

MURAJ: In Focus - Your Relationships and COVID-19

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Beyond clinical work and teaching classes, Dr. Steven Harris has spent the past ten years researching couples on the brink of divorce. Nine months into the COVID-19 pandemic, Dr. Steven M. Harris met with the Minnesota Undergraduate Research & Academic Journal (MURAJ) to discuss the ways that his team’s research has advanced traditional marital therapy for couples contemplating divorce, the ways in which the coronavirus is changing the nature of our relationships, and how we can heal and strengthen these relationships in a time with so many new and unexpected challenges.



Figure 1: Dr. Steven M. Harris, Professor, Department of Family Social Science

Approximately ten years ago, about the time when he began serving as a professor in the University of Minnesota’s Family Social Science Program, Dr. Harris joined a research project established by the Minnesota State Legislature. The project was coined the Minnesota Couples on the Brink Project and aimed to examine premature divorce decisions and prevent unnecessary divorce. Along the way, the project developed a method of interacting with couples on the brink of divorce known as discernment counseling. Whereas traditional marital therapy focuses on building communication and intimacy skills, discernment counseling guides couples nearing divorce in the decision-making process. In doing so, couples gain greater clarity and confidence in their choices. The rationale behind discernment counseling is that couples leaning towards divorce might not gather the same kind of benefits from traditional therapy as

their more stable counterparts—it is harder to actively engage in therapy if an individual is unsure whether they would like to be in the marriage in the first place. One goal of this approach, therefore, is to help couples decide whether the marriage is something in which they would like to invest. As a result, these couples can be brought to a place where they can better benefit from further marriage counseling.

Dr. Harris first became interested in divorce when he saw how difficult it was from a therapist's perspective to help and engage with a couple when one partner wanted to leave the marriage and the other wanted to stay. "It was also clear from the existing literature that we knew a lot about reasons for divorce and transitions after divorce and the resulting impact of divorce," Dr. Harris stated, "but we didn't know anything about the decision-making process." The work of Dr. Harris and his colleagues over the past ten years has provided therapists with more resources to walk with their clients through this decision-making process.

Discernment counseling assumes that there are three paths facing couples on the brink of divorce: continue in their unchanged marriage, divorce, or work towards building a healthier, mutually fulfilling marriage. An unintended benefit of discernment counseling is that many couples are unaware of what a third option—building a healthier, happier partnership—might look like. Discernment counseling helps slow down the divorce decision-making process, which can allow couples to see themselves and their partners in new ways. Until a couple receives discernment counseling, they can often only see the first two paths.

One technique of discernment counseling

is illuminating the role that each partner has had in the tenuous, current state of the marriage. In doing so, couples may gain greater clarity surrounding their decision. Many individuals enter therapy convinced their spouse solely caused the disintegrating relationship. A danger of this mindset is that these individuals are less willing to work towards healing the rupture. With each spouse capable of seeing how their own behaviors and patterns have weakened the marriage, as well as how their partner's contributions interact with their own, they are more able to change and grow.

Through years of research, teaching, and marriage, Dr. Harris has developed several tips to protect relationships. Many, if not all, of these tips also apply to protecting relationships during the coronavirus pandemic. The COVID-19 pandemic has not been kind to relationships. Whether we are stuck in our homes with a limited number of people or unable to visit those that we care about, the virus has disrupted our lives. The impact of the pandemic on relationships is not limited to marriages. Friends, roommates, extended family networks, and romantic partners are all having to find new ways to remain in relationship with one another with an entirely new set of physical and emotional constraints.

His first tip is to remember that when people are under stress, they tend to do more of the same, meaning they might rely more on coping mechanisms that come naturally. For example, Dr. Harris notes, "If I'm a control freak, I'm going to get even more controlling. If I'm laissez faire, then I might just check out altogether. And both ends of the spectrum have problems." Be mindful and attentive of your pre-existing relationship dynamics with others and remember that it is normal for people to react in ways that can be frustrating when faced with so many new, accumulating stressors.

Next, despite the fact that we are confined to our homes, many of us are paradoxically more tied to our computers. It may be tempting to focus your energies on work or your education at the expense of your relationships. While these things are important, do not underestimate the importance of personal relationships. Prior research has systematically found links between relationships and important life outcomes; physical and mental health, longevity, happiness, and more have all been tied to relationships. Even outcomes one might think would be unrelated, such as the amount of money one earns, have been linked to relationship satisfaction. However, the nature of the pandemic makes maintaining certain relationships more difficult. Given this, be intentional about how you spend your time and prioritize the people that you care about. This could mean reaching out to your friends more frequently to check in or creating new rituals with roommates, such as a weekly shared meal. Take time each day to turn off your laptop and turn your attention to people.

The COVID-19 pandemic has also placed several logistical constraints on many households. Parents have to navigate work and childcare demands, roommates must negotiate safety when household members have competing expectations surrounding which activities are safe, and many of the activities that we used to take for granted and depend on to sustain our mental health—social gatherings, exercise, travel—have become complicated, if not impossible. To keep these constraints from damaging your relationships, initiate conversations and suggest ideas to keep your household running smoothly. If you have children, this could mean creating a plan with other caregivers to ensure that the children are taken care of and each caregiver is also able to

meet their personal work and/or school obligations. If you live with roommates, this could mean creating a more detailed plan for fairly distributing household chores. You may also need to create more concrete means of spending meaningful time with your social circle. More frequent shared meals, a weekly movie night, or spending time outdoors together are just a few examples of shared activities.

Lastly, provide open spaces for empathy and understanding in your social circle. It can be difficult when friends, family, and roommates have different expectations regarding how to stay safe during the pandemic. Members of a social circle may have conflicting opinions with regard to how many people it is appropriate to see or which public venues are safe. In order to keep these differences in opinion from fracturing relationships, be honest, transparent, and empathic regarding your expectations of safety. Honesty and transparency will allow you to vocalize what you need in order to feel safe and supported.

Dr. Harris adds that empathy may be necessary because “a mark of being human is to know [that]...some people do not always rise to their best selves when they’re in stressful situations. And so, let’s say that you’re the recipient of someone’s comment that lands on you hard, how do you show grace? How do you say, look, I’m willing to say that that was maybe not their best moment? Maybe that particular statement doesn’t encompass the entirety of who they are. I think we’d all like some leeway when we’re having our worst moment.” Disagreements are bound to arise, and when they do, try to give compassion and flexibility to people that may not be having their best moments.

When asked what the coronavirus pandemic can teach people about life and love,

Dr. Harris replied that it depends on what people are willing to be taught. Ask yourself what you can take from this experience. The answer to this question depends on the unique challenges and joys that the pandemic has brought you. Are we coexisting in our homes, or are we meaningfully interacting with our family or roommates? Are we being intentional in our relationships with those that we cannot see? How will this change when life returns to normal? What things do we not want to return to normal? These are only a few questions that we can (and should) ask ourselves.

For students interested in taking part in this research, Dr. Harris suggests reaching out to him and asking whether there are any open research assistant positions. In the upcoming years, he would like to examine the ways in which ethnicity and race impact divorce decision making and his team is about to begin a research project studying marital separation. For both undergraduate and graduate students, Dr. Harris emphasizes the importance of work-life balance and dedicating time to your relationships.

Abby Person is in her final year as an undergraduate student in the University of Minnesota's Psychology Department. Her current research projects include studying the coping mechanisms used by students during the COVID-19 pandemic. She serves as a reviewer for the Minnesota Undergraduate & Academic Journal.

Dr. Steven M. Harris serves as a professor in the University of Minnesota's Department of Family Social Science and as the Editor-in-Chief of the Journal of Marital and Family Therapy. He is the Associate Director of the Minnesota Couples on the Brink Project. In addition to his academic accomplishments, Dr. Harris sees clients in a private mental health practice.