

# **When Too Close is Too Uncomfortable: Helping your Marriage Survive and Thrive During the Pandemic**

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The situation we are in at this time has created many inconveniences and difficulties. Everyone has experienced losses of varying degrees. Many of us are cooped up at home with family members for much longer periods of time than we have ever been before.

This unexpectedly long season of seeing our mates 24/7 has brought out and exacerbated unresolved issues and differences between spouses. For some, it is a joy to be spending more time with each other. For others, it is torture! For many of us, it is a mixture of both – sometimes it is great that our spouses are available, but sometimes, too much presence drives us crazy!

It is during those times when we cannot get away from our partners that the tendency to magnify faults happen. It is also during those times that some their qualities that we used to be able to tolerate become intolerable. Thus, many marriages are actually suffering during this season of sheltering-in-place. Thankfully, the end to this season may be coming due to the arrival of vaccines.

I can personally say that I am one of those women that falls into the category of having mixed experiences while sheltering-in-place with my husband. One positive part is the health benefits. We have developed a very good routine of walking twice a day and we do not eat out. We only eat foods that are generally healthy for us. Recent blood tests show great improvements! Another positive is our enjoyment of watching programs on TV together. Of course, being able to work on different projects and having each other to help is also a plus.

But not all is wonderful! One of the challenges is how the negative personality traits and temperaments reveal their ugly heads more easily and sometimes are very difficult to brush off, deny, or excuse. For example, my husband and I tend to accomplish chores and things to do at different paces. I tend to be faster; he tends to be slower and gets easily distracted. This difference becomes so obvious the longer we are stuck together. My ability to patiently wait for him to finish things I ask him to do has waned and my impatience is showing more.

I used to train couples who have conflicts similar to ours to help each other know how to “ask for something to be done each time as if it is the first time, even if you’ve already asked several times.” It is now harder, especially if I have already asked twenty or thirty times and waited for several weeks! To make matters worse, my impatience leads to my husband wanting to stay away from me because he is afraid of what this “slave driver” will ask him to do. I have been finding myself fuming when I see him distracted, reading news on his smart phone, or taking very long naps, while requests that I want done are left undone. What a stretching time for me!

So, in the meantime and for the long haul of our marriages, what can we learn that will help us cope better? What can we learn that will strengthen our marriages and help us enjoy the partners that God has given us?

Let me share some thoughts. I am trying to apply these to my situation, and they have helped. But I must confess that I am not an expert in applying these consistently yet. I am still learning. Hopefully, what I am learning will benefit my marriage in the long run, long after the pandemic becomes history.

1. Ask the Lord, “What personal growth project are you leading me into?” In other words, take a look at your own personality and character to see where what you are going through can help you grow. In my personal example, I see it as God stretching me to be more patient – a tough lesson to learn, but definitely one that will benefit me in the long run. I am aware that my “hurry sickness” has been a long-term issue, so it has been easy to spot whenever it shows up during this pandemic. Working on trying to not be as hurried and impatient, then, becomes a personal improvement project which takes some of the attention off of my husband’s “shortcomings.”

Looking at 1 Corinthians 13: 4-8 will give us many things to work on for ourselves. Galatians 5:22-23 is another good passage for reflection. I think for all of us, the matter of self-control is one area we can work on during this pandemic. Whether it be our tempers, our consumption of foods, drinking, or indulging in technology, we can learn greater self-control.

2. Take the time to go deeper spiritually. What a precious time this is to develop spiritual disciplines. Personally, I am thankful for a group of friends with whom I have been meeting online at least once a month to help me understand the subject of spiritual formation and to support one other through prayer and different exercises. Even though I have been a believer for most of my life, at this later life stage, I am just beginning to understand that there are proven ways for me to deepen my walk with Christ and be more intimate with Him. What can you do to deepen your walk with Jesus? Are you making this a focus of your time?

One aspect of going deeper spiritually is to strengthen your prayer life. You can spend more time talking with the Lord and interceding for others while you are doing chores, taking a shower, or walking. Doing so will shift your focus from what is wrong with your own life.

3. Surrender your desire to “fix” your spouse. For those of us married for a long time, we should be the ones to know that it is useless to try and fix our spouses. The more we try, the worse the situation gets! All of us have a rebellious streak ingrained in our natures. We got that from Adam and Eve. But only God can fix my spouse; only God can deal with rebelliousness at the root of a hard heart. A spouse’s heart is not softened by nagging, threatening, or even leaving! God will do the job.

Early in our marriage, my husband, a layman at that time, was given opportunities by an older mentor to do some preaching in small churches that did not have pastors. My husband’s tendency to be slow and always wait until the last minute made me nervous. He would stay up all night on Saturday to finish his sermon preparation and I would not

be able to sleep because I worried about him. I still remember the advice of a wise pastor's wife to me. She bluntly told me, "Ruth, stop fretting about it; what you need to do is pray for him!" I realized that any reasoning or nagging did not help him to be faster. It only made his preparation longer because I interrupted him whenever I got upset!

4. Take good care of yourself. Regardless of what your spouse does or does not do, you can create some space to make sure you are taking good care of yourself. One of the areas has already been touched on – go deeper spiritually. But think of other areas – care for yourself physically, emotionally, and mentally (intellectually). Develop or strengthen habits that will improve your health in all of these areas. Perhaps you could experiment with new foods and new exercise routines.

Emotionally, make sure you are connecting with loved ones and friends, especially the ones you know need encouragement from you. Helping others is one way to take good care of yourself! Being able to use technology to be in touch is a blessing during this time. Make the best use of it.

Mentally, one of the best things to do that also feeds you spiritually is to memorize Scripture. What a joy it has been for me to memorize portions of the book of Psalms during this pandemic! I am not good at memorization, but I have forced myself to do it and am now enjoying the fruits of my efforts.

We can all do this, even if many times, if not reviewed within a few days, what has been memorized is forgotten. I am showing my age here. But I am not giving up. I just review more frequently so the verses stick better.

There are many ways to take better care of yourself and reduce the focus on the shortcomings of your partner. Find a hobby; learn to play an instrument; take up gardening, reading, or writing. Do what will stimulate your mind, excite your heart, and give you some joy and happiness. The world cannot give that to us!

5. Exercise thankfulness and gratitude for even the smallest positive things you observe and experience. Scripture tells us to be thankful in everything (1 Thess. 5:18). Well, maybe for many that is too hard to do right now, but how about just being thankful for the positive things, even though they are small! Be more observant of the beauty of your surroundings. Keep a "Thank You Prayer Journal." It is amazing what gratitude and thankfulness can do for your overall mental health. This has been proven over and over in much research. Lately, watching the stars, the moon, and meteor showers made me burst out in praise and thanks to God for the beauty of the night skies! There are always things big and small you can be thankful for.
6. Don't forget to make positive deposits in your marriage. Remember your spouse's love language and make sure to make deposits. Instead of feeding your anger and frustration, do something nice for your spouse that will show your love. Remember that every time you have a fight and disagreement, you are making withdrawals from your mate's love bank. If you have had many fights and disagreements during this time of sheltering-in-place, the love bank may be on the minus side. Don't wait for your spouse to deposit in

your love bank; do your part to make deposits in your spouse's account! This way, he or she may be able to have some to deposit back in yours!

7. Marriage needs fun and friendship. Create some fun times. Do some things that you used to do while you were dating. Recapture the fun things you did in the past that brought both of you pleasure. You are not too old to have fun! Marriage is not all about responsibilities, chores, and bearing of burdens. You can have fun and be best of friends!

During this pandemic, one of the things that I have missed is going to the ocean just to watch the blue sea and enjoy the sea gulls and pelicans. So, my husband suggested that we should at least try and go out for a picnic while observing social distancing. We were able to do it twice so far.

8. Take breaks from each other. Ask for space to be alone; grant your partner space away from you. When doing so, do not use that time to brood over all the negatives of your spouse. Studies have shown that the more you brood about the faults of others, the worse your own mood will be. That does not help anybody. What you need to do in your private time is to find ways to improve your mood. Doing what has been mentioned above would be the best way to start. When you do not focus on the negatives of others, your mind will work better, you can think more clearly, and you can find better solutions to your problems.
9. Be in community, even if it has to be done virtually. Be part of a small group. Keep in touch with your best friend and pray and talk with him or her. Through these connections you will quickly realize you are not the only one having the same struggles and you can learn from each other. You can also receive the needed support to persevere.
10. Remember a key principle that will encourage you to stop focusing on your spouse and help you focus more on yourself: "When you lose it, you lose!" It means that when you get out of control and get angry, at that moment you no longer can cause any positive change in the situation and will just make things worse for you and the relationship. Pray and ask the Lord to grant you the fruit of self-control and focus on your own spiritual growth.

May we always remember that whatever experiences we have, the Lord allows them for our growth. We need to learn to embrace them with God's strength and help. A strong marriage is one in which the spouses graciously tolerate the tension of the differences between them. May God enable you to do that well.

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