How to Survive Self-Isolation (Especially with your Spouse/Partner)

By Rick Atkinson

Self-isolation is now part of battling the Coronavirus.

Our society is experiencing a pandemic caused by the spread of the Coronavirus, something we've never seen before. As an action step to curb the pandemic's effect, we're being asked by authorities to self-isolate in our place of residence.

For many, we're living with our spouse/partner, and other family members twenty-four, seven. The close quarters, abnormal anxiety, and unfamiliarity of constant chatter or long periods of silence can be unnerving, and bothersome. As a result, tempers may rise, impatience flares, and negative comments can be made.

So how can we successfully navigate our new surroundings?

Let's step back and think about our relationship with partners/spouses before the Coronavirus pandemic. The average couple normally doesn't spend a lot of time together. As partners, we are busy making a living, raising a family and fixing up a home. In a recent survey, it was found the average married couple spends only three or four hours a week together, without the children, and that may be collapsing on the couch and watching TV.

Due to today's hectic pace, each partner tends to develop his/her schedule and routine around their work, family and home demands. Then an experience like the pandemic comes, and we're forced into close proximity with those we love.

However, a time together filled with good times is not something that just happens. Like all other aspects of life, it requires planning and effort. As part of your plan, it's important to recognize that you and your partner have built up your own space and privacy needs. Each of you needs time to pursue your interests, hobbies, tasks and just 'chill out alone.' One train of thought is if you were apart from your partner eight hours a day during your regular working days, you should plan to be apart approximately four hours a day when in self-isolation. This enables each partner to have his/her own time and space. Be sure to talk with each other about your individual needs and agree on how those needs can be successfully fulfilled.

June and Rob agreed that when in self-isolation, in the mornings, June would indulge in her hobby – oil painting and Rob would work in the garage or do yard work. The couple agreed that they would have lunch together and then, again 'do their own thing' until five o'clock when they'd have a social drink, make dinner and spend the evening together playing board games or watching their favourite TV programs.

You and your spouse need to tell each other what living together means in terms of roles and responsibilities. By doing this, you create a mini job description; it can outline dates, duties, responsibilities and authorities.

Before Mike and Janet began their self-isolation, they discussed who would be responsible for what when restricted to their home. It was mutually decided that Mike would do the emergency grocery shopping...
and garden raking. He would make the bed each morning, prepare for dinner and several other domestic chores. As part of the division of duties, Janet would do the cleaning and vacuuming, washing and drying of clothes, folding and ironing. They agreed that household decorating would be done together. This sharing of responsibilities assisted Mike and Janet build a harmonious working relationship without one partner feeling he or she is doing the lion’s share of the work.

For some couples (and families), however, there is no prior discussion about what self-isolation means to them and who will take care of the numerous life tasks. This often leads to disastrous results.

Paul is a senior manager for a transportation company and is used to telling others what he wanted and by when. His wife, Paula, is a successful advertising executive. When they self-isolated, both looked forward to some downtime and spending time together in their garden. However, three days into their isolation, Paul began to criticize Paula’s housekeeping and cooking. Paul’s nitpicking continued until one day Paula got so angry she stormed out of the door and sat in the family car for four hours. Paul was shocked when he got a text from Paula that she may stay at a friend’s place for the duration of the pandemic.

The essential elements of a happy relationship are feeling valued, being appreciated and loved. When a couple (or family) lacks any one of these positive feedbacks, the relationship suffers and the partners drift apart. Accepting the status quo wears away at a couple’s intimacy and bond.

Though it is easy to take each other for granted, the preparation for long periods together provides you and your spouse an opportunity to assess and enhance your relationship. Are you thoughtful? Do you express appreciation? Have you a sense of fun and adventure? These traits, among others, add to the quality of your relationship and the satisfaction level between you and your partner.

Don't fall into the trap of believing if your partner isn't complaining; everything must be okay. Keep the communication lines open and take the time to listen to your spouse. Encourage discussion about each other's issues and concerns with the mindset of finding solutions.

If you tend to be indifferent about your appearance thinking it's not a big deal, take the time and make an effort to look good – even when lounging around the house.

To add spice to your relationship, do little things such as saying ‘thank you’ to recognize what he/she does for you and your relationship. Spend quality time together and share fun activities. Relationships are like a garden. They require regular care and feeding if they are to grow and become fruitful.

**Exercise:**

List some acts of kindness and appreciation you can do for your spouse to let him or her know how much you love them (i.e. make the coffee/tea in the morning, help with meal preparation, or wash his/her car)

**Little Acts of Kindness**

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Rick Atkinson, president of RA Retirement Advisors, is an expert in holistic retirement planning. Known as Mr. Retirement, he is the author of the bestsellers, *Don’t Just Retire – Live It, Love It!; Strategies for Retiring Right!* and *Why Me? And No Gold Watch!* He is also author of the popular workbooks, *The First Step!* and *Strategies for Retiring Right! The Abridged Workbook.* He can be contacted at ramgt75@rogers.com or 416-282-7320. Visit Rick’s website, www.rickatkinson.ca.