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Autonomy—connection tensions, stress, and attachment: The case of COVID-19
Judith A. Feeney\textsuperscript{1} and Jennifer Fitzgerald\textsuperscript{2}

Abstract
The COVID pandemic, and actions taken by governments worldwide to deal with it, have placed stress on couple relationships. Reports from many countries have documented substantial increases in relationship difficulties, conflict, and violence. We propose that issues concerning autonomy and connection are central to these problems, particularly as couples face changing situations with regard to lockdowns, social distancing, and border closures. We further propose that a fruitful approach to understanding these difficulties comes from integrating attachment theory with key concepts of stress and coping theories. Based on these principles and concepts, emotionally focused couples therapy (EFT) offers guidelines to help couples navigate the multiple stressors associated with the pandemic.

Addresses
\textsuperscript{1} School of Psychology, University of Queensland, St. Lucia, Queensland, 4072, Australia
\textsuperscript{2} Discipline of Psychiatry, University of Queensland, Royal Brisbane and Women’s Hospital, Herston, 4006, Australia

Corresponding author: Feeney, Judith A (j.feeney@psy.uq.edu.au)

Balancing autonomy and connection: distance regulation in couple relationships
Distance regulation is central to couple dynamics, with research establishing the importance of individuals’ needs for closeness and distance and the strategies used to manage these needs within relationships [1]. In a qualitative study, issues of closeness and distance (connection and autonomy)\textsuperscript{1} featured prominently in participants’ unstructured accounts of their long-term dating relationships [2]. Furthermore, the salience of these issues was supported by the strong and evocative language often used to describe these tensions (e.g. ‘smothered’; ‘shoved in a corner’).

The importance of autonomy—connection is highlighted by relational dialectic theory and research. This body of work suggests that close relationships involve a number of dilemmas, tensions, or ‘contradictions’, that is, opposing tendencies or forces that operate in dynamic interplay across the life span of relationships [3]. Autonomy—connection has been described as the central relational dilemma [4]: Couple relationships cannot exist unless partners relinquish some autonomy to forge a connection; however, too much connection stifles individual identities and threatens personal and relational growth. This dilemma is never fully resolved: Needs for autonomy and connection evolve and must be managed on an ongoing basis [5].

Distance regulation involves seeking opportunities for both closeness and separateness and manifests in such tensions as approach versus avoidance and association versus privacy [6]. Indeed, this dilemma has been called the ‘me-we pull’, reflecting individuals’ desire to be ‘their own person’, while also being with the partner [7]. Research demonstrates the relevance of these issues: Couples perceive autonomy—connection tensions as important factors in episodes of marital conflict [8] and in relationship breakups [9,10]. Conversely, the combination of strong relatedness and high autonomy predicts relationship quality and constructive relationship behaviors [11\textsuperscript{*}]. These findings support contemporary dialectical perspectives, which argue that optimal couple outcomes occur when needs for autonomy and connection are balanced in a ‘mutual’ style [12,13].

Stressors on couples’ autonomy—connection patterns during the pandemic
Dialectical tensions such as autonomy-connection shape relationship change and growth and are not inherently

\textsuperscript{1} The terms ‘closeness—distance’ and ‘autonomy—connection’ are sometimes used interchangeably in the literature. In this article, we favor ‘autonomy—connection’, except when describing research that has used the other term. In this context, ‘closeness’ and ‘distance’ imply both physical and emotional aspects.
problematic [14]. However, the COVID-19 pandemic (and governments’ responses to it) has placed unprecedented pressures on couples’ patterns of autonomy and connection, beyond the typical experience of these tensions. In particular, mandated lockdowns and social distancing guidelines have disrupted couple dynamics. In some cases, these changes involve partners facing unexpected separations and a sense of disconnectedness [15]. In others, couples find themselves spending much more time together in relatively confined spaces, often with the added challenge of juggling working from home with increased child-care responsibilities [16].

Given these pressures, it is not surprising that researchers globally have noted increases in relationship conflict and distress since the pandemic began. In a nationally representative sample of American adults [17], just over a third of respondents reported experiencing relationship conflict pertaining to COVID-19 restrictions and subsequent reductions in couple intimacy. Increases in intimate partner violence, often precipitated by social distancing and self-isolation policies, have been reported in other countries [18] and documented by international organizations [19].

Qualitative data highlight the specific importance of autonomy—connection tensions at this time. In a Spanish sample [20], over 40% of respondents noted relational deterioration linked to the mandated lockdown; of these, some reported problems of couple distance and reduced couple time (too little connection), whereas others reported lack of personal space and attention to individual needs (too little autonomy). Similarly, one of the themes emerging from accounts of the impact of COVID-19 among Australian families was the ‘push—pull of intimacy’ [21]. Again, some respondents reported having too little time with the partner, whereas others struggled with being constantly housebound with the partner.

Many COVID-related stressors have affected couple relationships (see Table 1). First, as already noted, lockdowns and social distancing policies affect the distance between partners (top section of the table). These changes have often been sudden, confusing, of uncertain duration, and beyond partners’ control—factors that increase perceived stress [22,23]. Second, individuals and couples face other severe pandemic-related stressors that affect their relationships (Table 1, mid-section), including financial losses and health concerns [24]. These multiple stressors can have additive and multiplicative effects on well-being—for example, the combination of high demand and low control predicts particularly high appraisals of stress [25]. Third, pandemic-related stressors affect entire social networks. Friends and family members often play an important role in supporting couple relationships [26]. However, during crises, these individuals may themselves be distant or feeling distressed and overwhelmed [27]. Hence, couples may perceive and receive less support for their relationships generally and for their efforts to renegotiate patterns of connection. In summary, the pandemic has disrupted couples’ interaction patterns and engendered major losses, while simultaneously reducing important social connections outside the household [28].

These stressors challenge coping efforts and may render traditionally adaptive forms of coping relatively ineffective. Although problem-focused coping is often more effective than emotion-focused coping in reducing stress, many pandemic-related stressors are beyond couples’ control, and problem-solving may neither ‘fix’ them nor reduce levels of worry [29]. Similarly, ‘common dyadic coping’, in which both partners identify the stressor as a challenge to be shared and managed together [30], may be unrealistic if partners are physically separated, facing multiple stressors, or confronting differing needs for autonomy and connection. Indeed, common dyadic coping may fail to reduce distress if situations are overly stressful or the partner is perceived as not coping responsibly [30].

### Table 1

Aspects of COVID-19 stressors that may challenge couples’ ability to cope.

- Lockdowns, closures, and social distancing guidelines impact directly on physical distance and may alter perceptions of emotional distance (detachment)
  - Disruptive of established interaction patterns
  - Sudden and unexpected changes, giving no time to prepare
  - Sometimes ambiguous and unclear information, creating confusion
  - Ongoing but with sudden periodic changes, requiring adaptability
  - Uncertain timeframe and resolution
  - Largely beyond the control of the individual and couple
- Concomitant pandemic-related stressors affect couple relationships
  - Loss (actual or feared) of the partner
  - Loss of sense of community
  - Financial loss and/or loss of home
  - Health concerns of self and/or the partner
- Pandemic-related factors affect those in couples’ support network
  - Physical distance from the couple, enforced by lockdowns and social distancing
  - Stressors, as above (loss of loved ones, sense of community, finances and/or home; health concerns)

**Autonomy—connection tensions and attachment**

Attachment theory is inherently focused on distance regulation (autonomy—connection). Proximity-seeking is the key feature of attachments in childhood [31] and adulthood [32], especially in stressful conditions: Knowing that the other will be available and responsive to one’s needs provides a sense of safety. Of course, the goal for safety changes subtly across the years of child...
development, from caregiver proximity to accessibility; adults handle longer separations with the knowledge that the attachment figure will be available if needed [33].

Mental representations of attachment figures as being unavailable or rejecting (which underlie insecure attachment) contribute to chronic activation of stress responses [34,35]. Conversely, the capacity to draw on representations of responsive attachment figures diminishes physiological and psychological responses to threat [36] [37**]. Secure attachment is thus a crucial resource promoting more benign stress appraisals and adaptive coping [38,39].

Importantly, the two major dimensions of insecurity entail contrasting attitudes and behaviors regarding autonomy and connection. Attachment anxiety is characterized by fear of rejection, excessive reassurance-seeking, and a desire for extreme closeness. In contrast, attachment avoidance is characterized by discomfort with closeness, avoidance of intimacy, and unwillingness to seek or provide support. When partners differ markedly on these dimensions, autonomy—connection tensions can create persistent and distressing cycles of pursuing—distancing [40].

Helping couples navigate pandemic-related stressors and tensions

Even before the pandemic, couples presenting for therapy have often found themselves grappling not only with ongoing relationship vulnerabilities but also with a range of life stressors. Furthermore, many couples presenting for therapy recently have stated that while they had some relationship problems before pandemic, the stress of the pandemic has certainly exacerbated their problems (personal communication with EFT clinical colleagues). These reports fit with a stress and coping perspective: Pre-existing vulnerabilities, interacting with stressors precipitated by the pandemic, have stretched coping resources. Thus, the crisis has overwhelmed some couples, causing them to feel anxious, angry, and unable to involve the partner in their coping efforts. Faced with multiple stressors, couples report more conflict escalation and unresolved conflicts [41]. Furthermore, longitudinal data confirm both attachment insecurities and stress during lockdown as predictors of relationship difficulties [42*].

Again, autonomy—connection tensions are relevant: some couples have found increased time together difficult and a source of conflict, whereas others have struggled with restrictions that decrease connection [43*]. Researchers and therapists have discussed how couples can manage these tensions. For example, increased time together may indeed signal a loss of autonomy, but can be reframed as an opportunity for partners to reassess their expectations about personal space [43] or to engage in novel, enjoyable activities that nurture relationship growth [16]. Furthermore, pilot data suggest that structured exercises addressing vulnerability and acceptance can increase a sense of connection for couples facing lockdowns [44].

Given the links among attachment, distance regulation, and responses to stress, EFT offers a fruitful approach to handling autonomy—connection tensions. Empirically validated and based on attachment principles, EFT is available in various modes (face-to-face and online therapy, workbooks, etc.). On a related note, clinical reports during COVID-19 restrictions in Switzerland have examined the feasibility (and challenges) of working remotely with individuals and couples from an emotionally focused perspective [45].

Before this current crisis, Johnson and Wittenborn described the role of EFT in shaping attuned and resonant conversations that promote attachment security. “It appears that if we can create this safe connection, almost any difference or problem is workable. If we cannot, every difference and problem is a potential abyss” [46], p. 21, emphasis added). Undoubtedly, the stresses and strains of the pandemic have tested this clinical observation for thousands of couples. Even relatively secure couples may have struggled to resolve conflict and achieve flexible shifts in closeness and autonomy.

Couples presenting for therapy (whether in good times or bad) frequently begin with complaints that reflect autonomy—connection tensions. For example, one partner complains that the other does not make enough time for the relationship, which often elicits a reply such as, “If I was not criticized so much, I might be more interested in spending time with you!” In these complaints, the therapist glimpses an underlying and often well-entrenched pattern of communication, called pursuing—distancing or demand—withdraw [47,48]: The more one partner stridently pursues connection, the more the other seeks autonomy; the more one partner defensively seeks autonomy, the more the other protests that distancing. This destructive cycle of interaction tends to erode relationship satisfaction, an effect that may be stronger among socially advantaged couples who have more resources to address partner demands and may harbor higher expectations that those demands will be accommodated [49].

Conceptualizing relationship distress through an attachment lens helps therapists understand and address tensions around autonomy—connection (Figure 1). Typically, distressed couples respond to stresses and challenges with self-protective strategies, such as protest and relentless support-seeking or withdrawal and fierce self-reliance [50]. These behaviors create ineffectual patterns of emotional engagement [51], in which fear is the organizing element [52]. The pursuing partner may fear being rejected or abandoned;
the avoidant partner may fear not feeling valued or having space to be ‘one’s own person’ [53].

To facilitate a move from these insecure ‘push—pull’ struggles to a sense of being accessible and responsive resources for each other, the therapist intervenes to expand partners’ awareness of their emotional experience and the impact of their behaviors (Figure 1). Partners then begin to shift from blaming or avoiding to seeing each other as victims of interaction patterns that have kept them stuck and dissatisfied. In the next stage of intervention, aimed at ‘restructuring’ the attachment, partners are supported to access and disclose their deeper fears and longings in vulnerable conversations [54]. Typically, the more withdrawing partner is first supported to ‘re-engage’, through disclosing fears and needs, often regarding safety and independence. Hearing these needs expressed coherently and assertively is usually experienced by the listening partner as surprising but welcome; this partner is then encouraged to explore and share their fears, typically about self-worth and lovability, and to express needs for closeness in softer ways that invite a supportive response.

In this way, a more flexible and positive sense of self and other emerges for each partner [55], benefiting couple
interactions and partners’ responses to stress. In the context of COVID-19, secure attachment is a particularly vital resource, allowing partners to label and discuss their relational desires and their fears of loss and separation and reducing the sense of overwhelming threat [56,57]. Autonomy—connection needs can then be further explored and negotiated, even in the face of situational demands that are complex, highly stressful, and frequently changing. As mutual constructive dependency builds, more effective responses to stress and crisis follow [58*]. Stressful tasks, losses, uncertainties, and changing routines can then be folded into the bigger picture of mutual accessibility and responsiveness, promoting more adaptive coupling and couple well-being. Finally, although this article focuses on COVID-related pressures on autonomy and connection, it is clear that many other crises (e.g., evacuations and deployments during emergencies) may also disrupt couples’ patterns of connection; the current integrative framework could be usefully applied to studying adjustment in these contexts.

Conflict of interest statement
Nothing declared.

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* of special interest
** of outstanding interest

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