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Surviving the Strain of a Crowded House

How to keep relationships strong in close quarters

By Barbara Brody | July 6, 2020 | Rally Health

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Back in pre-pandemic times, Jenna and her husband spent most of the week in different orbits: She worked from home while supervising their two young children; he was out of the house for at least 12 hours a day for his high-stress job in New York finance. They relished frequent date nights but also enjoyed separate outings with their own friends. Since the stay-at-home orders, however, that's all changed.

"There's a lot of 'Why did you do it that way?'" says Jenna, who asked that we use only her first name to protect her family's privacy. She resents having to explain things, like why she steps away from the sink with the water on. (She's waiting for it to heat up.) She also misses having evenings to herself, when she got most of her work done. "I didn't get married to see my husband every second of every day."

Jenna and her husband are faring well enough under the strain — she says he's a great dad and still considers them to be happily married. Some relationships are even thriving. Annie Warshaw, who runs a yoga-based empowerment program for kids in Chicago, says that this period has been surprisingly good. "Something clicked during quarantine. We do not bicker; we just enjoy each other," she says. "He's taken on more of the 'mental load' that tends to fall on women."

But some relationships have crumbled under the pressure. "I had a couple recently break up over how to cook eggs," says Moe Gelbart, PhD, director of practice development for Community Psychiatry.

It wasn't really about the eggs. "Spending so much time together has a way of magnifying whatever previously existed in the relationship," says Gelbart.

There's no shortage of stressors on relationships these days. Striving to strengthen your bond can be worth it. Good relationships are associated with a range of potential health benefits, including a lower risk of [heart disease](#), [depression](#), and [age-related cognitive decline](#).

The flip side can be extremely detrimental: Researchers from Brigham Young University determined that social isolation and loneliness may be as [harmful as](#) obesity.

Of course, the COVID-19 era has people feeling more isolated than ever. So how do you preserve your most valued relationships? Here's what the experts advise.

Strengthening romantic bonds

- **Open lines of communication.** If you repress your feelings they'll fester and you may end up exploding later. When your partner expresses discontent, acknowledge that their feelings are valid, whatever they might be, says Scott Braithwaite, PhD, an associate professor at Brigham Young University and creator of [ePrep](#), a marriage-strengthening program. At the same time, know when things are getting too heated: Braithwaite says it's OK to call a "time out" as long as whoever asks for the pause takes responsibility for bringing the topic back up in the not-too-distant future.

- **Keep a schedule.** Consistency is really important for mental well-being, which trickles down to how you interact with your partner, says Braithwaite. That means waking up and going to bed the same time every day, having set meal times, and getting regular exercise. It's also wise to build in some alone time; take a solo walk outside or escape for an extra-long shower once a day if at all possible, he says.

- **Maintain intimacy.** Sex is just part of it, says Gelbart. Sitting on the couch binge-watching Netflix while you hold hands counts, too. "Our marriage has sweetened and gotten deeper," says Hope Griffin, who lives with her husband in Canon City, CO. "Because we're less busy, we're able to share more meals, and we have had ample time to grow spiritually together through praying and singing. We never used to find the time to go on walks, but that has been one of our highlights during quarantine."

Connecting with kids

- **Set your own rules.** Parents have become the teachers, kids miss their friends and activities, and everyone is stressed out, says Jessica Borelli, PhD, associate professor of psychological science at University of California, Irvine, and a licensed clinical psychologist specializing in parent-child relationships. Her advice: "Prioritize what matters to your family, not what matters to your child's teacher or your neighbor. Prioritize your connection with your child — listen to what's on their mind. Spend time cuddling and being silly."

- **Empathize with older kids.** If your tween or teen is miserable because they can't see their friends, resist the urge to tell them to dismiss their feelings. Instead, let them know that while you can't fix the problem, you get it, says Borelli. "Ask your teen to tell you what it's like for them to be away from their friends. Tell them that you've never had to deal with such a long separation from a friend, and that it sounds unbelievably hard. Tell them that you think they're being incredibly strong and that what they are doing is helping to keep the family safe. Tell them you're grateful for their sacrifice. Validation of painful emotions usually helps ease the pain."

- **Cut yourself some slack.** "Parents have a lot of guilt," says Braithwaite. They know their kids shouldn't be spending so much time on screens and be more diligent about school work, but the conditions have changed and it's really hard. "You need to be a little compassionate toward yourself and understand that you won't be able to click on all cylinders."

- **Get kids extra support if they need it.** Telehealth has really taken off during the pandemic, and many mental health practitioners have eagerly gotten on board. If your child appears to be seriously depressed or anxious, reach out to an expert. Some one-on-one therapy or a few family sessions could make a big difference, says Gelbart.

Keep in touch with other friends and family

- **Find ways to connect remotely.** "Social distance does not equal social isolation," says Gelbart. Zoom book club meetings and poker games might not be the same, but they can still help foster bonds and lift your spirits.

- **Multitask.** If a Skype session with a friend or relative for the sole purpose of catching up feels awkward or too time-consuming, combine it with another activity, suggests Deborah Marin, MD, director of the Center for Stress, Resilience and Personal Growth at Mount Sinai. She chatted with her son for 45 minutes via FaceTime while he was cooking dinner. "It worked out very well," she says.

- **Plan in-person visits carefully.** Gelbart hadn't seen his grandchildren for two months, but his children and grandchildren recently stopped by. They all stayed 15 feet away from one another in the backyard. The children were briefed by their parents ahead of time and understood the importance of keeping their distance. "The 4-year old said, 'I wish I could give you a hug, and I said, 'Well, give your mom a hug for me.' Not being able to see my adult children and grandchildren has been the hardest part of all of this."

When relationships turn harmful

Relationships can benefit your health — when they're good ones. If your relationship has turned violent or you're worried it's headed in that direction, it's time for professional assistance. Call the [National Domestic Violence Hotline](#) (800-799-SAFE) to be connected to get free, confidential guidance from an expert.

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