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Review

Implications of social isolation, separation, and loss during the COVID-19 pandemic for couples' relationships

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Abstract

The broad isolation, separation, and loss resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic raise risks for couples' relationship quality and stability. Guided by the vulnerability–stress–adaptation model, we suggest that how pandemic-related loss, isolation, and separation impact couples' relationships will vary depending on the amount and severity of pandemic-related stress, together with enduring personal vulnerabilities (e.g. attachment insecurity), both of which can disrupt adaptive dyadic responses to these challenges. A review of emerging research examining relationship functioning before and during the initial stages of the pandemic offers support for this framework. We draw on additional research to suggest pathways for mitigating relationship disruptions and promoting resilience.

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The COVID-19 pandemic, as with all major shared community events and disasters, raises risks for broad isolation, separation, and loss. Pandemic restrictions have produced separation from important others (family, friends, coworkers) and support networks (childcare, health care) along with myriad losses (financial, employment, health, time, space) that challenge health and well-being. Stressful contexts involving these

challenges can jeopardize couples' relationship quality and stability and family functioning [1–3]. We apply the vulnerability–stress–adaptation (VSA) model [4] to consider how pandemic-related loss, isolation, and separation may impact couples' relationships [5], depending on the level and type of pandemic-related stress encountered [6,7] along with enduring personal vulnerabilities (e.g. attachment insecurity) that disrupt adaptive responses to these challenges. Emerging research examining relationship functioning before and during the initial stages of the pandemic provides support for this framework, as well as identifies pathways for resilience.

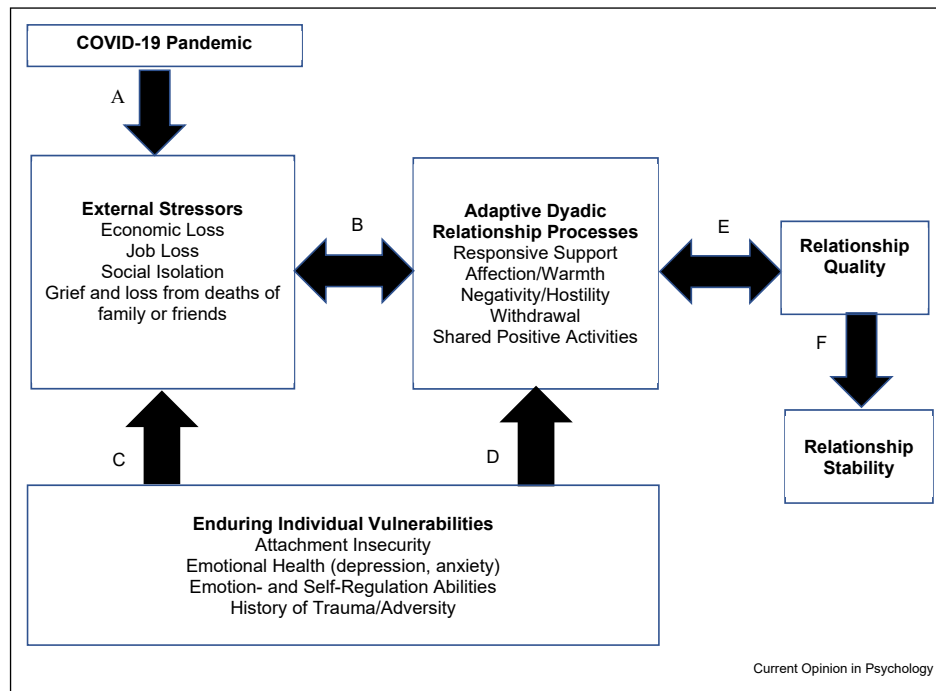
The vulnerability-stress-adaption (VSA) model applied to the COVID-19 pandemic

Figure 1 illustrates the VSA model, adapted to focus on stress from loss, separation, and isolation associated with the COVID-19 pandemic (for a related framework focusing on loss-related disasters/crises, see [8]). The model suggests that the pandemic will give rise to multiple stressors evoking feelings of loss, separation, and isolation (path A), that in themselves (path B) and together with couple members' pre-existing vulnerabilities (e.g. attachment insecurity; paths C and D), will mold couples' adaptive dyadic processes, including how they communicate, problem-solve, and support each other, which, in turn, will impact relationship quality and stability (paths E and F).

Loss, separation, and isolation and relationship outcomes (paths B, E, and F)

Numerous studies before the COVID-19 pandemic document that people faced with stress from outside the relationship—such as financial or job stress—are more likely to interact with their partner in ways that damage relationship quality across time, such as being overly critical, blaming, or being unresponsive to their partners [1,9–11]. A key reason that stress undermines adaptive dyadic processes is by taxing individuals' capacity to enact the effort and attention required to constructively engage with their partner [2,12]. Elevated stress also can interfere with perceiving the partner's need for support and therefore whether people provide effective support [13].

Figure 1



How the COVID-19 pandemic may shape relationship processes and outcomes. The framework (adapted from Karney and Bradbury, 1995) suggests that the COVID-19 pandemic will create a variety of external stressors involving loss and social isolation that may interfere with adaptive dyadic relationship processes, which, in turn, can intensify the impact of external stressors as well as lower relationship quality and threaten relationship stability. Couples in which one or both members have enduring vulnerabilities (e.g. attachment insecurity, depression) will be more likely to experience greater negative and fewer positive interactions, and the impact of external stressors may be heightened. The figure was adapted from "Applying Relationship Science to Evaluate How the COVID-19 Pandemic May Impact Couples' Relationships" by P. R. Pietromonaco and N. C. Overall, 2021, *American Psychologist*, 76 (3), p. 440 (<https://doi.org/10.1037/amp0000714>), Copyright 2021 by the American Psychological Association.

The COVID-19 pandemic is accompanied by multiple stressors, including social distancing, confinement at home while coordinating increased demands to balance daily tasks (e.g. job/career, childcare), and the lack of control, irritation, and frustration produced by disruptions and losses across many domains (e.g. economic, relational). These multiple stressors are embedded in a context in which people view family as more important, and conflict as more likely, during the pandemic than before [14]. In addition, disruptions from the pandemic make it more challenging than usual for couple members to balance maintaining their independence while also preserving closeness and connection with their partner [15]. The situation therefore is ripe for overloading individuals' cognitive and emotional resources, thereby undermining their ability to respond effectively when relationship problems arise as well as detect and provide support when partners need to rely on each other.

To evaluate whether pandemic-related stress adversely affects relationships, we summarize findings from the few studies assessing relationship functioning both before and during the pandemic, allowing for clearer tests of this link. Findings from the German Family Panel study

indicated that both men and women ($N = 781$ individuals) in marital/cohabiting relationships declined in relationship satisfaction from before to during the pandemic, regardless of pandemic-related employment changes [16]. Another study of 157 couples who were confined in mandatory quarantine with their children found that greater quarantine-related stress predicted residual decreases in relationship functioning (increased relationship problem severity, decreased problem-solving efficacy) and family functioning (increased home chaos, decreased family cohesion) [7], as well as residual increases in harsh parenting among those who perceived low (but not high) partner support [17].

Difficulty equitably managing the increased housework and parenting demands of quarantine also predicted greater relationship problems and dissatisfaction [6]. Finally, parents ($N = 365$) who experienced greater stress in mandatory quarantine also reported increases in verbal aggression toward their intimate partners [18].

However, the pandemic may offer opportunities to strengthen relationships by allowing couples to band together against external threats [5]. This possibility

may be why a study assessing 654 individuals in marital, cohabiting, or dating relationships before and during the early months of the pandemic found no differences in either relationship satisfaction or blaming their partner for mishaps regardless of the negativity of pandemic experiences [19]. Furthermore, those who reported that they and their partners were coping well, or had low relationship conflict, evidenced increased relationship satisfaction and decreased partner blaming. Although these improvements were small, they suggest that engaging in adaptive dyadic processes during this stressful context may benefit relationships. Indeed, counter to early predictions of a surge in divorces, United States' divorce rates in Florida, Missouri, New Hampshire, and Oregon were lower in March–May 2020 than those in March–May 2018 and 2019 [20].

Yet, the degree to which couples remain resilient, sustain positive relationship functioning, and stay together is likely to vary by additional factors. For example, couples with children have faced additional demands, including equitably balancing increased work and childcare demands, and thus likely experienced greater stress [21], more depleted resources required to be responsive, and less time to foster relationship connection. These differences may be why studies examining married couples with children illustrated more detrimental outcomes [7,16,18]. Similarly, the number and severity of stressors will likely be greater for couples entering the pandemic with greater economic or social challenges, and the impact of such ongoing stress and isolation likely grew after the early pandemic months assessed in the studies mentioned above. Finally, the VSA model [4] and our application to the COVID-19 pandemic [5] suggest that how much pandemic-related stress damages relationships will depend on pre-existing vulnerabilities.

Enduring individual vulnerabilities (paths C and D)

Individuals enter stressful situations including the pandemic with pre-existing personal vulnerabilities that shape their perceptions of stress and dyadic processes and also can spillover to impact their partner's perceptions and dyadic processes. Enduring vulnerabilities can include attachment insecurity [22,23], depression [24], emotion regulation strategies [25], and neuroticism [26] that interfere with adaptive dyadic exchanges (e.g. effective communication, being supportive) and in turn threaten relationship well-being. Furthermore, recent work demonstrates that individual vulnerabilities, such as poor emotion regulation strategies (expressive suppression, rumination) and neuroticism, can exacerbate adverse psychological and physical responses during the pandemic [26,27]. Moreover, enduring vulnerabilities will have the greatest impact when people encounter more pandemic-related stress, as illustrated by research

assessing relationship functioning before and during the pandemic.

Attachment insecurity is relevant because the pandemic raises threats, such as fears about mortality, uncertainty about the future, and separation from broader social networks, that can activate attachment concerns and lead individuals to seek security/comfort using destructive attachment-related affect regulation strategies [23,28]. For example, individuals who are anxiously attached show heightened distress in response to threat and often try to cope by seeking excessive reassurance from their partner. These strategies can create relationship problems for individuals and their partners, including destructive communication patterns, ineffective support provision, and feeling undervalued by the partner [29,30]. Consistent with a diathesis–stress approach to attachment [28], individuals with greater attachment anxiety (assessed pre-pandemic) evidenced increased relationship problem severity during a COVID-19 quarantine, but only if they also experienced high quarantine-related stress [7]. Moreover, individuals with more anxiously attached partners, and thus who likely encountered destructive communication and excessive reassurance seeking from their partner, also showed declines in relationship satisfaction and commitment, increased relationship problem severity, and poorer family cohesion when they experienced high quarantine-related stress.

Individuals who are avoidantly attached tend to disengage when threatened and distance themselves from their partner. Avoidant strategies also interfere with adaptive relationship functioning for individuals and their partners by constraining intimacy and responsive support and leading to ineffective (e.g. withdrawal) and damaging (e.g. hostility) responses to conflict [31–33]. Accordingly, in the study described previously, individuals with more avoidantly attached partners (assessed pre-pandemic) showed declines in problem-solving efficacy and family cohesion, regardless of their stress, probably because their partner's typical disengagement strategies interfered with resolving conflicts and maintaining closeness. These findings highlight the dyadic nature of couples' relationships: Relationship outcomes are linked not only to individuals' own vulnerabilities but also to their partner's vulnerabilities.

Other pre-existing vulnerabilities involve broader societal attitudes that shape how intimate partners manage power dynamics. For example, men's hostile sexism incorporates beliefs that men, and not women, should possess social power and authority within the family [34]. Men's hostile sexism represents a risk for aggression in couples' relationships, particularly when men feel they lack control or power [35], which is likely during quarantines when couples are confined at home, and must rely on each other isolated from other means to alleviate

pandemic-related uncertainty and loss. A recent investigation revealed that men higher in pre-pandemic hostile sexism were more aggressive toward their partners during a mandated quarantine, particularly when they felt less power when interacting with their partner [18].

A host of other personal vulnerabilities (e.g. depression, poor emotion regulation, childhood adversity) will likely shape how couples adapt throughout the pandemic. Individuals with depression, for example, focus on negative aspects of their situation [36,37], which can exacerbate the effects of pandemic-related stressors (path C). Similarly, the overly negative perceptions, hostility, and defensiveness of individuals experiencing depression can undermine adaptive interactions with their partner [38–40], which, in turn, may amplify the effects of pandemic-related stress (path B). Future work comparing couples before and throughout the pandemic is needed to reveal how depression and other vulnerabilities will impact relationships across this time of crisis.

Variation across couples: mitigating relationship disruptions and facilitating resilience

Just as research examining people's responses to loss and trauma reveals considerable variation in psychological responses [41], couples likely will vary in how pandemic-related stress affects long-term relationship distress [5], ranging from trajectories of chronic, prolonged distress to stable resilience. As summarized in Figure 1, and supported by the research reviewed previously, these trajectories will likely depend on the severity of pandemic-related stressors, personal vulnerabilities, and how well couples adapt. These factors also provide insight into how to mitigate relationship disruptions and facilitate resilience.

Couples who experience little economic loss, minimize isolation such as by using technology to connect with others, and have fewer personal vulnerabilities are most likely to show resilience, especially if they communicate effectively and support each other. For these couples, the pandemic and associated lockdowns may yield benefits by creating opportunities to spend more time together in enjoyable or novel activities, which promote relationship growth [42,43]. Moreover, by facing a shared stressor effectively together, they may exit the pandemic with a new appreciation for their relationship. This possibility aligns with recent findings that individuals with moderate exposure to a natural disaster (Hurricane Sandy) reported increased social support, less distress, and less attachment avoidance from before to after the disaster [44].

Most couples are likely to face more challenges, and their trajectories will depend on their ability to sustain adaptive relationship processes throughout the crisis.

Just as vaccines inoculate people against the virus, many couples may inoculate their relationships from pandemic-related stressors by engaging in practices that support successful relationships [5,45]. These practices involve effective communication, including refraining from hostility, criticism, and aggression even when negativity occurs, directly working to problem-solve as a team, and being motivated to improve the situation and open to compromise [46–48]. Safeguarding relationships also involves providing responsive support, including being understanding and attending to partners' concerns [49], which can buffer the adverse effects of stress, or personal vulnerabilities, on relationship well-being [40]. Traversing the pandemic using effective communication and responsive support may mean that, despite short-term increases in distress, many couples recover quickly and emerge with a stronger defense against future challenges.

Couple members who belong to groups with disproportionately greater risks for pandemic-related stress, loss, and isolation (racial/ethnic minorities, parents) may have the most difficulty adapting to challenges from the crisis [5] and incur greater risk for relationship distress and dissolution. Moreover, adaptive dyadic processes (effective communication, responsive support) may not be enough to mitigate intractable problems caused by severe adversity and economic hardship, especially if the pandemic exacerbates these broader contextual stressors [5,8]. For couples most at risk from the pandemic, social policies are needed that provide economic support, jobs/job training, child care, and health care [50], establishing a foundation for couples to benefit additionally from adaptive relationship processes.

Conclusions

The loss, isolation, and separation accompanying the COVID-19 pandemic represent significant challenges for couples' relationships, interfering with adaptive relationship processes (e.g. increasing hostility, with drawal) and risking relationship distress. Couples' relationship trajectories—from chronic distress to stable resilience—will vary depending on their pandemic-related losses, isolation, and separation, personal vulnerabilities, and ability to enact adaptive relationship processes that help to inoculate relationships from pandemic-related stress.

Conflict of interest statement

Nothing declared.

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