

How to Survive and Thrive Through the Coronavirus Quarantine: Turning Cabin Fever Into Relationship Wins.

Posted on March 13, 2020 by Carolyn Sharp

News just came in that schools in most of Western Washington have been cancelled until April 24, and many employers here already mandated work from home until the new Coronavirus is contained. Many of my couples are anxious and uncertain about getting through this time without damaging an already stressed relationship. Very real professional, financial and health challenges are facing many families and many others are struggling with severe anxiety about this pandemic. While this global crisis is challenging everyone's lives in profound ways, there are opportunities to create connection and strength as a couple. Creating a strategy to get through this period as a team is critical to protecting the health of your relationship long past COVID-19.

Stan Tatkin, Psy.D., author of *We Do: Saying Yes to a Relationship of Depth, True Connection and Enduring Love*, tells us about the need for couples to create a couple bubble—an “ecosystem” for their relationship. In this bubble, the needs of the relationship are prioritized and maintained so that each member feels nourished and protected against external stressors. Let's imagine this quarantine as a physical manifestation pressing on the Couple Bubble. There is so much stress on everyone around us right now that our homes and our families need more than ever to be places of refuge. At the same time, too much togetherness is not always the ideal. So, how do you balance the opportunity for togetherness against the stress of cabin fever? As always, I ask my couples to focus their attention on what their partner needs and how to provide it. Does your partner have health challenges that requires special care during this time? Is your partner someone who needs connection to relieve stress? Does physical touch help them relax and connect? Or do they need quiet and alone time? With this in mind, couples can develop a plan together to help support the relationship through this period. While you focus your attention on hearing what your partner says, break this plan into categories:

Time:

What times of day is your partner most productive and engaged? How can you arrange your work time, parenting time, and housework time to help them feel most productive and energized? Are there times when they need quiet or resting time and how can you manage it?

Mornings are my best time for productivity, but not necessarily personal engagement as I am focused on tasks at hand. My partner, on the other hand, is pretty slow in the morning and would rather take his time. Working toward meeting his needs, I could bring him tea and chat for a bit to help him start his day positively, and then he could send me off to get things done. Later in the day, having gotten stuff done, I could protect his need to focus and keep the kids out of his way. Later, we could give the kids a shared activity and settle into some dedicated couple time to debrief, destress, and enjoy each other.

Talking about this in terms of your partner's needs—rather than your own—helps your partner feel supported and will promote their focus on reciprocating this experience. As you

talk about it, focus on your partner's body language, facial expressions, and tone of voice as they respond to your ideas. Are you noticing relief and happiness or stress and frustration? Can you adapt your ideas based on non-verbal feedback and continue to listen and attend?

Space:

Can you create space in your home for the different activities that will keep you both sane? Can you creatively make room for each of you (and any children) to work, rest and play, so that you don't feel confined during this time? Helping your partner have space to decompress on their own will create room for their nervous systems to recharge. Designating other space for your relationship will center that connection as a priority and will help wire you together and feed that ecosystem.

For example, the living room couch can be for couple time, whether snuggling, talking together or enjoying a TV show, while the dining table is for work, homework and family time (meals, games art projects, etc.). A chair in the bedroom may serve as a refuge for each of you to take time alone, for work or for regrouping. No matter the size or layout of your home, you can work together to create and protect these spaces. The kids will follow your lead, especially when you are working together.

Goals:

Setting goals for this time away from work and school is an opportunity to connect and prevent chaos and deterioration as a couple and a family. Listen closely to what your partner needs and values. Take note to support them in getting things done and feeling positively about the direction you take as a family. Are there big work projects on the horizon for them that need specific attention? For any kids, are their school subjects or behavioral needs which will require you working together? Again, using your attention, notice the response as you listen carefully with interest and commitment. Adjust yourself to make sure they feel supported. Notice, too, as they reciprocate and how it feels to work together to get ahead of this stressful time.

Challenges:

What will be hardest for your partner and the kids you may share? What do they need to feel supported through this? Are they anxious about infection and consuming too much news? Does your partner have health needs that create increased anxiety and stress for the possibility of infection? Are there financial challenges that the two of you need to work through? Do your kids struggle to be productive and spend too much time on their device, causing friction? How can you, as a couple, look at these potential pitfalls to support each other and work together to solve?

In Sickness and in Health...

Now, obviously, the most significant challenge would occur if either of you or your children or extended family were to become ill with the virus. Have you worked together to set up contingencies for someone in your family becoming ill? Taking care of each other's health is obviously the most critical job either of you have. Having this plan in place will support all of you in feeling prepared and supported.

Taking Care for the long term.

Working through these challenges at the start of the quarantine will help focus your attention on taking care of one another. It will help develop a system that will best support your relationship, and your family. Being proactive will prepare you for problems before they come up and keep them manageable.

While no one wants to be quarantined, cut off from work, school, and community, this challenging time does create an opportunity to build stronger relationships. Lessons learned in this time can be applied for long family vacations, extended business trips, relationship, and the inevitable family challenges couples face together. If you remain focused on supporting your relationship first, by putting your partner's needs at the center of your attention, both of you will have your needs met as much as possible and find new ways to grow stronger as a couple and as a family.