COVID-19 and the accompanying procedures of shelter-in-place have had a powerful effect on all families but have additional special meanings in the context of families contemplating divorce, divorcing, or carrying out postdivorce arrangements. This paper explores those special meanings for these families. It also offers suggestions for couple and family therapists involved in helping these families during the time of COVID-19.

Keywords: Divorce; COVID-19; Couple Therapy; Family Therapy

The world is experiencing enormous stress with COVID-19, and the broad impact on individual and family life clearly is pervasive (Lebow, 2020). This paper explores the special meanings and challenges for one set of families already experiencing a second major family stress, the prospect of divorce. The addition of the COVID-19 stress to these evolving families is particularly salient. Research about divorcing families shows that, although divorce itself is mostly experienced as a stressor which most can process without severe long-term consequences for mental health and functioning, the addition of other stressors to divorce potentiates negative effects on individual and relational functioning, placing family members at risk for a range of difficulties (Greene, Anderson, Hetherington, Forgatch, & DeGarmo, 2003; Lebow, 2019b). This paper also presents possible ways of mitigating specific problems that emerge for those dealing with divorce during the time of COVID-19 through systemic therapy.

Divorce represents a major watershed for family life (Lebow, 2019b). Most families remain resilient, though highly stressed, through this transition. However, a significant percentage, estimated at 10–20% of the population, fall into processes of conflict and/or cutoff that make individual and relational problems more likely (Drozd, Saini, & Olesen, 2016). Other families divorce well, only to have other significant problems arise from parents forming new relationships or related to other changing aspects of child and family development. I describe the challenges of divorcing/divorced families as well as how therapists might best respond to these families in a recent book (Lebow, 2019b). Here, I highlight the specific challenges that COVID-19, and with it the much-needed public health policy of shelter-in-place, present for these families.

LAUNCHING AND PROCEEDING WITH THE DIVORCE PROCESS

The first place COVID-19 impacts separation and divorce is in the launching of separation and divorce. Here, COVID-19 both potentiates and constrains separation and divorce.
On the potentiating side, for most families moving toward divorce, COVID-19 and shelter-in-place raise stress and create more rigid boundaries between the nuclear family and those outside the family. The now frequently blurred boundary between work and home-life provides new opportunities for conflict, as do the intensification of parenting roles and prevalence of other stressors, such as unemployment and income reduction. Many schools are closed and school-aged children need to be home-schooled as parenting roles get extended to becoming teachers and coaches for their children’s schoolwork and extra-curricular activities. These additional parental responsibilities also increase work stress (especially for women who become responsible for most of these tasks), which readily spills over in couple relationships as roles need to be redefined. Young adult children returning home unexpectedly for undefined periods of time further adds to these stressors.

This can make for a hothouse of interaction during a time in which there are limited possibilities for escape into the outside world. In this context, the sort of cascade moving toward negative sentiment override, and divorce, described by Gottman and Gottman (2015), is enabled in which problems are readily magnified, Couples fall into angry exchanges without resolution or into patterns of demand-withdrawal, which may degenerate into protracted high conflict and sometimes domestic violence. In parallel, social interactions and social support that might mitigate tensions are decreased. The intense environment that has emerged the wake of COVID-19 leads many to greater intimacy, egalitarianism, and connection (see Stanley & Markman, 2020), but for those close to the fault line, acrimony and distance readily increases. In this intense confined environment, thoughts about the advantages of separating and divorcing are for many are intensified.

This all suggests that many more couples may begin divorce in the time of COVID-19, and there have been early data suggesting this may be the case (Prasso, 2020). However, there are forces that move to constrain divorce as well. Divorcing usually occurs in some sporadic stepwise process of physically and emotionally separating households and dealing with several related legal issues having to do with the division of money and time with children. In the wake of COVID-19, all of the specific tasks involved (e.g., deciding on who will move out, that person finding a place to live; showing the children their new home) are rendered so much more difficult. Even the well-travelled recourse of one adult spending a few days in a hotel or with a neighbor or family member as a temporary step in the process is now fully dependent on such a hotel being open or that support person being prepared to deal with the COVID-19 risks involved, and even then raising issues about quarantine. Further, many adults take the lead up to separation as sequential long periods away from the shared home. This becomes far less possible when everyone is at home all the time. Families also must multi-task dealing with the other stressful aspects of COVID-19 while attempting to launch divorcing. In the good divorce, parents typically handle the business of divorce away from children, but now children may be present all the time.

Further, the legal system is either not open or proceeding with a major backlog of cases. For most divorcing couples, filing for divorce has great meaning. Some choose not to file until all the details of divorce are worked out; this works very well among what Connie Ahrons calls “prefect partners” (Ahrons, 1994), those who continue good feeling along with the bad. However, for most divorcing partners there is a reality brought to what may have been threats or the voice of exasperation over the years by filing. That process is now much harder to launch or carry out. For those in violent homes, there also is the prospect of initiating action without typical levels of support in other times from the Court for such special circumstances.

A result is that, while thoughts and wishes to divorce look to be increasing with COVID-19, the paths to divorce are more constrained. For many, this changes the process. Divorce is rarely an impulsive act. For most, it represents the culmination of a process of
disconnection that typically is years in the making with some specific precipitant sparking a decision on the part of one or both partners to divorce. Although the process of divorce is almost always ripe with possibilities for difficulty and legal systems for divorcing at times heighten these possibilities (Lebow, 2019b), most people bring into the process a fairly clear template of the steps involved in relationship dissolution. Additionally, there is a great deal of useful popular psychoeducation about how to divorce, and the strategies for more successful parting are widely disseminated (Ahrons, 1994; Emery, 2016; Emery & Dinescu, 2016). As in the well-known lyric by Paul Simon, there are fifty ways to leave your lover (and a few of those much better than others).

Many “divorcing” couples in the wake of COVID-19 are not moving forward with divorcing; they are stuck in a developmental pause of undetermined time. Although this may have some positive ramifications (e.g., the possibility remains that this constraint might lead to a discernment decision to work further on the marriage before exiting; Doherty & Harris, 2017), more families than usual look likely to become caught up in a protracted hell. In these ways, a pattern typical of difficult divorce may come to be commonplace in more parting couples, in which both partners continue to live together without clarity about arrangements through this tumultuous time.

Here is a case example:

Cheryl and Max had been married for 20 years. Early in the relationship, they both enjoyed time with each other, but much of that time was centered on a contract out of awareness in which Cheryl soothed Max by deferring to him, especially in relation to his many anxieties and need for control. Over time, this core exchange no longer came to work for Cheryl, but Max’s anxiety was too great to allow him to move from this position of being needy and controlling. Max launched many stormy confrontations over a wide range of his complaints, and Cheryl withdrew. Just before COVID-19 came to North America, Cheryl had told Max that she was planning to file for divorce. With the emergence of COVID-19, there no longer was a mechanism to pursue living apart without the complete cooperation of the partners. Cheryl also feared that she would act in a way that might push Max to possibly harm her or himself. And in the one area they partnered well, the lives of their children, they were called upon to run a home school while doing their work at home. Thus, COVID-19 both increased the levels of stress and problems, while also acting as a major block to parting.

**PROCEEDING WITH DIVORCE**

The problem is no less acute for those who are proceeding through divorce. Families involved in more typical divorce often perceive the process as excruciatingly slow. After COVID-19, slowness can turn into a hard stop, particularly if there are difficult and contentious issues that need to be negotiated. Those who get into the legal system face closed or slowed courts. Although there may be processes for handling true emergencies and video versions of court, the system inevitably is less responsive.

Cooperative divorcing partners who enter the process may only be slightly affected given the availability of video mediation and related methods of alternative dispute resolution (Emery & Dinescu, 2016). However, for those with more complex issues and those who are at risk for difficult divorce, the divorce may stretch on, as a two-year process moves to three years, three years to four years, etc. The online processes available in many jurisdictions are necessarily slower and a less than good fit with the sense of urgency of most at this stage of life and the need to establish some new working arrangement.

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1Problems such as Infidelity, couple violence, and child abuse sometimes do make for more urgent and unexpected dissolution.
It is a bit of an anomaly in the world of couple and family therapy to speak of not being able to get divorced or having divorce decelerated as a problem. Yet, it is important to emphasize that divorce and the process of experiencing oneself as able to act on one’s wishes about who to spend one’s life with does act as a mechanism for mitigating anger, contempt, and other problematic feelings that Gottman and Gottman (2015), among others, describes as so pathogenic. The absence of there being a timely mechanism through which to disengage leaves many families in the most vulnerable position, and on some version of lockdown. This pressure cooker may only be in search of a spark to make for an explosion. Beyond the obvious risk to partners already in abusive relationships, there remain endless possibilities for painful, ongoing, destructive patterns of acrimonious conflict or contemptuous distance, which can lead to problematic impacts for all family members. And even if there are no spectacular events, an overly elongated period between marriage and life after is not helpful for anyone.

With such elongated periods, complexities grow. Many divorcing people may already be anchored in new relationships while they have yet to be divorced without anything that resembles infidelity. Children grow older, and their needs change. Financial pictures also change. COVID-19 itself has had an enormous impact on family finances. This, in turn, makes the resolution of conflicts over money more difficult. It also enables the fear that one or both parties will simply not have enough money once one household becomes two, which, in turn, becomes a constraint to resolution. Furthermore, in the overwhelming income inequality that has accompanied the pandemic, which includes a 20% unemployment rate in the United States, there may not be enough money to hire lawyers and separate households.

**PROCESSING ONE’S EXPERIENCE**

Divorce is a transition in which there are multiple tasks (Lebow, 2019b). COVID-19 creates a very special context for this experience, given that most people are home most of the time and multi-tasking more than usual. Beyond its behavioral impact, there is the question of how adults and children can do the psychological work needed at this major life transition with less social support and while also dealing with anxieties about food, work, and health.

**POSTDIVORCE CONFLICTS**

COVID-19 is the enemy of planning. Thereby, more fragile postdivorce coparenting relationships and parent-child relationships come to be at risk. One difficult topic is shelter-in-place and social distancing, which asks divorcing and divorced families to designate who is in and who is out of the family system. This is a challenge in nondivorced families, as parents often differ in their vantage points. For divorced parents, establishing a shared understanding about questions such as this one requires some degree of flexibility and the ability to collectively problem solve and compromise. For those who have difficult divorces, problems readily arise. These families typically benefit from clear articulation about the specifics of who is with whom when in their joint parenting agreement, but there are no instructions about what to do in a pandemic on which to fall back. For some, differences are monumental; for others, any difference becomes the fulcrum of a break down in cooperation.

Here is an example:

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In this situation I am frequently amazed by how often this is referred to as infidelity.
Lenny and Tom had considerable conflict over the four years since their splitting up but have maintained a steady schedule for when the children will be in which house. In the wake of COVID-19, Tom moved to a rental home far away from the city in which both reside, taking the children with him. He argued that being away from the city, which was a COVID hotspot, was safer and that there was no way to share time there unless Lenny also rented a place nearby. That there was a lower prevalence of COVID-19 away from the city was technically correct, but unilaterally changing the division of time was both illegal and a violation of the spirit of a coparenting agreement. This was followed by emergency motions through the court by Lenny and a series of cascading provocative actions between the parents that characterize difficult divorce.

Other postdivorce families who have established stable working relationships may be destabilized in other ways. Parents may live at a distance, but the distance may become far greater in a world in which there is a limited public transportation system. Schedules that center on school schedules must be worked with when there are no schools or camps. Standard agreements allocating time for vacations away take on new meanings in a time during which most people limit travel. Work schedules also have mightily changed. Routine is helpful to divorced families, and COVID-19 disrupts such routines.

**COUPLE AND FAMILY THERAPY WITH DIVORCING COUPLES IN THE SHADOW OF COVID-19**

COVID-19 and public health procedures that accompany it have not changed the nature of divorce or the useful things that couple and family therapists do to help families who are dealing with divorce issues. Yet as already noted, this pandemic makes a difference in the context of divorce and calls for adaptations on the part of the therapist working with these families or their subsystems. In what follows, I speak to the adaptations to working with divorce in the time of COVID-19. My comments are presented in the context of a view of working with divorce based in an integrative combination of generic therapy skill sets and special adaptations of those skill sets for working with divorcing families. The integrative model for engaging with divorcing families I suggest is described fully elsewhere (Lebow, 2019a, 2019b), but the comments that follow are intended to apply to all therapists working with divorcing families whether or not they draw on that model.

As in all work with these families, safety concerns are the first consideration (Lebow, 2019b). When there is a strong possibility of either physical or emotional danger for family members, the therapist needs to recognize this special circumstance. In the slowed and frequently stuck environment of COVID-19, standard helpful ideas, such as the value of honesty and self-disclosure, may need to take a backseat to promoting a holding action until separation and the assurance of safety is more feasible. The assessment of physical and emotional safety in an ongoing way is essential. When conflicts degenerate, initiating and maintaining an effective time-out strategy is needed (Greenberg & Lebow, 2016) as is having a contingency plan for what to do if time-out strategies fail.

Careful monitoring is also needed of how much the parental problem enters their interactions with children as well as the level of child exposure to interparental conflict, and especially, intimate partner violence. Given the greater intensity and frequency of contacts in the typical home between parents and children in this time, therapists also need to assertively intervene to help families recognize such problematic patterns and move from them as much as possible. Psychoeducation, mindful practice, and cognitive restructuring that brings into focus the actual needs of the children can be very helpful in this regard (Lebow, 2019a).

Similarly, the couple should be helped to monitor the frequency and value of the endless conversations that can be arise about divorce, especially the circle of blame for the demise of the marriage. Some such processing can be enormously helpful for many, both in terms

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of learning from this experience and processing emotion, but in a COVID-19 environment with nowhere to go, such conversations can readily slide toward disaster.

Helping family members create individual space should also be in focus more broadly. Given that parting may be slower than normal and other outlets limited, creating some sense of boundaries for who is part of what space and when has considerable value (though many families don’t have the space for a comfortable version of that arrangement). This typically is a work in progress that requires attention over time. Closely related is the specific task of helping the family work together toward safe mutually agreed upon expectations for the various special decisions imposed by COVID-19; for example, when to be in contact with whom?; when to wear masks?; etc.

It is also a time during which extra attention should be focused on the needs of the leaning in partner who questions getting divorced (Doherty & Harris, 2017). With the background stress from COVID-19 so high and with social support significantly reduced, leaning in partners have a very special task. How to deal with that deep, once in a lifetime hurt without pulling one’s partner into what will be a destructive conversation? Some form of individual therapy with the leaning in partner, always a helpful option, now seems more needed than ever.

As to the steps in divorce, as in pre-COVID times, helping clients to engage in a structured process is beneficial. Cooperation works much better than conflict. Mediation is vastly superior to conflict-laden strategies in almost all families (Emery & Dinescu, 2016). Attorneys can more readily move on with the legal process to the extent there is cooperation. Helping parents collaborate and plan together about how to bring the children into the conversation about divorce also helps as does assisting them in identifying and planning for the needs of children through this time. So does helping the family find a structured arrangement mid-way between marriage and divorce for this time that includes clear achievable expectations and can be a stepping-stone to a more successful divorce. Assist the family (most especially, the divorcing couple) in seeing the value of a creating an overarching cooperative mindset aimed toward achieving shared goals for this time in the context of the realities of a slowed judicial system. The therapist’s role includes both helping the family move toward identifying and achieving the behavioral steps involved in divorce and enabling work on the psychological tasks underlying dealing with the dual stresses of divorce and the pandemic crisis. Therapy may involve one therapist working with the whole family or, when possible, multiple therapists working with different family subsystems; having multiple therapists is generally preferable but only is so when there is good coordination between the therapists.

There also are developments that increase risk that therapists can help families avoid. New partners in the time of COVID-19 present additional foci for negative attention and present yet another stressful change at a time where too many changes often are too difficult to process. Clients (and their attorneys) should also be encouraged that this is not a good time for blaming petitions. If there are major conflicts over matters such as money, that might be dealt with later, postponing discussion of these issues may be advisable.

Research will uncover whether the impact of moving to teletherapy is more or less impactful than in-person therapy with these families and their subsystems. My sense is that the ledger seems mixed. Divorce is a time where the calming presence of the therapist itself has great value, and that presence has to be diminished without physical presence. Similarly, attending to emotion is vitally important during this time but more difficult to engage at a distance, and thus the processing of emotion suffers. However, I also experience video conferencing as helpful in cooling conflict and providing distance that enables greater cooperation among family members. It also is far easier to move various family members in and out of zoom rooms to enable the most useful format for the work needed in a specific meeting than to do this in an in-person meeting (Russell & Breunlin, 2019).
And family members at home may be much more easily added to whatever unit began the therapy as is helpful. Additionally, parting partners and former partners are often relieved that there is no need to sit in the same room with their former partner during sessions, rendering conjoint treatment more acceptable (Lebow, 1982).

Finally, in the wake of COVID-19, there is helping the family deal with the uncertainty of COVID-19 itself. Will it be gone by the Fall (as one United States president has said) or will we be hunkered down for a decade? COVID-19 and divorce share in being lessons in the value of radical acceptance. Here the acceptance the therapist must inevitably try to help clients to work through in one way also has a meaning in relation to this silent terrorist floating in the air.

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