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Division of  
Clinical Psychology  
Faculty for Sexual Health & HIV

## GUIDANCE

# Covid-19 and intimate relationships: The complicated impact of ongoing lockdowns

The Covid-19 pandemic has led to big changes to the way we can live our lives. This may have had a particular impact on our personal, intimate and sexual relationships.

This leaflet has ideas for helping us cope with the effects of lockdowns and restrictions on our intimate and romantic relationships. Relationships are very varied and it is hoped that at least some of the ideas in the leaflet will be helpful whatever your relationships look like.

## SEX AND SAFETY IN THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

Healthy sexual relationships form an essential part of most intimate relationships, increasing feelings of safety, closeness and connectedness. However, sexual relationships can help the spread of the virus. Covid-19 seems to be spread by droplets in the air or on objects and can easily transmit through close human contact. We are also infectious before we have symptoms and many people do not show symptoms at all.

It can be transmitted to anyone, anywhere and so fears about the spreading of the virus may affect who we have sexual relationships with. We need to be able to trust our partners to keep safe to keep us safe.

It might be helpful to think about sexual practices which reduce face to face contact. It is really important to talk with your partner about this and to make sure that everyone agrees. Introducing something new into the sexual relationship might provide fun and desire, but make sure that the other person is up for it by explicitly asking. Confidence and ability to talk about and agree on choices relating to sex might be influenced by:

The stage of the relationship, whether it is still early days and developing or longer term and maintaining. In the early days, lack of sexual connectedness may threaten the relationship and limit compliance with health directives. In longer term relationships, changes and pressures relating to sexual intimacy may lead to many unwanted outcomes, for example, conflict or dissatisfaction.

How constraints on sexual intimacy are experienced. Feelings of choice and control have been found to be more acceptable than constraints imposed by others.

The requirement for reduced physical contact may depend on individual limits in terms of the length of time that people can tolerate the loss of physical contact with another.

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Digital technology may offer new forms of sexual intimacy to develop, although issues relating to privacy and safety need to be thought about. These might include the risks of blackmail by someone using images/videos of sexual activity or 'sextortion' where you feel forced to send someone sexual images. Use of technology must also fit with what feels right to you.

There is also the possibility that deeper emotional intimacy may develop in response to limited physical contact, where other shared experiences may assume more importance. However, where sexual intimacy is occurring the following suggestions may help people keep as safe as possible:

You are your safest sexual partner, so masturbation (even when with another) is the safest possible practice.

Be aware of risks involved in mouth to mouth kissing with new partners.

Try to limit the number of partners that you have.

Washing hands and intimate areas before and after sex, as well as cleaning any sex toys.

Use condoms and dental dams to reduce contact with saliva and other bodily fluids.

Ensure you have a good supply of protection and contraception (e.g. condoms, the pill, Pre-Exposure Prophylaxis; PrEP – for HIV prevention).

Regularly access sexual health services for testing, advice and treatment.

How we negotiate new strategies will have a major impact on our sexual health and wellbeing. Different levels of lockdown that challenge previous norms, can bring or trigger a whole host of problems and issues to our intimate relationships and our sexual function within them. Each person brings to the table a unique learning history and personality that sit within a broad range of individual living circumstances and value systems. We are all facing the same storm but we are not in the same boat. As such, how each individual may respond to crisis or uncertainty will likely be different and some coping strategies, for instance use of alcohol and substances, can lead to relaxed boundaries around sexual behaviour, or perhaps distress in the longer term. Further differences may include Covid-19 vulnerability, tolerance of risk, communication, needs, desires and expectations. These differences may become more pronounced at times of uncertainty with the potential to lead to tensions.

## CO-HABITING IN COMMITTED RELATIONSHIPS: KEEPING IT TOGETHER

### CHANGES AND PRESSURES; THE POSSIBLE IMPACT ON SEXUAL DESIRE

The social and economic restrictions associated with Covid-19 might affect the frequency of sex and how enjoyable it is. The stress caused by dealing with children at home, financial concerns, job loss/changes, or illness (affecting each other, friends or family members) may impact emotional wellbeing and also communication between couples. This is likely to create a context in which old tensions return and new challenges appear.

These concerns, along with a general uncertainty about the future can increase or decrease sexual desire, which is connected to our mood and of course how we currently feel in our relationship.

Psychological issues triggered by the pandemic, such as guilt and worry about exposing loved ones to Covid-19 or sadness and anger as a response to experience of bereavement may have a considerable impact on emotional wellbeing, and therefore sexual function and desire. Additionally, unmet sexual needs may lead to unhelpful coping strategies and bring further pressures to the relationship.

Strategies:

- It can be difficult to talk about sex as it can make us feel vulnerable and exposed. However, couples might find it useful to discuss their feelings and expectations around sexual intimacy. If not comfortable discussing your own needs, perhaps asking your partner about their experience of desire might be a useful way to start.
- Talking openly about these pressures with your partner will help you both understand the impact of the pandemic on each other's sexual desire and sense of sexual attractiveness. Being 'straight forward' about feelings and being open to listening may help avoid misinterpretations or 'jumping to conclusions' about any changes to sexual intimacy. Actively addressing, rather than avoiding issues may help prevent potential relationship discord.
- For some couples, setting a routine around sex may be helpful, for others trying to maintain a sense of spontaneity might work best. Either way, talking about this will help you understand each other's needs.
- If your sexual desire is low, it might be difficult to say so to your partner. However, it is important to not feel under pressure to have sex if you don't want to. You might still want to cuddle and feel close but not want to engage in sexual activity. It is important to express this so that your partner is aware, as feeling like sex is coerced will impact emotional wellbeing and is likely to have lasting negative effects on your relationship.
- If there are problems with sexual function (e.g. erectile dysfunction, vaginismus, premature ejaculation) you can explore options to seek support from specialist services through your GP.
- If your sexual desire heightens, it is also important to discuss this, as your partner may not feel the same. Explore together what is acceptable to you both and try to agree what will work. If there is a mismatch then perhaps other routes to respond to sexual libido can be explored, such as erotic material and masturbation. However some strategies (e.g. use of pornography) may come with risks to relationships.
- If any partner is forcing the other into sex without any consent, this is against the law, and support from specialist agencies can be sought.
  - <https://rapecrisis.org.uk/get-informed/about-sexual-violence/sexual-consent/>
  - <https://www.survivorsuk.org/https://www.safeline.org.uk/what-we-do/services-for-all/>
  - <https://www.thesurvivorstrust.org/>
  - <http://www.galop.org.uk/sexualviolence/>

### THE EFFECTS OF UNCHANGING ROUTINES

Spending day after day together can create tensions in relationships including those who are normally loving couples. There may also be couples who have just moved in together and therefore are learning to live with each other in a very challenging time. Everyone is under additional pressure at the moment and the effects of monotony and the pressures to cope with a sense of crisis might cause couples to be desensitised to each other's feelings, reactions and sensitivities.

Emotional wellbeing can be affected, which will be expressed verbally and through actions, which have the potential to add strain to relationships. In order to remain open and available to partners, it is essential to practice compassion and self-care as this will aid coping and adapting in this situation.

Strategies:

- This could include setting and maintaining helpful daytime routines including getting enough sleep, eating well and with variation, bathing and getting dressed each day and scheduling in self-care activities (e.g. workouts, yoga, meditation) to stay emotionally grounded and, therefore, more likely to be attuned to each other.
- Accepting that both partners might be acting differently and understanding this as a response to the situation, rather than changed feelings about each other.
- Being able to check in emotionally with each other will help to pay attention to a partner's feelings and be aware of the changing impact of external pressures on the relationship. Relate have some useful videos and articles on their website ([relate.org.uk](https://www.relate.org.uk)) on maintaining your relationship with your partner during Covid-19.
- Try to plan a new activity with your partner. It doesn't matter if it is something that you think you might not enjoy or you might not be good at, the point is to try something new, for example, try an online dance class together, or take up an outdoor activity together.
- Try to introduce spontaneity wherever you can. Surprise your partner with little things (e.g. gifts ordered online, a romantic plan for an evening at home) to show that you are thinking about them and that passion remains important.

### WHEN RELATIONSHIPS ARE NOT WORKING

Spending an increased amount of time with a partner might bring an increased focus on difficult relationship issues. There might be old issues that have been intensified by the effects of Covid-19 restrictions or new pressures placed on the relationship. Factors relating to your home environment, such as size and space, and the amount of people in it may well be adding to the stress. Managing feelings of being upset, frustrated or annoyed might become even more important as usual coping strategies might not be available (e.g. going to the gym/pub/someone's home) particularly if access to digital technology is limited. For some, the feeling of being trapped in lockdown may bring past trauma to the surface, which might come with overwhelming distress and a change of behaviour in relationships. Negative perceptions of relationships enhance stress and have consequences for physical and mental health.

Strategies:

- Big and difficult conversations may need to be put on hold while you deal with the current situation.
- If you've been arguing with your partner over a particular issue, consider calling a truce during this period to make living under one roof more bearable. Choose your battles and weigh up if they are worth it at this time.
- Think of how you tend to show your distress and understand distress behaviours as communication. Let each other know what you might need at these times (e.g. comfort, space, distraction, humour...).
- Remember that there are many different ways of coping in stressful situations and your way isn't the only way. Try to respect each other's space and individual needs.

- Relationship conflict can have a considerable impact on mood and wellbeing, so make sure you pay attention to the happy times and moments of closeness. Appreciate them with each other.
- Learning new strategies such as counting to ten, pressing the 'pause button' and taking some deep breaths may give you a little longer to decide how to react.
- Remember that children will learn from how you deal with conflict. Keep this in mind when you are all under one roof together.
- Understand that with the best will in the world, rows are quite likely in these circumstances. It's how you deal with them that counts.
- Something you usually find irritating about your partner may become useful in a crisis or they may surprise you by how well they are handling things. Let them know how much you appreciate this.
- If you were having relationship problems already being able to speak to someone external might be helpful. Relationship counselling via Zoom or Skype might help you address the issues.
- If you are becoming overwhelmed, try to find a way to communicate this to your partner (if it feels possible and/or safe) to help them understand why you are feeling the way you do. If this is related to personal issues you have lived with for a long time, some outside, individual support may be required. Speak with your GP.
- If you are feeling frightened in your relationship, are experiencing abuse or think you are at risk of this, there are support services you can access to stay safe.
  - <https://www.nhs.uk/live-well/healthy-body/getting-help-for-domestic-violence/>
  - <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/domestic-abuse-how-to-get-help>
  - <https://www.womensaid.org.uk/information-support/what-is-domestic-abuse/>
  - <https://uksaysnomore.org/supportingmen/>
- Whilst you might not be in a position to leave, these services will have some ideas about how to keep yourself as safe as possible, including making safety plans for escape should danger increase.

## LIVING SEPARATELY: MANAGING THE DIVIDE

Together apart relationships can be defined as a couple who live apart. Covid-19 has caused significant challenges to those creating, developing and sustaining together apart or long-distance relationships. In the current climate long distance may not actually be that long or that distant.

Some couples have been together apart pre-Covid-19 having carefully considered the decision to take this step. Others may have been propelled into unexpected together apart relationships without the usual consideration and negotiations that would typically be involved. Moreover, people may also have been forced to make tough choices between families or intimate relationships. Whatever the context, the challenges are substantial with potential for increased isolation and personal and sexual disconnection through prolonged periods of separation.

Hallmarks of a secure relationship include the sense of having a future together as well as safety. For those in early stages of relationships this sense of future is already fairly uncertain and adding Covid-19 to the mix may create complications. This may lead to increased pressure and judgements about the relationship, which may disrupt the flow, particularly in

the honeymoon period. Furthermore, at times of crisis some individuals may focus on their own needs and be more likely to move on from relationships or look elsewhere. Conversely, individuals in established relationships usually seek security during crisis from their partner, which is now met with barriers.

Strategies:

- Hold an awareness and compassion for the unique circumstances you find yourself in. Keep in mind, although together apart may be difficult, this is not forever.
- Ensure a range of joint activities together virtually – try something new and use technology to make usual activities joint (cook, walks, TV, games, Netflix party, shared Spotify playlists etc). Protect time for date nights.
- Explore memories of times together and make plans for your next trip (what you might do, where you might go etc). This may help protect a sense of future at a time when everything around reinforces an uncertain time ahead.
- Communicate, express self/needs and develop an understanding of individual differences. This period may provide an opportunity to develop compassionate communication and to deepen the understanding of each other.
- Explore creative and novel ways to show you are thinking about each other. This may include gift giving, letters, emails, voice notes etc.
- Physicalness and intimacy within relationships are an important part of developing close connection. As such, exploring ways to physically and intimately connect in a safe and secure environment remotely is important.

## **SINGLE, BUT SEEKING CONNECTION**

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Covid-19 and lockdown rules present a particular challenge to those who are single, whether they are dating casually, seriously, or whether they are not dating at all. The impact on more casual encounters may also present issues for those in open relationships. The use of online dating websites and apps may be affected in different ways during the pandemic. As lockdown rules and restrictions change, this will have a direct impact on interactions with a new partner. Keeping up with the rules can be a challenge in itself as restrictions on mixing households, indoor or outdoor meeting, or going to people's homes are changing all the time. For those who may be shielding, these added restrictions may come with a heavier burden. It might be helpful to be aware of and think through your own boundaries around physical contact and sexual contact in light of the pandemic before meeting a new partner.

Single people may feel that their romantic and sexual life is put on hold during the pandemic and may understandably feel frustrated, or lonely as a result. Research shows that single people face unique challenges, even those living with non-romantic others e.g. housemates or lodgers, as they report feeling less socially connected than those living with romantic partners. Lockdown may also have a particular impact on single people due to closure of key places that may have previously facilitated social connections e.g. pubs, clubs, LGBTQ+ spaces.

## Strategies:

- Whatever the impact, be aware of and accept your human need for social connection and its importance for your overall wellbeing. Perhaps searching for security through intimacy may feel even more important at this anxiety-provoking time.
- Try to schedule in ways of connecting with others. Be flexible with this, as ongoing changes to lockdown restrictions will mean that you will need a whole range of ways of building in connection to your day.
- Consider your own boundaries around physical and sexual contact when dating/hooking up with a partner for sex. Think in advance about how you might discuss or negotiate these with a new partner.
- Try something new: For those who feel frustrated that their sex lives have been put 'on hold' due to lockdown restrictions, sharing fantasies, or phone or video sex may offer opportunities for sexual connection if that feels comfortable for both partners.
- Don't forget that sexual activity doesn't have to be partnered and lockdown may provide some time to get to know your own body. Masturbation and fantasy can also be a 'social distancing-friendly' activity. Sales of sex toys have increased during lockdown and this might be a good opportunity to try out a new sex toy for solo use.
- For those who might be eager to start a family, exploring online dating may be particularly helpful. Even if there is no sexual component, this can offer space and time to get to know somebody and to discover whether there might be a future in the relationship. This may reduce the sense of 'losing time'.

## IN THE SAME STORM: ISSUES AFFECTING US ALL

Whilst different relationship arrangements may bring some specific problems, there are also issues that may affect how intimate or romantic partners relate to each other, irrespective of relationship status. Some of the more prominent concerns are described below.

### WORKING FROM HOME

During Covid-19, there has been a significant increase in UK homeworking from an estimated 5 per cent to over a quarter during the initial lockdown. A survey carried out by the Office for National Statistics in July 2020 showed that 30 per cent of adults reported working mainly or exclusively from home in the previous week.

Humans are social animals and connection is a basic human need. The loss of workplace face to face interactions may mean that some people have a lot less social contact than previously. The shift to more people working full-time or part-time from home can also add extra pressures to intimate relationships. For cohabiting couples who are both working from home, the blurring of home/work boundary may be difficult to manage and it may be challenging to keep work and home life separate. For those together but not co-habiting, work-life may begin to intrude on time spent together.

Homeworking also reduces opportunities for social interaction with colleagues and can constitute a loss of wider support network. This may impact negatively on intimate relationships as people may look to their partner to address all of their social needs. Although research shows that time spent together correlates with relationship quality, this does differ significantly depending on what activities that time is spent on. During lockdown, the issue of boredom and repetitiveness may be a challenge for co-habiting couples. Research shows that couples who spend time together in shared active and novel recreational activity report higher perceived relationship quality.

Strategies:

- With reduced opportunity for face to face contact, find other ways of connecting with your social network. Make an extra effort to communicate with loved ones to maintain a feeling of connectedness (letters, cards, social media, phone and video call). Contact outside of intimate and romantic relationships is important, particularly in terms of gathering alternative perspectives in the form of support and problems solving.
- Try to set up 'buddy tea breaks' with colleagues where you use this as an opportunity to have a 15 minute informal catch up to maintain work relationships during the working day.
- Where possible, keep structured time boundaries around your working routine to differentiate between work and home life and to ensure that time can be spent with partners, whether cohabiting or otherwise.
- Although holiday options are limited, it is really important to take leave from work and make plans with your partner, or dedicate time to dating.

### REDUCED ACCESS TO USUAL SUPPORT SYSTEMS

Emerging research is showing that living through a pandemic can lead to mental health difficulties (e.g. anxiety, depression, post-traumatic stress) and it is well known that social support is very important for our ability to manage and recover from these issues. The level of social support available from others will also influence feelings of connectedness or distance. One of the major difficulties for everybody during lockdown has been the loss of access to the regular, supportive relationships and friendships that helps everybody to maintain perspective, feel understood and be able to discuss and share our experiences with trusted and loved people.

Whilst co-habiting partners may support each other, they will also need to feel connected to and supported by their wider community. Under the circumstances, when cohabiting, it is tempting to lean on partners for emotional support and comfort just because they are under the same roof. This might place stress and pressure on relationships. This may also be true for together apart relationships, or new relationships if lockdown is creating particularly difficult issues. A lack of regular wider support may lead to relationships increasing in intensity, perhaps before they may have done in different circumstances. For those who are dating, Covid-19-related stressors might dominate conversations and be a barrier to connection in other ways. Whatever the relationship's status, there is a risk of (would be) partners feeling burnt out emotionally leading to irritability, frustration, anger and resentment. This may result in further emotional distance, which may fuel any issues being encountered.

Strategies:

- Maintaining connections with others external to the household is important. Talking with other people on the phone and the use of technology to keep one's friendships and support network intact is essential.
- Taking the first step might be required. Many people are under incredible pressures due to the economic, family and social consequences of Covid-19 and may feel reluctant to burden others with their worries and concerns. Taking the initiative to send a text or make a phone call will be mutually beneficial.

### MANAGING BOUNDARIES: WORKING THROUGH CONFLICTS

The ever-shifting rules of lockdown have the potential to cause issues in our close relationships. People are experiencing different levels of distress, frustration and worry in relation to this for many reasons, and it is likely that some are finding it difficult to comprehend and follow the rules

that are set. Whilst it seems that some people adhere strictly to the governmental frameworks, others may be choosing to manage risks according to their own criteria.

Whether relationships are long term, new or casual, the decisions one partner makes about how they do, or do not follow the rules inherently affects the other. Stress around these decisions is likely to increase the more restrictive the lockdown is and will be related to variable factors in each person's situation such as, commitments and necessary actions (e.g. working), ability to tolerate separation from loved ones, the need to protect yourself or vulnerable significant others, community and cultural influences or belief and trust in the systems creating the rules. If partners are often not in agreement about sticking to lockdown rules, ongoing conflict may intensify existing problems, reveal a side to a person that you do not favour or even lead to 'dealbreaker' situations where people no longer feel able to be with each other.

There is also the possibility that fears, distress and the imposed control of the Covid-19 pandemic is being experienced as traumatising by some people. Perhaps particularly for those who have had difficult experiences in the past, the situation may be triggering overwhelming distress, due to pressure from the wider circumstances, and/or issues of control and power within personal relationships. Conflicts within partnerships may activate traumatic patterns from previous relationship experiences where some people may feel dismissed, ignored or powerless and acquiesce to another's decision to avoid conflict. Conversely others may feel stress from being out of control, and therefore cope by dominating decision making processes. Either way, inequalities in decision making process are likely to lead to psychological and emotional issues that play out in the relationship, whether they are expressed or not.

Strategies:

- Remember – Stress can exaggerate how we respond to a problem. Where there are strong feelings, the emotional part of our brain takes over the more rational part of our brain, affecting how we think and reason things out. If emotions are escalating, take a break, and revisit when both parties are feeling calmer.
- During discussion, be as honest you can. You know yourself best and so it could be helpful for your partner to understand the reasons underneath your decisions.
- If in conflict, try to acknowledge your partner's position and needs. If a person feels heard, this can reduce distress and help them feel more open to listening to other perspectives.
- In relation to the above points, it is important to consider your own safety first, if you are fearful or in a situation of abuse, please access services that can support you (see the links provided earlier).
- Although mutual decision making would be recommended, this may not always be possible. When situations are complex with lots of competing demands, try to agree on some priorities. Solutions may be about risk and harm limitation, for example by making important visits but agreeing to leave significant time periods in-between for infection control.
- If agreement is difficult, aim to have some balance by trying to ensure that one partner's needs/decisions do not dominate. If things fall in favour of one person more often than the other, there is a risk of building resentment and distress (even if not expressed) which will impact wellbeing and therefore, the relationship.
- Always acknowledge and thank the other person for any sacrifices made.

- With the complexity of the current situation that is regularly changing, it is easy for Covid-19 to become the centre of many conversations. Time free of Covid-19 will be essential to manage stress and connect with each other on more familiar terms.

## A PLACE FOR HOPE AND POSITIVE CHANGE?

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In summary, there is no doubt that Covid-19 presents a challenge to all of us and our intimate and romantic relationships. However, like any challenge, there may also be the possibility for positive growth and change in relationships as we face the demands of the pandemic together. We may find that we learn new things about ourselves or a partner, or see hidden strengths come to the fore during these challenging times. The pandemic may present us with an opportunity to slow down and take the time to think about the relationships that are most important to us. You may find that you develop new relationship skills during lockdown like better communication skills, or to focus on the positives and learning to 'let the small stuff go'.

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