

Entry

COVID-19 and Romantic Relationships

Octav-Sorin Candel * and Mihaela Jitaru 

Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences, Alexandru Ioan Cuza University of Iași, 700554 Iași, Romania; jitaru.mihaela@uaic.ro

* Correspondence: candel.octav@uaic.ro

Definition: Since the beginning of 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted most people's activities and relationships. Romantic relationships are a crucial source of fulfillment and emotional safety for many individuals. However, due to the risk of illness and the social distancing norms, human interaction, even inside one's couple or family, suffered great changes. Some of these changes have the potential of disrupting people's relational or psychological well-being, but they can also have positive impacts. On the other hand, one of the most negative consequences is the growing number of intimate partner violence (IPV) incidents. Considering all these aspects, therapy would be beneficial for those affected.

Keywords: intimate partner violence; sexuality; relational satisfaction; COVID-19; lockdown effects



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1. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic brought a number of profound alterations to people's lifestyles and relationships. While the number of cases increased during the first months of 2020, most countries imposed severe restrictions on the population. The new social distancing norms led to social isolation and separation, a situation that is likely to negatively impact the functioning of romantic relationships [1]. Early reports indicated that the population was exposed to significant stress during the pandemic, mainly due to the risks of becoming infected or losing their job [2,3].

In the context of increased stressful experiences, the quality of romantic relationships could be seriously impacted. While some couples are more vulnerable than others, researchers considered that the pandemic could harm the dyadic process for most couples [1]. This paper provides an overview of how the COVID-19 pandemic affected the creation and functioning of romantic relationships. Firstly, it concentrates on how people adapted to the social distancing norms and how they managed to find potential romantic partners under the stay-at-home orders. Secondly, it presents the most important findings related to the functioning of intimate relationships in youth and adult populations. Next, it provides some information about one of the most noteworthy concerns regarding the pandemic, namely, the potential increase in intimate partner violence [4]. Finally, it introduces some findings and recommendations related to the therapeutic process during the pandemic.

2. Online Dating during the COVID-19 Pandemic

Stay-at-home orders resulted in increased levels of perceived loneliness during the early days of the pandemic [5]. This link was mitigated by relational status and living arrangements. People who were in a relationship, as well as those who were living with someone else, reported less perceived loneliness [6]. However, for those single, knowing new people and potential romantic partners became increasingly difficult given the restrictions related to social distancing. Under these conditions, online dating became an even more viable instrument in finding and selecting romantic partners [7–9]. While many individuals were already using online dating apps and other types of computer-mediated communication, the reliance on the virtual environment for romantic purposes

increased during the pandemic, but the benefits of using it are not always apparent [10]. It is worth noting that the desire to meet new people did not decrease, but the safety of doing it and the negative outcomes of a potential date became more salient for those involved in online dating [11]. Missing the physicality of real contact, the ability to determine chemistry or to develop intimacy are some of the most important shortcomings that people felt while using online dating during the pandemic [10–12]. In addition, the fear of being emotionally exploited by a potential partner increased for some young women [10]. These fears are centered on the possible lack of authenticity, truthfulness, reciprocity, and accountability, especially in online dating spaces. The health status of the date also became more relevant compared to the pre-pandemic period. Thus, communication and information-seeking strategies became extremely important in reducing uncertainty during these times. Protective measures against COVID-19 infection, such as setting boundaries or directly asking about one's health status, were deployed by the individuals involved in online dating [13]. Finally, the quality of communication, especially on dating apps such as Tinder, was considered quite low [13]. Despite these drawbacks, those apprehensive of using virtual environments to communicate during the pandemic reported increased levels of relational worry and, consequently, more loneliness [14]. Thus, although not perfect, computer-mediated communication helped people during the pandemic by offering them a safer and more stable environment to meet new potential romantic partners.

3. Youths' Romantic Relationships

The social distancing measures affected the mobility of young people, with some studies showing that a large majority of adolescents engaged, at least minimally, with this norm [15]. Moreover, the pandemic was associated with mild to moderate depression and anxiety symptoms [16]. Thus, it created the premises for some important changes in the youths' romantic behaviors. Firstly, the reduced possibility of physical contact, as well as the worsening of young people's psychological state, led, for some, to a reevaluation of close relationships and of the efforts involved in their maintenance [17]. The reduction in the time spent with partners was the most important predictor for a fall in the quality of the romantic relationship during the pandemic [18]. In addition, teens, especially girls, described the maintenance process as being rather difficult due to the lack of intimacy, physical dating opportunities and psychical touch [10]. Despite these shortcomings, not all adolescents reported decreased relational quality. Some of them considered that the pandemic strengthened their relationships, but this was the case especially for those who spent significant time together with their partner [19].

The relationship between mental health and romantic relationships seems to be bidirectional. One study found that romantic relationships were the most important predictor of students' probable anxiety and also a predictor of their probable insomnia during the COVID-19 pandemic [20].

On a more positive note, young people also took advantage of modern communication methods (phone, social network sites) to keep in touch with their partners [10]. Technology use also mediated the negative relationships between self-isolation and relational quality for adolescence. While those who self-isolated more frequently reported a lower relationship quality, they also reported a higher use of technology, which led to an increase in relationship quality [21]. While stay-at-home orders and the youths' own intentions to self-isolate were hurdles in the management of romantic relationships, their communication behaviors and the adoption of new ways to communicate brought some improvements in the process.

4. Adult Romantic Relationships

The changes brought by the pandemic in areas such as couple relationships or parenting were significant. However, most studies show that the newly created situation had a rather complex array of outcomes on the functioning of couples. Some results indicated that the quality of close relationships was negatively impacted by the fear of COVID-19,

depression, worry and rumination about the pandemic. When people reported higher levels on these variables, they also reported more isolation and lower abilities to reduce conflicts. Moreover, the worsening in the quality of the relationships was related to lower optimism and hope [22]. In addition, more COVID-19-related conflicts decreased the frequency of some intimate behaviors such as hugging, kissing or holding hands [23]. In the USA, there was a significant decline in marriage from 2019 to 2020 [24]. In Germany, 40% of couples reported declines in marital satisfaction during the pandemic, while only 20% considered that their satisfaction increased [25]. However, other studies showed that satisfaction remained stable during the first weeks of the pandemic and that people blamed their partners less, preferring not to attribute their negative behaviors to their internal characteristics [26]. Others found no association between quarantine and marital satisfaction, in both heterosexual and gay and lesbian couples [27,28]. Higher marital satisfaction was related to a lower impact of confinement on health, physical and emotional well-being [29].

Various psychological mechanisms could account for these conflicting results. For example, both attachment anxiety and avoidance were related to lower relational quality and family cohesion, especially when the individuals were expressing more stress [30]. In addition, people seemed to receive less partner support when their level of avoidance was higher [31]. Daily support reduced stress through enhanced gratitude [32]. Coping seems to link psychological distress and relational resilience. While negatively coping, which is positively related to distress and reduced resilience, positive coping provides protection against distress and strengthened resilience [33]. Similar associations were found in the case of relational quality [34]. In Finland, coping strategies at the relationship level (being more flexible, creating and using family time, having good family communication) were the most useful in dealing with stress [35]. In addition, the COVID-19 concerns led to more explicit stress communication, which was related to higher perceived partner dyadic coping. Thus, while the pandemic-related concerns were negatively linked to psychological well-being, they also led to improved dyadic coping, which has a protective role in well-being [36]. Resilience communication behaviors, such as creating new routines and constructing positivity together were positively related, although not directly, to the process of dyadic coping. Together, they reduce relational uncertainty, fear and anger, emotions that can decrease the level of dyadic coping. The use of humor was directly and positively related to coping [37].

On the negative side, stress was related to lower relational satisfaction only for the women with higher socioeconomic status, but not for those with lower socioeconomic status or for men [38]. Negative emotions and relational turbulence increased from before the pandemic to during the pandemic due to a decrease in partner interdependence and an increase in spousal interference [39,40]. Finally, the illness of a family member was associated with increased fear of COVID-19, anxiety, depression and stress [41] and adverse life events and perceived threat of COVID-19 affected the relational quality of same-sex couples by increasing complaint avoidance [42].

The pandemic also had an effect on the willingness to engage in a relationship. COVID-19 concerns increased the fear of being single, which, in turn, increased the importance of stability and family commitment [43]. Still, experiencing meaningful interpersonal connections during the first days of the pandemic created a context for the affirmation of the self and led to an emotional uplift [44].

Parents, compared to non-parents, were more protected against declines in marital satisfaction [25]. Moreover, there was no association between quarantine and parental burnout [27]. Still, parents felt some disruptions in their daily lives, but the division of labor in the newly created environment was not a stress source [45]. They were, however, mostly unhappy with the balance of paid and unpaid work during the pandemic [46]. The situation was more dramatic for the divorced or divorcing parents, who faced legal, financial and negotiation-related difficulties due to the pandemic [47]. Some changes were also found for the parents involved in consensual non-monogamous relationships. They spent less time with their partners when the partners were not living in the same household

but more time when they were living together with the partners. In addition, some of them prioritized the more committed relationships [48].

5. Sexuality during the Pandemic

The pandemic brought important changes in people's sexual activity, although its impact was either positive or negative depending on various factors. While for some individuals, the social distancing norms meant a worsening of their sexual life, for others, spending more time with their partners lead to some improvement [49–51]. Relational status, gender and sexual orientation are, however, very important variables that should be taken into account when discussing how human sexuality was impacted by the pandemic.

Throughout the world, various studies showed that people reported less sex during the pandemic, a result that was consistent among participants from Australia, Spain, Turkey, the UK, the USA and Taiwan [7,49–54]. Women seemed to be particularly affected by the changes [55–57]. On the contrary, solo sexual activity increased, behaviors such as masturbation or using adult online sites becoming more prevalent for both men and women [7,49,50]. In addition to gender, relational status played an important role in determining the nature of the changes that happened throughout the pandemic. According to a study conducted in Turkey, the partners that spent more time together reported an increase in sexual satisfaction [50]. Similar results were found in Australia, where the participants who were single reported a more pronounced decrease in sexual activity compared to those who had a stable partner [7]. In addition, people reported having more sex with stable partners than with casual ones [7]. Finally, in Southeast Asia, one study showed no substantial differences in sexual activity before and during the pandemic in a sample of married individuals [58].

In regard to sexual orientation, some studies showed an association between being a sexual minority and decreased sex-seeking behaviors for men [53]. Others show that men having sex with men are less willing to seek casual sex but more willing to reduce the number of sexual partners or to find new ones [59,60].

Although the restrictions imposed throughout the world led to important decreases in sexual activity, some people still tried to make new additions to their sexual life. One study showed that one in five people made new additions during the pandemic by trying new sexual positions, using cybersex or watching pornography, among others [54]. In addition, the same individuals reported more sexual improvements during the same period.

Other than the demographic characteristics, multiple psychological variables are related to sexual activity. Higher risk perception of COVID-19, anxiety, stress and depression were negatively associated with the frequency of sexual activity and satisfaction [49,52,53,61]. On the contrary, those who experienced fewer disruptions in their daily lives felt more sexual desire and reported better sexual functioning [62].

In conclusion, the pandemic brought a decrease in sexual activity for most people (although some notable exceptions were present). This change was present in both the young population and in potential parents, some of whom renounced their parenthood plans [63,64]. Thus, the long-term consequences of this period should also be of particular interest given that they could impact the reproductive habits of the population.

6. Intimate Partner Violence

The restrictions imposed by the authorities due to the COVID-19 pandemic seem to also have had a significant impact on romantic conflicts and intimate partner violence (IPV) [4,65,66]. IPV encompasses any set of behaviors that lead to physical, psychological or sexual harm in an intimate relationship [67]. IPV is a product of its social context and includes physical violence (e.g., slapping, beating, etc.), psychological abuse (e.g., humiliation, threats of harm, etc.), sexual violence (any sexual coercion acts) and controlling behaviors (e.g., monitoring partner's movements, restricting access to family, friends, financial resources, education, etc.) directed against an intimate partner [67,68].

An important factor that exacerbated the impact of the lockdown on IPV is the economic stress that existed before or came along with the pandemic [69–71]. After the pandemic started, some experts were trying to bring attention to the possibility of a rapidly growing number of IPV incidents as a result of the lockdown [72–74]. In addition, recent research does indeed highlight a growing percentage of IPV incidents all over the world [4,70,75].

From the early stages of the pandemic, people reported changes in IPV, the situations involving physical and sexual violence being aggravated [76,77]. Some studies targeted the changes that appeared in the number of sexual violence incidents in romantic relationships, highlighting their increase after the start of the COVID-19 pandemic [70,77]. These changes appeared not only in heterosexual relationships but in queer couples, too [66]. The situation did not improve over time, and the reports of IPV continued to be high [4,70,75]. There are also reports that show that some countries reported fewer official incidents of IPV than before the pandemic [4], but, unfortunately, the situation might not be that good, and a lot of IPV cases might go unreported.

Before the pandemic, women were reporting more cases of psychological violence than any other type, but during it, they started experiencing even more psychological but also physical and sexual violence [70]. Inadvertently, the measures imposed to protect people from the infection with COVID-19 put in danger some categories of people. In this case, those especially endangered were those who already experienced IPV.

A specific population that was affected by the IPV incidents consists of pregnant women [78,79]. In this type of situation, there is a direct victim, but the victimization does not affect only the mother. In addition, it can become increasingly difficult for the victims to extract themselves from the situation and they may need extra support and care [78].

Throughout the research completed up to this point, there is a factor that augments the impact of lockdown on IPV and that is economic stress [69,70,75,79,80]. The changes in the household income or the dismissal of the male partner were strongly related to a higher percentage of IPV [75,80].

In conclusion, the lockdown and the economic stress that resulted from the COVID-19 pandemic had significant repercussions on couples' wellbeing. The growing number of IPV incidents should be of particular interest due to the danger that they represent to the victims [65,71]. Policy makers and those responsible for carrying them out should be especially attentive to the way that the pandemic and related effects had impacted the victims' possibility to get help and extract themselves from the dangerous situations.

7. Therapeutic Interventions

The pandemic is not a significant threat for all couples. However, most could face at least small levels of stress caused by various changes or by illness. For other couples, the problems would be more severe. Thus, therapeutic intervention would be crucial in order to help couples to face their various burdens during the pandemic. Despite this stringent need, the social distancing norms also affected the therapeutic process. One survey found out that therapists had little experience with providing online interventions for couples, but their attempts were, nevertheless, mostly successful. Still, creating a strong therapeutic alliance was considered to be more difficult under the new circumstances [81]. Using virtual couple therapy or teletherapy was recommended by various practitioners as viable and even mandatory formats in which the therapists can provide their services to those in need [82,83]. Moreover, their positive experiences encouraged couple therapists to consider virtual interventions as being very useful even after the pandemic will end [84]. Finally, practice guidance was offered for the professional that must use telehealth to work with victims of IPV [85].

8. Conclusions

The COVID-19 pandemic has a complex impact on romantic relationships from their beginning to their ending. In order to find new potential partners, people use the Internet

and various communication technologies even more than before. In addition, especially among the younger individuals, the reevaluation of current relationships seems to be more important than before the pandemic. The quality of the relationship took some hits for some couples, while for others it flourished. Various demographic and psychological variables account for these differences. Although parents feel some additional burden, this might not be felt as problematic. However, those who are trying to legally end their marriage are confronted with additional problems. One crucial negative outcome is the increase in the rates of intimate partner violence and a solution for this issue is not easily approachable. While therapists experienced some difficulties due to social distancing, they also use video-chatting or teletherapy to stay in touch with their clients.

Despite the impressive number of studies that were conducted on romantic relationships during the pandemic, some shortcomings must be discussed. These studies only present a short-term image of the situation. While important, this is not enough to draw pertinent conclusions about the impact of the pandemic. Longitudinal studies with multiple yearly waves are needed to have a more complete view of how COVID-19 really impacted close relationships. In addition, not all of the studies were able to differentiate between the different stages of the COVID-19 pandemic (the start of the pandemic, the lockdown, etc.) and their distinct impact.

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