohabitation, and how couples who slide through potentially important relationship transitions (like moving in together), rather than making clear decisions about what is happening, are at greater risk on a host of dimensions (Kline et al., 2004; Rhoades, Stanley, & Markman, 2009; Stanley, Rhoades, & Markman, 2006). We cannot describe the background for this context any better than by quoting from a recent blog article (by co-author, Stanley, 2020):

There are two applications of this key, one about transitions and one about moments.



Transitions: People often slide through potentially life-altering relationship transitions. To understand how much this can matter, consider two fundamental aspects of commitment: dedication and constraint. Dedication is about the “want to.” It encompasses the desire for a future together, the will to sacrifice for one another, and having an identity of being a couple (in addition to being individuals). In contrast, constraints reflect the mix of things that would be either costs and losses of leaving or poor alternatives. Constraints can be good or bad, depending on the quality of a relationship. If you have a great marriage, you have a lot of constraints. If you have a damaging, dangerous, awful marriage, you likely also have a lot of constraints.

Constraints can be chosen or not, and that makes all the difference in understanding commitment. Commitment is making a choice to give up other choices. It is choosing to be constrained because you believe in the path you are choosing. Deciding. In contrast, sliding often increases constraints, but they are not chosen as much as experienced, as inertia creeps up to continue forward on a path not clearly chosen. When a transition can deeply impact what follows, it’s worth deciding and not sliding.

Many couples will experience the downsides of sliding in the context of this widely felt, worldwide transition that may be larger than any since World War II. What has changed in the lives of most couples? For many, nearly everything around them, even if they are maintaining prior levels of closeness and relationship satisfaction. For some, the COVID-19 crisis will be a time where they draw together, re-connect, and strengthen their commitment and emotional safety. For others, it will be a time of de-stabilization, where the work many of us do will play a more obvious role. Regardless of the path couples have traveled so far, this is a time when roles and routines are altered—some, for years to come.

For example, even after we are well beyond the immediate crisis stage(s) of this pandemic, many people will not return to work as they used to do it. Some may not return to the work they knew at all and will lose substantial income. Many more people than before will be working from home. Others will experience long-term unemployment and all the massive stress this puts on individuals and couples. Still, others are working as much or more than ever outside their home, but under conditions of greater danger than they used to experience—a danger that they can easily bring back home. The examples of medical professionals living in campers outside their homes to protect their spouse and children come to mind as the extreme example, but many are dealing with a spectrum of challenges of a similar nature. Most concerning are the impacts on those making lower incomes in necessary fields such as in grocery stores, hospitals, or in any number of other types of work where they are more directly in harm’s way from the virus and COVID-19 than most. These are extraordinary stressors. Nevertheless, although external stressors clearly dominate the experience of life for many in ways that call for societal action, that does not undermine the importance of encouraging all individuals (and couples) to make decisions where they can to protect themselves from further loss. For example, across themes of all the types of safety we described earlier, there is plenty of work that practitioners can do to help individuals manage anger and frustration as well as they can so that a really tough day does not increase their odds of a lost job or relationship.

We can encourage couples to clearly see the degree to which this present crisis is an inflection point—a series of them, really—where they can make decisions and not just slide into letting things happen to them. For example, we encourage couples to talk about changes in who does what around the home. About responsibilities about money. About changes in spending or savings patterns. Here is a list of ideas of things couples can go through and make decisions about from Stanley (2020) and from the DU class-conducted survey:

- Who does this or that in this present time?
- How does working remotely affect you as a couple?
- If one of you is still working outside the home, how does that affect you both and the family? Is there added risk and concern? How can you work together coping with that?
- What does positive time together look like, now?
- Money, income, debt—in what ways (if any) will it have been better to make clear decisions?
- Do you need to adjust parenting patterns (especially, given disruptions in regular school and work routines)?
- What rules will you set for seeing friends and families?
- How do you deal with family members who are at high risk, are sick, or who pass away?
- What do you do with wedding plans (or other family ceremonies)?

In our work as both couple therapists and relationship educators, we have long suggested that couples explore and share important expectations in their relationship, rather than leaving things unsaid (Markman et al., 2010; see also Baucom & Epstein, 1990). Couples can decide to take the time to talk about their hopes and dreams for their relationships as well as what they expect concerning everyday tasks as they spend more time together. In most of our books (e.g., Markman et al, 2010; Stanley, Trathen, McCain, & Bryan, 2014), we provide a variety of topics couples can consider in order to clarify and communicate about their expectations, but couples don't need a book to map out some of the obvious places to start. Our list above gets at many of the important areas that are affected by COVID-19. The concept is simple. We want people to think about and share expectations, and not simply assume being on the same page as partners. That is all the more true during times of upheaval. Too many things are different now, not to talk about what has changed. "Decide, don't slide" is a simple reminder to optimize thinking carefully and working together during times of transition.

One area of expectations that many couples with younger children may need help addressing revolves around how their children's routines have been disrupted. For some couples, having their children at home more than usual will alter a fragile equilibrium they may have achieved about work outside and inside the home. Consider the couple where both work outside the home and had relied on childcare or school as the major place for the children to be for much of the day. In the context of lockdowns or restrictions on workplaces, and especially where schools are closed, couples now have to cope with who is watching the kids while both are working. For couples who already have difficulties with parenting, the current crisis has likely created more problems such as this and others. Couples dealing with co-parenting issues can benefit from a skilled helper, such as a therapist experienced in working with couples, to help them navigate these difficult waters with openness and emotional safety. While beyond the scope of this paper, we want to note that for single parents, these issues are even more difficult, and the pandemic may provide an important opportunity for therapists and educators to reach out to help people who do not usually received such services. Many individual parents will be juggling co-parenting routines with an ex-partner, which can be even more challenging than parenting within an ongoing relationship.

In our work with couples, we have found that this principle of "decide, don't slide" has another important application when it comes to dealing with opportunities and risks in the moment. A moment is also a transition to the next. Many couples have conversations that do not go well because they slide into negative interactions when trying to talk about important issues. Again, from Stanley (2020):

Moments: “Decide, don’t slide” also pertains to moments where you could either let something hurtful happen, decide to let something go, or even do something to show you care.

Many are on edge and worried. Fuses are short. One says X, the other hears Y, and off you go into an argument or, almost worse, a missed opportunity to connect. In these moments, sliding is the easy but costly path.

In all our work, we emphasize the importance of having a way to put the brakes on damaging interactions. We use the metaphor of time out, and stress this in training therapists and relationship educators. Many practitioners emphasize the idea in one way or another. While some couples naturally do this well or have little need for help learning how to do this, others can learn strategies to protect what they have together by limiting damage at moments where things go sideways. We like to emphasize that couples need to develop an agreed-upon signal for when a time out is needed so that the behavior is not mis-construed as withdrawal. We also stress that the type of time out that couples need to be good at using is the type sports teams take, not the type where a parent puts a child in time out. It is the team that needs the time out in order to get their raggedy act together, call a time in, and play better as a team. Time outs can be longer or shorter depending on what has occurred. After things have cooled down, two partners should check if they need to talk more about whatever triggered the conflict. Stanley (2020) notes that even just one partner can do a lot to make a time out happen while reducing the chances of further escalation:

One person can use this concept to stop a slide to the bad side: “I’m not at my best right now but I know we should talk about this. Can we a little break and come back to this in a bit?” That can work, especially if the “come back” part happens. It works all the better if both partners have decided to use the strategy and use an agreed-upon signal for when taking a time out is the smart play—like using the words “Time Out” in a constructive way. “I would like it if we took a Time Out on this for a little bit.”

The above example demonstrates a simple way to describe a skill that can be exceptionally valuable, yet this is difficult to do precisely when needed most. Couples can benefit from a lot of help in defining how they will use time out, what signals it, and what behaviors they will engage in during a time out to calm down, in order for them to successfully apply the brakes when needed. This advice is not unique, and certainly not only applicable in times of a pandemic, but it may be especially needed for those couples who easily escalate. During distancing and restriction strategies dealing with COVID-19, there are added stressors, and many couples are together for more time than in the past. For some especially volatile couples, or in relationships where one is more oriented toward control, such strategies will not be enough to help both the two individuals and the couple to become safe. As noted earlier, practitioners should be alert to situations where physical safety will be difficult to achieve, and be prepared to provide information, referrals, or knowledge of how to access other systems to become safe.

Once couples learn the skills and principles associated with managing conflict better, they are less likely to slide into patterns that exacerbate conflict. Thus, improved communication and clarity about expectations (and opportunities), along with decisions for how two partners can handle the most difficult moments together, will be exactly the type of simple strategies that practitioners can help couples with at this time.

### **Make it Safe to Connect**

Our primary focus with this key is on emotional and physical safety, though all other aspects of safety mentioned earlier apply. “Make it safe to connect” emphasizes what each partner, and both together, can do to keep it safe to talk, connect, and provide emotional

support to one another. Feeling accepted and connected are the foundations of being open and vulnerable in healthy relationships. As we noted earlier, anxiety is up in these times of COVID-19, for obvious and multi-determined reasons. Couples who will thrive have ways to stay connected and feel supported. The data from the DU class-conducted survey clearly show that many couples are feeling more supported. One of the specific things noted by many was that they were expressing more gratitude for their partner during this time that has made us all, all too aware of how fleeting life and opportunity can be. That is something any couples can be encouraged to do more of in therapy or relationship education.

As already noted more than once, there is a particularly clear association between financial strain and damaging conflict in relationships. One of the obvious, but often not considered, things couples can do is place boundaries around the times when they talk about money or other more volatile topics. That's deciding not sliding in a way that can directly promote emotional safety. If one or both partners have a vague feeling that conflict can erupt at any moment because some small event triggers the topic of money, it is nearly impossible to relax in each other's presence. Couples have a better chance of keeping the hot topics off limits during relaxed time together if they also decide when the better moments to talk about issues constructively will happen.

What making it safe to connect means in action is that each partner does his or her best about what they can do in the moment—this moment—to foster closeness and connection. In our approach (that is inherently based on cognitive-behavioral marital therapy), we teach skills and strategies for communicating more effectively and preserving emotional safety during conversations that otherwise may be difficult. We have long maintained that couples can do better with some conversations by adding a little structure. Setting a time, or at least, deciding in the moment to enter into a discussion—rather than sliding into it—adds structure. Establishing some turn taking, with each focusing on their own message when speaking but focusing on their partner's when listening, can improve many conversations that may otherwise lead to conflict, withdrawal, or avoidance. Of course, we emphasize the Speaker Listener Technique we teach in PREP, but therapists and educators usually have their own preferred methods for helping couples communicate and handle conflict better. In our view, this present time is a very good time for placing extra emphasis on this.

Although there are obviously many different approaches to working with couples, all emphasize, in one way or another, safe, open, communication that can foster closeness and understanding without damaging interactions [including Cognitive-Behavioral Marital Therapy (CBT), Enhanced CBT (Epstein & Baucom, 2002), Integrative Behavioral Couple Therapy (Christensen, Doss, & Jacobson, 2020), and Emotional Focused Therapy for Couples (e.g., Greenberg & Goldman, 2013; Johnson, 1996)]. It is our impression (by what we read, what we hear others say, and by what we see in therapy training videos) that most couples therapists utilize some structured communication approaches in their work with couples, no matter their model. The conversations couples sometimes need to have can be inherently difficult, and we believe that some structure can be especially helpful at precisely such times. The differences in approach may mostly lie in how overt the teaching is, how much practice and coaching a couple is given, and whether or not the couple is being taught to use such strategies at home when they need them or if such methods are mostly occurring during therapy sessions, intermediated by the therapist. Whatever the method, structure helps people behave better when stressed or when the task is challenging. (If you do not have a particular approach that you like better than any other, and you want to try ours, there is a 19-minute video teaching the technique we teach freely available online at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3JmGR8XHbJY>).

Consider the points made about the last key, “Decide, don’t slide” in this context of emotional safety. For couples to have a few good talks about decisions they could make now instead of letting things slide, it will take having the skills and confidence to talk without fighting, and to talk in ways that foster emotional safety. There are many pathways to helping couples get there, but there they must get.

More simply, this COVID-19 period could be one of the greatest times in most of our lives to reinforce the simple power of listening and paying attention to one’s partner—of being responsive and caring. As noted in the new study by Balzarini et al. (2020), there is a strong theoretical and human rationale for helping partners support each other around stress. In fact, we believe that such times offer opportunities for couples to experience a closer bond because each showed care for the other around the expression of some fear, anxiety, or sadness. Feeling heard and supported in the time of worry is a way to make intimacy. Nearly everyone can stand to be reminded of the effectiveness of listening, with less emphasis on finding a solution and more on letting the other be where they are.

Another core strategy for making it safe to connect is not allowing it to be unsafe to connect. Some form of a time out strategy such as we covered earlier is of essential value for couples who are striving to put this key into practice. If we could only teach couples one thing that might make the biggest difference, we believe it would be how to successfully interrupt behaviors that compromise emotional or physical safety.

Before leaving this specific topic, we should note that there are couples who will have exceptional difficulties during this time of crisis because one or both individuals already had significant mental health struggles or because their relationship was already substantially distressed—or both. Further, we know that many people will experience increases in depression and anxiety during this crisis. The good news is that, although depression and anxiety and relationship quality are interrelated (e.g., Whisman, 2007), couples therapy is generally effective for treating co-occurring mental health symptoms and relationship distress (Beach & Whisman 2012; Fischer & Baucom, 2018; Kavitha et al., 2014). Some couples are going to need a lot of help as the strains of all the changes from COVID-19 drag on.

## **Do Your Part**

This last key is needed for the other keys to work. Each partner needs to do his or her own part. That is, to focus less on what their partner should or could do and more on what is under their own control, and what they can do to protect and strengthen their relationship. Howard loves to quote John F. Kennedy (and hopes one day yet to make it to the moon, harkening back to Kennedy’s decision to make that happen; Elon Musk, are you listening? Please?). Howard often paraphrases JFK to couples: “Ask not what your partner can do for you, but what you can do for your relationship.” Of course, we also value people being able to ask directly for what they want or for some improvement in their relationship. And yet, we believe most people would do well to focus a little more on things under their own control rather than on things that require someone else, namely their partner, to act. In our work with couples, we often teach people that, at moments when they are prone to react negatively, to stop and say to themselves, “What can I do right now to be the best possible partner in our relationship?” That also holds strongly for moments of seeing one’s partner feeling vulnerable.

During this time of pandemic, when so much feels out of control for so many, people will do best to focus on what they have the most control over and that will most often be their own behavior. This fits a larger focus of helping couples to focus on dynamic (changeable) rather than static risk factors that they face (Markman et al., 2010; Stanley, 2001). Done well, this individual advice strongly supports the identity of the couple, as each can see

evidence that the other is trying. Various types of studies suggest that it reinforces commitment and couple identity to be able to see both one's partner and oneself making an effort (e.g., Stanley et al., 2010; Wieselquist et al., 1999).

Another aspect of "do your part" is seen in behavior that can interrupt chains of blame and negative interactions. When beset by stress and difficulty, it is all too easy to look for someone to blame, and to lash out. We want to help people do their part to manage this by recognizing the destructive impact of negative interpretations; people under stress may routinely make the worst interpretation of their partner's behavior and that leads to added difficulties. Weiss (1980) coined the term "sentiment override" to describe how strong feelings can bias perception of one's partner—a process that is clearly damaging when one is seeing more negatives in the motivations and behavior of their partner than are really there. Only the individual, by doing their own part, can work against unfair negative interpretations of their partners behavior. For example, if one believes strongly enough that their partner does not care for them but only wants to control them (supposing this is not objectively true), that is all they will see. For those struggling a great deal with this, it can take a fair amount of direct, cognitive work to help them see what they are not seeing.

There are many simple examples of negative interpretations that are likely being widely experienced in households across the globe as we are all living in the shadow of COVID-19. It goes like this. One partner reminds the other of something about basic safety regarding the virus. "Hey, you just petted Joe's dog while we were walking. You should wash your hands." "Do you really need to go back to the store again? Can't you just stay in?" Or, "I don't think you are wearing that mask, correctly, it goes like this." For some, the flash point will be something as seemingly harmless as saying, "I really want our grandchildren to come over today and give them a hug, okay honey?," to which the other might blurt out, "what, you want to kill us?" Even simple reminders about safety related to the virus can be interpreted as based in control rather than care.

One of the advantages that couples can have during such times is to act as a check and balance on each other, to take care and be better protected. It can be too easy to be irritated at something that is good for us. Sure, some will be obsessive about this in ways that damage the relationship, but for many couples, each nudging the other to be safer will be a good thing. The behaviors can also be seen as evidence of care and commitment. However, these moments are ripe with opportunity for frustration and misattributions about what the behavior of each partner means, and attributions tell an important part of the story of how relationships fare in life (Bradbury & Fincham, 1990; Fincham, 2001). It is not only what actually happens that is important, but also what is seen or believed about it.

In otherwise healthy relationships, one of the things each person can do to do their part is work against negative interpretations, looking for evidence of positives that undermine the negative, working to see the best in their partner. In many relationships, this is not a mere mental trick. One specific strategy that may help some couple is to work toward blaming the situation—the virus, the pandemic, and the economy—rather than each other. Two partners need to team up to fight these negative forces. Practitioners can help people do this.

## PRESERVING THE POSITIVE

People do not commit to a partner to have someone they like arguing with, or because having a partner may help them survive some challenging time in life. Most people are looking for life-long love, including fun, friendship, romance, and satisfying sensual and sexual connections. When people are in crisis mode, it is natural to let the positive things

slide and focus on managing problems. But anxiety and vigilance are not conducive to being connected with another, emotionally. It may take more effort than usual to find ways to make positive times together happen.

One of the most powerful things we think couples can do during such times is something difficult enough for many couples to do during normal times: Make time for the best things and protect those times from conflict and the need to deal with issues. That means deciding to set time aside where both partners understand that the difficult stuff is off limits. If a couple can put boundaries on discussions and decisions that are more difficult, they can create more space and time together where each can relax and enjoy their relationship. Making the time is also a manifestation of the priority placed on something, sending a message about commitment.

As already discussed, the COVID-19 crisis will provide some, maybe many, couples with a bump in motivation for making changes that increase positive ways to connect. A number of simple findings we mentioned earlier are consistent with the idea that some people will experience a surge in their commitment to their partners. Practitioners can help couples build on this motivation and use it to increase positives. In the DU class-conducted survey, people reported many fun things they are doing together that differed from their prior patterns, including such things as reading books to each other. Other things were also reported that are nearly ideal during social distancing and other restrictions, such as taking walks together or hugging more. These are simple, powerful behaviors that support positive connection, and that are also likely to have a direct, physiological impact on reducing anxiety. That's the good stuff in times like this. For other couples, it may be playing board games or making love. There is not one list, but we can all help every couple we work with to create their own and get after it.

Some couples will struggle with having different expectations, such as if having a lot more time around each other means more time engaging in positive things together. What if one partner values a lot of personal space, and their arrangement has worked fine for both of them but is now disrupted? What if going into work every day was just the amount of relief from time together that allowed a couple to do well? The expectation of having immensely more time to focus on the relationship, or in doing positive activities, might be unreasonable and damaging for some couples even while it is a boon to others. Many couples are having to adjust to another difficulty where one or both partners are home a lot more than normal at the same time there is greater pressure on the job—a job that now being done, at home, virtually. Still, other couples will struggle with the fact of having increased potential free time, together, but a reality where a lot of that time goes into playing video games or watching Netflix, alone. There are many such shifts that are not easy for all couples to navigate.

Just having a bigger bucket of time does not make for having a fuller bucket of positive time spent together. People need to talk and decide, and be intentional about making time for the positive things they want to do (and can do) in this context together, all while balancing individual needs for space. Times of disequilibrium are also opportunities for therapists and relationship educators to help.

### **REMOTE ACCESS MAY BE A BOON**

There are many downsides to restrictions that make it difficult to see couples in person—in the room, as it were. And yet, this limitation may lead to an explosion of people becoming more comfortable with services delivered virtually, such as in the burgeoning forms of telehealth. These methods allow more practitioners to reach and work with couples in their home environments, in situations that, for many, might better approximate their more typical dynamics. It has always been a challenge to get couples to generalize

what is learned in the office or workshop to their life outside those contexts. This might be a moment where we can get that much closer to where couples live.

Methods of remote access also can reduce the barriers for some couples to get help, such as around baby-sitting or transportation, or from the sheer distances involved in people who live in rural communities getting services. In many respects, there is no turning back. One of the ways that the COVID-19 crisis has opened up new opportunities is that a vastly larger number of people have been pushed to become comfortable with virtual contact and telehealth systems. If you work with couples, there is an opportunity in all this.

## CONCLUSION

In the University of Denver Couples Clinic that Howard runs, therapists have found that many couples have used the current restrictions and increases in time together to focus on their relationship, including using skills learned in therapy to talk about important issues that have been long-standing or that have arisen because of the present crisis. For example, one couple who reported ongoing disagreements about parenting styles said they have used this time in therapy to drill down on their parenting differences and learn ways to improve their parenting alliance. That is a great thing for their relationship and their children. Another couple who had struggled with intimacy and affection used a brainstorming procedure we emphasize to create a list of things to start doing to increase time for fun and friendship. Sometimes, simple procedures can lead to workable plans to increase positives, like holding hands while watching a show or expressing appreciation and gratitude each night.

Are these kinds of examples exceptions or the rule during such times? There is no high-quality evidence yet available for understanding how the COVID-19 crisis affects the average person in their most important relationships. And, we know nothing yet about what those effects will look like long-term for couples. However, our gut sense is that a lot of what couples need right now from practitioners is what we all usually do, but with special awareness and focus on the aspects of our strategies that may be most needed in the shadow of COVID-19. When people seek help for their relationships, the best we can do is be ready with specific, actionable ideas for how they might make the best of the moment to build on what they have. As the work of Cohan and Cole (2002) and Wilcox (2011) suggested, there are opportunities resulting in a crisis for change based in a deepening commitment.

These are extraordinary times. We do not yet know how the course of this particular worldwide crisis plays out. Will there be wave after wave of people falling ill with many loved ones dying as in the 1918 "Spanish Flu" Pandemic? Will the economic shock lead to a recession dwarfing the great recession of 2008, and harkening back to the great depression? No one knows. What is certain is uncertainty. And opportunity.

## CONFLICT OF INTEREST

Scott Stanley and Howard Markman own a business that develops and sells relationship education curricula, and both have published books and produced other materials that are mentioned in this paper. There are no other conflicts of interest.

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