



Stuck at home with your partner? Look to retirees for how to make it work

Across the country an unprecedented number of couples are suddenly spending every waking and sleeping hour of the day with one another.

That's what many older retired couples do too, even when there isn't a pandemic. Their experiences are worth listening to, because many psychology studies find that marriages among the Medicare-eligible set are the happiest of any cohort across the life span.

A review of the research reveals a U-shaped pattern of marital happiness over the life cycle. Early marriage features many positive aspects interlaced with a lot of conflict, while older couples enjoy the highest levels of companionship with low levels of conflict. Midlife couples who are raising children are at the bottom of the U. They tend to see a plunge in their enjoyment of one another, along with an uptick in fighting.

Of course, you might wish you could be securely retired with a partner right now, especially if you're currently on your own. Working remotely or facing unemployment while running a one-room schoolhouse, planning three meals a day without running out of food and worrying about your family's health makes retirement look like a dreamy vacation.

But there are some important similarities between retirement and the isolation required by social distancing. Your social networks have shrunk. Without work connections and friends to meet for lunch or at the gym, a partner becomes more essential than ever. As a therapist

who has been treating couples at all stages of life for almost three decades, I'm currently witnessing the relational challenges of this pandemic, a big magnifier that can bring out the very best and sometimes the worst in relationships.

Lean on me

Older, retired couples primarily focus on supporting one another: Can I depend on you when I need help, feel scared, worry about dying or don't feel well? And am I willing to be that source of comfort and stability when you need me?

No matter the age or stage of the couple, the current pandemic has revealed the need for much more mutual dependency. Can I count on you to protect yourself and us when you go to the grocery store? If I'm feeling scared about my parents' health or mine, can I tell you? If teaching algebra (a subject I struggled with the first time around) to our children has pushed me to the breaking point, can I ask you to take over, kindly and with no eye-rolling?

Now is an ideal time to develop your help-asking muscle and, in turn, to welcome your partner's vulnerability. You can practice now for the years ahead when you'll need to be comfortable with more mutual dependency – being able to count on and be counted on in moments of need and frailty.

Have fewer, kinder fights

My colleague, psychiatrist Bob Waldinger, brings octogenarian couples into his laboratory to study their conflicts. He told me that he often has trouble getting them to reenact a fight. Having had the same fights for decades, these older couples are quite bored at the prospect of another round. They already know the other one's lines. Do we have to do this again?

When older couples do fight, they tend to handle conflict better than younger ones: They are more likely to interject expressions of affection and are less prone to voicing disgust, belligerence and whining. Because the relationship is so central, they may be more likely to forgive their partners or let a grievance slide.

So, try to catch a fight as it starts and consider saying to your partner, "Can we talk about something more interesting? We probably already know how this is going to unfold."

Or, if the conflict is important to air, try to remember that you can say something kind without surrendering, or give a warm nonverbal smile or touch.

It's also a good idea to refrain from making any contemptuous or nasty comments. Couples researchers recommend following the "magic ratio" of 5 to 1 during a fight to secure a stable relationship: Try to say five positive things to every one zinger or negative comment. This ratio, which may seem outlandish, is based on the fact that negative interactions carry more weight than positive ones.

Focus on the present reality

Studies suggest that older couples focus on the present and are better able to accept the relationship as it is, rather than looking ahead to a time when it is going to be transformed.

While they may not discuss their own mortality, older couples' perspectives are shaped by a shorter time horizon. They typically pay more attention to positive experiences, want to understand their emotions better and focus on a smaller group of close friends and family.

Try focusing on what is good about your relationship. What do you admire and feel grateful for? If you focus on

the ways your partner is supportive, research shows that both you and your spouse will feel better about the relationship. Focusing on emotion will not be hard during a pandemic that elicits powerful feelings of anger, fear, worry, grief, love and gratitude. What can you learn about your partner that you didn't know before about his or her strengths, ways of coping and cracks in that coping?

Being stuck with your partner 24/7 may leave you pondering the expression "for better or worse, but not for breakfast, lunch and dinner." But you may come out the other side with some new skills. You don't have to wait for retirement to have a stronger relationship.

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