The Strain the Covid Pandemic Is Putting on Marriages

By Anne Marie Chaker

For Kristin and Ira Shapiro, the Covid pandemic has created new tensions. Laterly, the spouses have argued about Mr. Shapiro's travel schedule; Ms. Shapiro doesn't like that it creates child-care headaches. But Mr. Shapiro says it's important to his work as a Washington D.C. think tank director, and offers emotional reprieve too.

"I would be lying if I said there haven't been tears," says Ms. Shapiro, a 37-year-old attorney. She is confident they will make it through together. But for now, their stress level is high. "This has been a very difficult period," she says. Even in the best of times, marriage and relationships are hard work. But the pandemic has produced a pressure cooker inside homes, straining even strong partnerships and, experts say, likely breaking others. Families are cooped up, with spouses trying to work while still taking care of their kids. Job losses, caring for at-risk elderly parents, arguments over what's safe, and disagreements over school reopening are all taking a toll.

"Where there was a crack, there is now a rupture," says Kathryn Smerling, a family therapist in New York City. Dr. Smerling says she has gotten about 20 calls for appointments from couples in the past four months, compared with a handful in the same period a year ago.

Susan Myres, president of the American Academy of Matrimonial Lawyers, which represents 1,600 members nationwide, says she expects more divorce filings to increase somewhat between 20% and 25% in the second half of this year. For much of the lockdown, most state courts weren't processing divorce filings or struggling to manage case flow, so it isn't currently possible to assemble meaningful nationwide statistics, she says. But anecdotal, she says, member attorneys have received more queries than normal since March.

More than one-quarter of adults said they know a couple likely to break up, separate or divorce when the coronavirus pandemic ends. "When couples have external stress, it affects how they interact with each other," says Paula Pietromonaco, a professor emerita at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, who wrote a recent analysis on the potential impact of Covid-19 on marriages for American Psychologist. "Interactions become less constructive. People are likelier to blame their partner.

Dr. Pietromonaco says research has demonstrated the toll that outside stress can take on a couple's relationship. One recent study published in the Journal of Family Psychology observed 418 newlyweds couples. Spouses who experienced greater external stress, from work stressors to financial problems, had lower relationship satisfaction than couples with fewer external stressors. People spend years regulating their relationships—"when to be together, when to be apart," says Richard Weisbord, a family psychologist at the Harvard Graduate School of Education. Now, quarantines and other restrictions have scrambled all of that. "You can't regulate when to be apart and when to be together. Sometimes you confront things that you avoided for many years." he says.

Even in the most communicative partnerships, there is more stress. "We have a strong marriage," says Courtney Westling, a public-school official in Portland, Ore. "But this has not been easy." She and her husband of seven years, Mike, have spent recent months negotiating new work spaces in their home as well as child care for their sons, ages 3 and 5.

Before, routines gave them their own separate lives—and something to come home and talk about while eating dinner or after putting the kids to bed. "That was our time together," Ms. Westling says. Now, she says, "I don't have that time with my husband," she says. "Everything is harder.

Mr. Westling, a communications consultant, agrees. In a recent heart-to-heart with his wife, he said: "I am doing my best and it feels like my best isn't very good right now." There was a time at the end of the day when you would talk about some important things. It was well, what's been tough for you? you'd say. Now it just feels like everything is tough.

They have argued more about which parent is handling distance learning and how to expand their quarantine bubble. Ms. Westling says she and her husband remain strong, and they haven't had any make-up-break fights. "It's all things around the edges, when you add them all up it's a lot.

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Closed or backed up, she says, and many clients have felt stuck. "It's added stress to an already stressful situation," she says. In some cases, tensions can mount into violence. "The National Domestic Violence Hotline says total calls—texts, calls and online chats—increased 9% to more than 60,000 in the period from mid-March to mid-May, compared with about three in that same period last year.

Sodoma Law, a family law practice based in Charlotte, N.C., consulted with 263 new clients on divorce issues from April to July compared with 217 clients in that same period a year ago, says Nicole Sodoma, founder and managing principal of the firm. Supportive is usually when separating parents make the transition to two households, holding themselves time to acclimate before the school year begins. But courts have either been closed or backed up, she says, and many clients have felt stuck. "It's added stress to an already stressful situation," she says. In some cases, tensions can mount into violence. "The National Domestic Violence Hotline says total calls—texts, calls and online chats—increased 9% to more than 60,000 in the period from mid-March to mid-May, compared with about three in that same period last year.

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Thinks twice about big relationship decisions during this time

White Plains, N.Y. divorce attorney Leslie Montanile says she is advising potential clients under marital duress to take a step back and pause. Recognize that everyone is under added strain, and that a partner's out-of-character behavior may really be about something deeper. "Maybe what you don't recognize is that your partner is actually cautious about the uncertainty, maybe his job or some underlying health issues, and it causes them to act out, but that doesn't mean it's the end of a marriage." That's particularly true in a relationship that had previously been solid, she says. "Recognize that it is not living in ordinary times," she says.

How to handle Covid stress in relationships

Keep in mind that this is a unique situation.

Marc Gieseke, a professor in human development at the University of Texas at Austin who studies relationships, considers two weeks of daily diaries from more than 85 couples in April and May. Preliminary findings show that couples were more attuned to Covid-19 as a principal reason for their current relationship difficulties—rather than some flaw in their partner—are fairing better. "We've found that spouses does something that upset you, it's okay to veer into blaming it on some character flaw. That is not a good sign," he says. Couples that tend to see "situational attributions" she says, do better. "If I have the mentality that this is not because of the situation and not my partner, that should be beneficial."