

# DAILY REPORT



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## How to Keep Your Relationship From Being Socially Distant: A Family Lawyer Talks with the Experts

Many mental health professionals advise that, when properly discussed and resolved, many of the arguments between couples during this crisis can actually work to strengthen the relationship.

By **Jessica Reece Fagan** | August 25, 2020



**Jessica Reece Fagan, partner, Hedgepeth Heredia Family Law. (Courtesy photo)**

Social distancing is our new normal, and many companies have announced office closures and work-from-home extending for months. Family togetherness time continues. But, with forced closeness comes increased demands—couples are sharing in more responsibilities with fewer escapes. In this atmosphere, are challenged relationships doomed?

What if you're realizing that you just don't particularly know, or like, the person you used to only see a few hours a day? Is there a way to avoid socially distancing your relationship when you're together 24/7? I spoke with experts on the main reasons couples separate and offer tips to avoid conflict and even grow stronger with your partner through the crisis.

## Addressing the Money Issue: Outsourcing the Money Fight

It is no surprise that constant fighting over finances is one of the top reasons couples cite for separation. The American Psychological Association reports that about a third of couples say disagreements over money are a major source of conflict in their relationships. With more than 35 million people now on unemployment and others furloughed or on reduced salaries, financial stress regarding overextended budgets is pervasive. But before separating over financial woes, couples may want to consider outsourcing the money fight, says Charlotte Geletka, managing partner at Silver Penny Financial Planning.

"Basically, don't fight at the dinner table," says Geletka. "Go to someone's office, take stock of reality and get a financial plan in place moving forward."

To help couples in crisis, Geletka offers "Finance 101" to help couples take an honest "diagnostic" inventory of their finances and their concerns. She then meets with couples to review the data and concerns, referee arguments and provide feedback to formulate a plan.

"Too much spending can be the biggest misstep for a family and lead to compounding stress as a result," says Dane Cooper, a financial adviser for Global Wealth. "A financial adviser can be the impartial third party to help a couple both understand and agree to what their budget needs to look like."

Dan Monahan, a senior investment consultant at BAIRD, agrees: "When people face uncertainty in their lives, making bad emotional money choices can bear permanent scars. Working through those challenging times with professional advice can produce better outcomes that help keep you financially sound. Having a financial plan means you'll help people come out stronger on the other side of a short-term setback."

Because financial stresses often ebb and flow as much as the stock market, financial experts recommend couples find an adviser trusted to go the distance and to check in regularly with them.

"The whole point of joining a gym or having a trainer is accountability," says Geletka. "So why not have a financial coach to help make a plan and stay on track? Hearing that you are, or are not, meeting financial goals is often easier to take from a neutral third party as opposed to a spouse that you may view as nitpicking."

## Communication Issues: What We Have Here is a Failure to Communicate

According to a recent study by the American Academy of Matrimonial Lawyers (AAML), nearly 70 percent of all marriages fail because of a breakdown of communication. That breakdown is, most often, not the fight itself but a failure to make repairs and clear the air appropriately afterward, says Allison Hill, a licensed clinical psychologist who treats couples and families.

"Everyone is in stress mode right now, and it's no surprise that, when stressed, we get more testy and more inclined to pick a fight. That's not the concern," says Hill. "The concern is whether the parties are actually resolving their differences. Too often, people try to move forward too quickly."

Sweeping issues under the rug is a major issue for couples. There is a time and place for a discussion, and Hill advises against avoiding conflict and, instead, focusing on resolutions.

Many mental health professionals advise that, when properly discussed and resolved, many of the arguments between couples during this crisis can actually work to strengthen the relationship.

For example, do you find that you and your partner are fighting over differing parenting styles? You are not alone; one study reports that approximately 35% of couples report their fights center around child-rearing issues. Hill reminds her clients, first, that parenting differences can be positive because children benefit from learning how to navigate different people in the world and learning how to read adults.

Acknowledging this, Hill suggests couples use the difference for a chance to discuss and align on shared family goals and values. So long as the overall goal of the family is being met, it makes the differences in parenting style less of an issue.

Has one partner experienced a significant job change or loss, resulting in a rearrangement of duties at home? As a result, often couples find themselves arguing over the day-to-day tasks, because the partner suffering the job change may be tasked with taking on certain duties (such as homeschooling or cleaning) that he or she typically outsourced or shared.

Are you fighting over an inability to take time for yourself or just get away? Hill reports that those concerns need to be voiced and addressed as both person's well-being is important. Even 30 minutes in the car listening to a podcast, catching up with a friend or reading a book, for example, can be as refreshing as a full vacation in times of social distancing.

Another mental health professional recommends couples focus on the future and utilize this "great pause" to realign on family priorities.

"I have seen many patients rethinking things, including how caught up they have been in this whirlwind of life and rushing from one activity to the next," says Angela Arnold, a licensed psychiatrist specializing in women's issues. "This unexpected time has brought a level of peace for many couples because they are using this as an opportunity to look inward and take serious inventory of what is real and what is important."

To start the conversation, Arnold recommends couples sit down and talk about what is going right during this time and, as restrictions are being lifted, discuss what they want as their unique new normal.

What if you are still hitting roadblocks and finding differences?

"The main thing is to focus on the communication," says Hill. "If you have a strong need, vocalize it. Telling your partner the main thing on your mind and feeling he/she understands, that's where the connectivity—the intimacy—comes in."

So, how to properly resolve issues? Hill offers a few suggestions:

- Raise awareness of the issue but remain objective when voicing concerns: "Recognize emotion is playing a role, but stick to the facts."
- Remind your partner that you are a team: "Nothing diffuses an argument like letting your partner know they have an ally in whatever the challenge may be."
- Keep your sense of humor: "If you can put yourself in the other person's shoes and show some empathy and make a joke about your reaction, that can help."

"Just remember we are all going through this," says Arnold. "So, try to view things like losing jobs or having young children at home as an opportunity to show not only the strength of you as an individual but the strength of your relationship."

Not sure how to start a conversation that doesn't involve work, kids or money? Farm topics of discussion and interesting debate out to the professionals in the guise of a game. TableTopics is one company that makes a conversation cube filled with starter questions on a variety of topics, such as Date Night (Which famous couple would we like to go on a double date with?); Family (What do you say that sounds just like your mother or father?); Sports (If you could play in a championship game in any sport, which would you choose?); and Kids (What would be a really good flavor for toothpaste?). The discussion could provide an enjoyable change of pace.

### **Fear of the Unknown: Planning for the Future in These Unique Times**

With so much uncertainty, is there any way to minimize that stress?

“Control what you can control,” says Kristen Rajagopal, an estate planning attorney. She spends her days asking families tough questions about events they’d rather not think about.

But rather than obsess over “What If” looking 10 years into the future, Rajagopal advises couples to focus on answering the hard questions today.

“There is a tendency to want to plan for every eventuality, which is very difficult, if not impossible,” says Rajagopal. “Choose the best decision for today and amend documents later, if necessary.”

Many couples often find they are much less stressed about the future, and rarely fight during the planning process after addressing their long-term planning concerns and fears, she says.

### **Knowledge Is Power: Meeting With a Legal Professional**

What if this time of togetherness has unearthed serious personality conflicts or unknown financial obligations such as credit card or other debts? It may be time to speak to a legal professional.

Many family law professionals are hosting virtual meetings—using telephone conferences and videoconferencing to have safe, socially distant, meetings to discuss options with clients. Third-party neutrals are hosting remote, virtual mediations with parties in separate “Breakout Rooms” in an attempt to resolve issues out of court, and other parties are relying on the out-of-court arbitration office with a neutral, as well.

But when those options do not work, Courts are starting to reopen and can finalize a divorce action, if moving forward with your partner is not a possibility.

In the end, if it does not appear that a balance can be struck and the distance between you and your partner is too far to bridge, separation and divorce remain on the table and family law professionals are available to assist.

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