Couple Connectedness in the Time of COVID-19

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Abstract
The COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in unprecedented global morbidity and mortality which altered people’s daily lives, as well as created multiple societal challenges. One significant problem posed by this unique stressor is maintaining healthy intimate relationships, which are linked to mental and physical health. The literature has shown that the pandemic has exacerbated issues for couples such as financial difficulties, a lack of privacy, medical issues, and family and professional concerns. The pandemic has also forced all healthcare systems, hospitals, and clinics to quickly incorporate telehealth services. The number of requests for mental health consultations has risen to the point where demand exceeds supply. This paper provides an overview of ways couples can stay emotionally connected during this time as well as provide future directions for therapists to help couples develop or improve adaptive relationship mechanisms.

Keywords
COVID-19, couples, couple connectedness, relational satisfaction

Romantic Relationships
According to Madden and Rainie (2006), 47% of all adult Americans have been married or have been in a committed relationship for over five years. Current research shows that adults in the United States are postponing marriage more frequently, and a record percentage of contemporary teens and young adults are expected to forego marriage entirely (Curtin & Sutton, 2020). From 2017 to 2018, the rate dropped 6%, from 6.9 per 1,000 population to 6.5, the lowest of the 1900–2018 period (Curtin & Sutton, 2020).

According to Moss and Schwebel (1993), the main component for romantic relationships is intimacy. Individuals who are in romantic relationships base their relationship on how high or low their intimacy is, and that intimacy guides their romantic relationship. Intimacy has been defined as “determined by the level of commitment and positive affective, cognitive, and physical closeness one experiences with a partner in a reciprocal (although not necessarily symmetrical) relationship” (Moss & Schwebel, 1993, p. 33). Moreover, this definition emphasizes why individuals may choose romantic relationships. This can be for intimacy, commitment, and closeness. Being in a romantic relationship could impact individuals in multiple ways such as financially, physically, and emotionally. Literature further supports that engaging and investing in close relationships has been linked to a number of psychological and physical health advantages. Healthy behavior, reduced prevalence of chronic diseases, better levels of satisfaction, and decreased mortality have all been related to the quality of close relationships (Chopik, 2017).

Furthermore, Stack and Eshleman (1998) state that those in a romantic relationship who are married also have an advantage of greater physical health. This is because they have a significant other who can point out anything out of the ordinary with their partner physically, can assist in maintaining yearly check ins with a doctor and to go to the hospital, if need be, and to assist in not partaking in drugs. In addition, Stack and Eshleman (1998) state that those who are married will feel they have more support compared to those who are not married since they have someone to discuss their feelings with. These factors impact relationships and show why they are important for individuals’ well-being in all aspects of their life.

According to Stack and Eshleman (1998), another advantage for romantic relationships in marriage are finances because it is not just a single income but rather two incomes for a better place to live. Other advantages stated are a variety of better food options and other essential items that those without a partner may not obtain by themselves. However, current research shows that financial concerns are increasingly being shown to have an impact on the quality and course of marriage relationships (LeBaron et al., 2018). Gudmunson et al. (2007) found that financial stress was associated with negative marriage interactions, such as higher couple conflicts and less time spent together as a pair. A contributor to financial conflict may be
materialism which has been defined as “the importance a consumer attaches to worldly possessions” (Belk, 1984, p. 291). LeBaron et al. (2018) shows that materialism was also found to have a negative association with marital quality, even when spouses had the same materialistic values. Part of the reason why high materialists are unhappy is because it is difficult for them to feel appreciative for what they have (Tsang et al., 2014). This decline in gratitude is linked to a reduction in essential psychological requirements, which are necessary for people to survive. This points to a variety of potential intervention points for increasing life satisfaction for individuals who are high in materialism (Tsang et al., 2014). When compared to couples in which one or both spouses reported high materialism, they discovered that marriages in which both spouses reported low materialism were better off on various aspects of marital quality, including conflict resolution, problem areas, satisfaction, and stability (LeBaron et al., 2018).

More recently, financial conflict in marriage is a greater predictor of divorce than any other form of conflict. People associate money with strong emotions and meanings. Individuals may associate money with important goals and needs like success, security, love, and esteem (Dew et al., 2012). Disagreement might emerge when partners are unable to reconcile disparate definitions of money or have competing goals for how they want to spend their money. Rather than the underlying meanings of money, most couples will focus on and dispute over practical financial difficulties (Dew et al., 2012). Even when other causes of conflict are taken into account, there is evidence that money disputes between spouses are linked to decreased marital satisfaction (Britt & Huston, 2012).

**Covid-19**

The COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in unprecedented global morbidity and mortality, with population mental health effects being an increasing concern, and specific threats within the family context (Prime et al., 2020). During the pandemic, challenges related to social disruption, such as financial instability, caregiving pressure, and confinement-related stress, pose a serious threat to the families’ well-being. There are also difficulties and negative effects on both individual well-being and intimate and family relationships. Additionally, parents may be worried about their family’s financial and physical well-being, as well as their children’s social isolation from peers and teachers (Fontanesi et al., 2020).

Understanding how the present pandemic may impact couples’ relationships is especially crucial since economic, job, and mental health disturbances are all directly linked to couples’ relationship functioning (Pietromonaco & Overall, 2021). Couples may be struggling to handle financial problems, a loss of privacy, worry over medical issues, and familial and professional worries due to the pandemic. Additionally, the COVID-19 pandemic has isolated families and loved ones. Further isolation was needed if a loved one contracted the disease. Those afflicted with the virus are sent home to quarantine and isolate themselves or, if severe, to a COVID hospital ward. The inflicted loved one and those who love them cannot be physically near each other due to the fast spread of the virus. This isolation and separation increased grief and shame due to the inability to be near a loved one in a time of uncertainty and need (Lebow, 2020). These feelings exacerbated when a loved one passed away alone and sometimes unexpectedly.

Grief has also become a daily experience due to a sense of loss in routines, cancellations of planned celebrations and milestones, along with physical separation from family and friends (Woods, 2020). The universal grief our society is experiencing is a reaction to the loss of intangible aspects of daily life. Many are no longer able to separate work from home, school from home, or leisure time from work or school. We are now fully immersed in technology as we engage in virtual meetings and classes while educating children at home and communicating with our loved ones (Woods, 2020). This kind of loss has been termed ambiguous loss. Ambiguous loss cannot be quickly resolved or verified, and is marked by the inability to confirm a person’s whereabouts or the ability to return to normal (Woods, 2020). This type of loss can be incredibly challenging as it is confusing, disorienting, and defies the concept of closure.

Couples are facing an increase in external stressors during this time. For instance, there is a high risk of one or both in the relationship losing their job. This increased economic strain due to salary reduction or elimination has negatively affected relationship satisfaction (Turluc & Candel, 2021). Past research has shown that significant adverse life events, such as wars and medical crises exacerbate preexisting stress levels. These adverse life events can lead to an increased chance of relational dissolution or decreased marital satisfaction (Reizer et al., 2020; Schmid et al., 2021). Moreover, adverse life events increase anxiety, depression, and other mental health issues (Turluc & Candel, 2021). The pandemic has also led to decreased social and familial activities and more problems for couples, such as increased negativity, hostility, and withdrawal (Pietromonaco & Overall, 2021; Williamson, 2020). Therefore, there is a need for couples to actively engage with one another to combat an eventual deterioration of the relationship during the pandemic.

The COVID-19 pandemic has forced all healthcare systems, hospitals, and clinics to quickly incorporate telehealth services, and the American health system’s delivery of patient care will be forever changed. Relational telehealth, also known as online therapy or e-therapy, is an electronic modality that supports the well-being and functioning of individuals, couples, parents–child dyads, and families by conceptualizing relationships and mental health in a holistic way (Tadros et al., 2021; Wrape & McGinn, 2019). This form of online therapy can include services provided by professionals such as psychiatrists, psychologists, counselors, marriage, and family therapists (MFTs), and social workers (Tadros et al., 2021). Platforms such as Zoom and Simple Practice can be used for telehealth. Simple Practice is a cloud-based, practice management system for health and wellness professionals that streamlines
the business side of private practice and makes virtual treatment a reality for millions of clients. Secure messaging, paperless intake forms, progress notes, insurance claim filing, a digital client portal, online booking, payment processing, free appointment reminders, and more are just a few of the highlights (Simple Practice, 2021).

Cost savings, convenience, and the ability to give treatment to individuals with mobility constraints or those in remote regions who do not have access to a local doctor or clinic are all advantages of using technology to offer health care (Gajarawala & Pelkowski, 2021). Additionally, patient satisfaction can be improved via telehealth because of better access to treatment, convenience, and reduced stress (Gajarawala & Pelkowski, 2021). Unfortunately, as convenient and cost-effective as telehealth services are, there are still various barriers. Patients require a private space for their sessions in addition to technological access. Counselors may have trouble detecting nonverbal cues when they do not have in-person engagement (Writers, 2021). There will also be some visits that cannot be conducted from a distance. For instance, one will still need to visit the doctor for imaging tests and blood testing, as well as diagnoses that require more hands-on treatment. Moreover, the safety of electronic transmissions of personal health information is an issue and data accuracy and misdiagnosis are disadvantages to telehealth (Gajarawala & Pelkowski, 2021). Also, during the COVID-19 pandemic, insurance companies are increasingly paying the cost of telehealth visits, however some services may not be completely covered, resulting in out-of-pocket payments (Gajarawala & Pelkowski, 2021). It should be noted that telehealth should not be an emergency alternative for direct medical advice from your doctor or other qualified clinician. Telehealth was formerly thought to be restricted to rural or distant areas, but it is now being utilized to increase the geographic reach of health care services and increase access to treatment. As a result, during the COVID-19 pandemic, telehealth is an important tool in providing care while keeping patients and health professionals safe.

**Need for Therapeutic Services**

While the spread of COVID-19 has raised demand for therapy in certain circumstances, it has also caused financial hardship and mental stress for both therapists and patients. Some counselors have seen significant growth in their private clinics. Others have witnessed a drop in caseloads due to losing insurance coverage or health-care policies that only cover in-person visits (Writers, 2021). It is also important to note the typical issues are exacerbated such as infidelity and financial issues. Infidelity occurs in approximately 25% of all marriages (Coop Gordon & Mitchell, 2020). Coop Gordon and Mitchell (2020) define infidelity as an emotional or sexual act that occurs outside of the primary relationship and results in a violation of trust or agreed-upon relationship boundaries. When a couple commits infidelity, they frequently suffer large financial losses, which is increased even more for those who divorce (Crouch & Dickies, 2016). While previous research supports the theory that the pandemic has increased the probability of infidelity among spouses, it is also vital to note that the means of contact for affairs may have changed. The social distancing recommendations, such as not going to the gym or not going to work, have reduced the opportunity for physical contact with affair partners (Coop Gordon & Mitchell, 2020). However, current research has shown evidence for the increased risk of infidelity through virtual means happening at this time. During the pandemic, for example, a dating site for married people has been gaining 17,000 new members per day, up from 1,500 new members per day in 2019 (Coop Gordon & Mitchell, 2020).

Moreover, the pandemic had a significant impact on face-to-face communication. Face masks, which are a necessary precaution to prevent the infection from spreading, had a significant impact on interpersonal communication. Facial expressions and gestures play a major role in facilitating interpersonal communication, comprehension, and the delivery of intended messages (Mheidly et al., 2020). Nonverbal communication, such as facial expressions and gestures, accounts for 55% of our total communication. The eyes and mouth are the two key organs that aid in the recognition of other people’s features. People who wear face masks are more likely to focus on their eyes to grasp the facial emotions intended. Eye contact may be used to demonstrate empathy and care for others, control emotions, display interest, and aid communication (Mohammadi, 2020).

Strong social ties have been known to protect individuals from mental health issues as it has been shown that people who have integrated social support networks (including family, friends, neighbors, and community groups) are less despairing and report higher levels of happiness (Haslam et al., 2015). This is where access to relational therapy can be beneficial. According to Evry and Fuller (2021), relational therapy is a psychoanalytic method to work through psychological and behavioral issues. Relational therapists see connections as crucial to psychological well-being and use the therapy connection to help people become more conscious, grow, and create positive changes (Evry & Fuller, 2021). In other words, relational therapy aims to assist people who are having difficulty developing and maintaining stable, healthy, and safe relationships. A lack of satisfying connections in one’s life is thought to contribute to a variety of common psychological difficulties, such as mood instability, social anxiety, addiction, and a greater vulnerability to trauma (Evry & Fuller, 2021). Relational therapy assists people in being more aware of the prior events and patterns of behavior that impede them from forming healthy relationships, as well as learning the necessary skills to enhance their relationships (Evry & Fuller, 2021).

Partner responsiveness to the wounded partner’s emotional pain and attachment discomfort helps to alleviate the bond’s rupture and encourage forgiveness and reconciliation (Zucarini et al., 2013). Also, new cycles of emotional engagement related to the injury promote greater trust, relationship satisfaction, and forgiveness in resolved partners (Zucarini et al., 2013). Additionally, Emotionally Focused Therapy (EFT) can
help decrease stress and increase vulnerability of expressing emotions (Wiebe & Johnson, 2017). Additionally, it is possible to assist couples in establishing a more stable relationship and implementing successful impact co-regulation in their own lives. MFTs also access the resiliency that comes with ensuring that a significant partner will still be present and receptive. Zuccarini et al. (2013) suggests the use of an Attachment Injury Resolution Model (AIRM) which aids in learning why they feel they are in the hurt cycle, discuss new ways to express their emotions in their hurt, and to have consolidation.

**Strategies for Couple Connectedness**

One way couples can stay emotionally connected during the pandemic is learning a partner’s love language. Dr. Chapman identifies five different ways people speak and understand emotional love in *The 5 Love Languages: The Secret to Love That Lasts*. Each of Chapman’s five methods has been shown to strengthen relationships all over the world by identifying basic human needs and desires (Adams, 2020). The five love languages are Words of Affirmation, Quality Time, Receiving Gifts, Acts of Service and Physical Touch. Each of these love languages is crucial in determining one’s emotional needs. Furthermore, each love language consists of actions that a person may request from their partner in order to feel emotionally loved and appreciated in a relationship (Adams, 2020).

A person whose love language is Words of Affirmation thrives on kind and encouraging words from their partner. One whose love language is Quality Time values the undivided attention of their partner while doing an activity they enjoy, receiving gifts feels emotionally loved by their partner when they are given objects as a visual representation of their love, also a person whose love language is Acts of Service feels emotionally loved when their partner displays an eagerness to do things for them that they know will be appreciated, and Physical Touch feels emotionally loved when they are touched by their partner on any part of the body (Adams, 2020). Other ways couples can stay emotionally connected during this time are by implementing the five magic hours, value cards, Sensate Focus Exercise: Non-Sexual Intimacy, expression of gratitude, and using I statements.

According to John Gottman, couples in positive relationships devote an extra five hours per week to their marriages in very specific ways, this is called the magic for five hours (Anne, 2014). There are five ways to apply the magic for five hours. First is parting, which is making an effort to learn one thing that is happening in their partner’s life that day before saying goodbye in the morning (Anne, 2014). Second is greetings, which is having a debriefing conversation. This can include discussing your day, your hopes, your dreams, your life, or anything else that comes to mind (Anne, 2014). The important thing is to reconnect. Third is admiration and appreciation. For example, appreciating your partner for taking out the trash or appreciating the energy they put into making dinner. Subsequently, affection is showing physical affection to your spouse (Anne, 2014). This can include hugging, holding hands, and Gottman advises goodnight kisses. Lastly, weekly dates (Anne, 2014). At first glance, that amount of time may appear excessive, but this is an opportunity to be creative. One can stay up late and play a game, take a walk around the park, and enjoy each other’s company.

Another way to connect with your partner is using value cards. Value cards are useful in helping identify values an individual may not have previously considered (Nikolic, 2019). For instance, you can separate three piles of cards and label them as important, very important, and not important. The individual will then place the cards into three piles quickly, without thinking too much. After this is done, the individual will look into the meaning of the words for this as well as any specific placement decisions and one can speculate on what life would be like if one or more values were absent, as well as the consequences (Nikolic, 2019).

Additionally, sensate focus is a set of touching activities that aims to increase closeness between couples. Masters and Johnson, a sex therapy research team, initially created it in 1970, and it has since become a commonly recommended technique among sex therapists (Keller, 2017). The goal of this exercise is to help one experience physical contact with their partner more fully, set aside any distracting factors, and learn more about the types of touch and contact one finds intriguing and enjoyable. One may also discover that this improves communication within the relationship. Stroking, caressing, kissing, massaging, fondling, and tickling are just a few examples of many sorts of contact that may generate pleasurable experiences (Keller, 2017). At different times, various people find multiple kinds of touch pleasurable.

Lastly, expressions of gratitude and I statements can emotionally connect couples during this time. According to Rogers et al. (2018), a higher proportion of I-language and a lower proportion of you-language was associated with better problem solving and higher marital satisfaction. Similarly, the more frequent you-language during face-to-face conflict discussion was negatively associated with interaction quality of couples. Murray and Hazelwood (2011) discovered a link between gratitude and certain aspects of attachment and discovered that people who were more grateful and more secure in certain aspects of attachment were more likely to engage in pro-social behavior.

Moreover, the number of requests for mental health consultations has risen to the point where demand exceeds supply. This claim is due to the pandemic’s increased anxiety and despair, as well as racial and political unrest, which is adding to clients’ stress (Read, 2021). Mental health work is stressful, especially now during the COVID-19 period, and it may lead to burnout from prolonged job-related stress, which may lead to emotional tiredness and loneliness. Therapists are a particularly susceptible group, partly due to their good intentions of assisting as many people as possible (Luther et al., 2017). Self-care, defined as a deliberate and self-initiated attempt to look after oneself, is widely recognized as an important tool for improving therapist wellbeing and overall treatment efficacy (Rokach & Boulazreg, 2020).
Additionally, self-care must be adapted. This includes, among other things, eating well, getting enough sleep, exercising, finding healthy stress releases, and engaging in meaningful social connections. Resting, sleeping properly, exercising, and eating a healthy diet, as Skovholt and Jennings (2004) showed, can provide the body with energy that allows the therapist to interact with their clients. Moreover, the Buddhist nun Chodron (1994), authored a book called “Start Where You Are,” which advocates empathy not just with clients, but also with ourselves. The literature shows that when therapists reached out for help from other mental health professionals, the capacity for empathetic behavior increased, both directed towards oneself and towards clients (Rokach & Boulazreg, 2020). Other self-care practices a therapist can do are practice mindfulness techniques, stick to a routine, create a separate workspace, reach out to colleagues, exercise, and to not be so hard on yourself (Clay, 2020).

It is of critical importance to educate, promote, and enforce boundaries. Boundaries inform every one of the situation’s regulations. They act as guideposts, ensuring that the lines are obvious and understood for everyone involved (Zukor, 2021). Moreover, what presses one’s “button” must be recognized and protected against. Acknowledge the stressors, but also recognize that they are shared by the vast majority, if not all, of therapists (Rokach & Boulazreg, 2020).

Future Directions

Previous research has shown that external stressors such as economic deprivation, demanding careers, and disasters will negatively impact the quality and stability of couples’ relationships (Pietromonaco & Overall, 2021). Additionally, research has also noted a close relationship in which partners provide warmth, stability, and assistance to one another are also valuable sources of emotional and physical well-being and are therefore particularly important as people address the current crisis (Pietromonaco & Overall, 2021).

Pietromonaco and Overall (2021) suggests that couples that are less economically and socially vulnerable will need less policy efforts, but policies that resolve heightened external stressors resulting from the pandemic will also support their relationships. These couples can benefit from engaging with therapists to develop or improve adaptive relationship mechanisms, such as learning how to interact and help each other effectively considering each partner’s unique characteristics and circumstances. Moreover, Cheon and Yrani (2018) explored the relationship between role profiles similarity and their marital satisfaction. Role profiles seem to have promise in terms of offering a different perspective on personality in terms of roles. Roles are collections of archetypal attributes that reflect one element of a person’s personality, one that interacts with others and, when combined, creates a cohesive sense of self (Cheon & Yrani, 2018). The findings from this study show that Role Profiles can be used to investigate people’s role systems in connection to their self-esteem and marital satisfaction.

Brown et al. (2018) described the application of relational cultural theory (RCT). This posits that all individuals want to connect with others, and psychological growth and development take place in the context of interpersonal relationships (Brown et al., 2018). RCT presents an effective theoretical framework for working with survivors of Intimate Partner violence. This provides clients to understand their relationships patterns and images and serves as a basis for relational rebuilding. Counselors may assist clients with relationship rebuilding processes and creating healthy relationship practices that support psychological growth and wellbeing through the perspective of RCT (Brown et al., 2018).

Moreover, many of the activities professional social workers accomplish during their days, weeks, and years of employment are implicitly geared toward the future (Nissen, 2020). For example, helping an individual find housing or supporting a person suffering from a chronic illness. Nissen (2020) looked at how social workers’ creativity and innovation affect the larger social work practice ecosystem, and he encouraged us to be open to emerging dynamics that may and should alert people to the need for new components of the shared practice to better prepare for the future. Additionally, the field of MFT has grown and developed, but there is still work to be done in terms of identification, extensive scholarly resources, empirical support, and name brand awareness (Wampler et al., 2019). Wampler et al. (2019) states that the goal is to propose a framework that can be used to describe the role of MFTs more effectively in an integrated health care system, the value of CMFT practice for a wide range of relational, mental health, and physical health problems, and to suggest practice, theory, research, and policy directions.
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