

Quarantine can test any relationship. A couples therapist explains how to cope.

Couple's Therapy's Dr. Orna Guralnik on creating structure, drawing boundaries, and raising kids during the coronavirus pandemic.

By [Emily Todd VanDerWerff](#) Mar 20, 2020, 12:00pm EDT



How are we going to make it through this coronavirus pandemic? That's a question I've asked myself more than once since the Covid-19 pandemic created what amounts to a nationwide quarantine in the United States — and many other countries. My wife and I have a good, strong marriage, and we really do love spending time together. But being in the same apartment 24/7, with no obvious end in sight, makes it feel like there's a storm rumbling on the horizon. Right now, we're getting along famously. In a few weeks, that might be less true. I've heard this concern from a lot of couples I know — as well as from lots of people who live with roommates they normally like but whose habits they're increasingly finding annoying in this time of forced solitude. We're all doing mostly okay, but oh my God, will you stop doing that thing *right now*, I am *trying to work*.

To start thinking through how we might best deal with these scenarios [in the weeks and months ahead](#), I consulted someone who knows more about interpersonal relations than just about anybody out there: [Dr. Orna Guralnik](#), a licensed therapist who is at the center of [Showtime's riveting documentary series *Couple's Therapy*](#). Guralnik and I had talked about marriage and other forms of cohabitation before, but when I reached out to her on the phone earlier this week, I specifically wanted to ask her about how to keep your head while cohabitating in a time of quarantine. We discussed the importance of structure, the need for distancing, and how, if you're a parent, you can keep your head above water when your kids are around all the time.

Emily VanDerWerff

Let's just start super high-level. What's one of the ways those of us who are living together constantly can make life slightly more bearable for our friends and loved ones who are stuck with us?

Orna Guralnik

One of the things that I've been talking to people about — and it's pretty obvious — is the importance of structure and structures that switch things around. You should have a structure where you know when a certain time unit begins and ends, even if it's a completely artificial thing like doing some reading between 2 pm and 4 pm today and then going on a bike ride, or then watching TV, or then playing with the cat.

Similarly, [you want to be] artificially structuring in time together and time alone — switching it up but in a way that mimics what the external world usually does for us. You might even create situations that mimic commute, like going somewhere, moving spaces. Most places, you can still go out for a walk. It sounds very artificial, but it actually works. Structured time is important so that you set a schedule and keep to it.

The other pretty obvious thing is you can structure how much time you're spending on social media or following the news and decide in advance how much you want to get sucked into the [terror] around this.

You should also decide how much time you want to spend with other people on the phone or online, and that varies from person to person. People who isolate can forget they have that option, connecting with people not just on the phone but visually, like FaceTime, Zoom, Skype. But other people are spending their entire day, non-stop, hooked up to other people, and I don't think that necessarily works either. Each person has to figure out a way to sketch some boundaries around that.

Emily VanDerWerff

You're saying that most of this is really self-motivated, but the thing I keep hearing is, "My spouse is annoying me so much" or "I just can't put up with my roommate right now." Even if you're structuring your time very carefully, how do you account for other people in that scenario?

Orna Guralnik

You can separate that into two separate issues.

Especially with couples — but it happens with roommates, too — it's very easy to make something that is your own personal ambivalence toward or difficulty with implementing these kinds of ideas, and turn it into a conflict with someone else. We're all very good at that.

So if you know it's a better idea for you to be getting out of the house, but you don't manage to motivate yourself to do that, it's very easy to somehow blame your partner, your friend, your roommate for why you're not getting out of the house and ask them to be responsible for it, or complain that they're not motivating you. It's really easy to interpersonalize a personal dilemma, so try not to do that. Try to own your decisions and not drag whoever's around you into your own inner conflict with getting yourself to do something. Most of our fights are about some way that we interpersonalize our own dilemmas.

The other issue is to understand that we are, indeed, different people with different needs, and it's important for us to be able to do things differently. So you make certain decisions for yourself, not for your partner or friend. If they want to join, great. If they don't want to join, that's probably great, too. We need boundaries around this ambiguous, endless stretch of time that's all around us, so anything that can create differentiation, boundaries, or difference is really good for us right now.

Emily VanDerWerff

Well, how do you handle situations where someone is perhaps doing something that's interfering with your own work life or your own process? There are a lot of different needs in any one home. How do you balance those different needs against each other — so I can get my work done, but my wife can watch her TV show?

Something like that.

Orna Guralnik

Or like someone who's writing and the other one is on a phone call.

Ideally, the best way, if you have the luxury and the means, is to be in separate spaces. One goes in the bedroom, and one goes in the kitchen. If you can't do that, there are things like headphones or earplugs, to create artificial boundaries.

The best advice is really to solve it by yourself and not ask your partner to solve it for you. If you realize that in order to do your work as a journalist, you need to figure out a way to block sound around yourself, use earplugs or headphones, or go to the bathroom and sit and write there. [Laughs.] Seriously!

The less interpersonalization of the problem, the better off you'll be. Respect space and try to be self-containing in that way. Maybe that's not a very satisfying response, but I really think it's the best way.

Emily VanDerWerff

Inevitably as this stretches on, conflicts will arise. What's the best way to resolve those conflicts in a way where both people feel heard, but you're also preserving the relationship? That's kind of a huge question.

Orna Guralnik

I mean, let's summarize my career, right now, in one paragraph. [Laughs.]

Two things. One is: I can expect that things are going to go the way these kinds of situations tend to unfold. We can expect a honeymoon period, where people are sticking together and trying to make the best of it, or even enjoying it. I think we're going to see the best of each other first.

Then a lot of conflict is going to emerge, no matter what. No matter what you're going to follow, no matter whose advice, no matter what guidelines, there's going to be conflict. There's no way around it. And then you get to the interesting part, which is asking, "Okay but how do we resolve this?"

And it's obvious stuff! First, try to take care of as much of it as you can on your own. Try to notice when you're projecting [your own issues] onto the other person or dragging them into something that is really your own issue. If you really do need to negotiate this with another person, don't worry. You'll get to your own needs. Don't give them up. But first, try to understand where the other person is coming from and what their needs are. Give them a good dose of active listening. Then you set the stage for good communication.

And start with yourself. Always start with yourself. Don't wait for the other person to offer that. Most of us, once someone respects what we need, we are very capable of listening to the other person, and we can very easily come up with solutions. We are a very intelligent species, and we know how to problem-solve. We get bogged down by feelings, by ego, by all sorts of things around the issue itself. The problem solving itself is rarely the problem.

We can figure out a way to do things. You start. I'll go later. Let's go to separate rooms. Let's divide the day. Let's call in someone else to do this part of the work. There are solutions, and if there really aren't any solutions, then people can just say, "You know what? We're stuck in this particular problem, but we'll get through it."

Emily VanDerWerff

Okay, let's make this even trickier. How do you advise people to handle these conflicts once children enter the equation, especially with two parents in the same house? Because kids are the ultimate destabilizing element.

Orna Guralnik

Children come first. You have to be thinking that there is a young person there, and you have to think of their needs first. In a way, it's a very orienting call. It helps because there's a built-in person who's more important. Everything I've been saying so far is super important for children. Like structure — children benefit a lot from knowing when it's time to do this and when it's time to do that and from keeping that structure predictable and firm. The same thing everyday.

One of the things I'm hearing from a lot of people is that since children are not going to school, there's an incredible sense of responsibility that parents are feeling that they're supposed to somehow be a substitute for school. With everything else they're doing, they're feeling guilty that they're not somehow sitting down and being their kid's teacher. I would say, try to reduce expectations under these expectations. You're not going to suddenly become school! What I've been saying to parents is, if you can do two segments of 45 minutes where you're actually doing something educational with your kid everyday, you're doing amazing. That's really enough. The rest is about passing the time well and figuring out a way to be a family together. It's about having this be a pleasant experience, or at least an interesting experience even if it's not pleasant. Kids are learning a lot from this, and this is a very important moment in history. Kids are looking at us with great interest as to how the world deals with this kind of thing.

Emily VanDerWerff

What are some areas where people living together will frequently come into conflict that you can be thinking about ahead of time?

Orna Guralnik

So far, it hasn't been long enough. People are more in what I'm calling the honeymoon phase, where people are being quite tolerant and thoughtful and figuring out ways to deal. But I know us humans and I know this is not gonna last.

One thing I *am* hearing is that people have different ways of organizing their anxiety vis-à-vis this pandemic. Some people tend to be hyper-anxious and consume a lot of news and be alarmists and worry a lot about the illness. And if you happen to have a different kind of defense system where you prefer to keep things cool and more distant, or be more cerebral, you don't like that anxiety. When you like to reduce anxiety, it's very stressful when your partner goes toward anxiety.

The other things [people might fight about] are more predictable. What do you do with unstructured time with the kids? People already are going into their usual groups with that, with one person wanting to micromanage the other.

Money, too. There's less income. Who's going to be bringing in the money? How are we going to do it? Should we go into savings? Should you take on anything new right now? Why did you spend money on that in the past?

Emily VanDerWerff

Okay, how about the flip side of all of this? A lot of my friends are living alone right now and quarantined by themselves. What can I do, as somebody who *is* quarantined with another person, to look out for my friends who are alone?

Orna Guralnik

Reach out, reach out, reach out. Call, FaceTime, ask if you can drop something off at their door. Keep connected. Reach out at the end of the day. Reach out in the morning. Those are vulnerable moments.

Emily VanDerWerff

When the quarantine lifted in some parts of China, [a bunch of couples immediately filed for divorce](#). Do you find that surprising, or do you feel like that kind of spike in divorce rates is inevitable?

Orna Guralnik

Oh, I find that sad. I am surprised and disappointed. I have to say, if I were to make a prediction, I would not predict that that's going to be the outcome everywhere. I think people are going to come together, beyond just couples. This is a chance for a lot of us to come together, not just in our small couple units but hopefully even globally. That's my hope out of this.