

Lockdown and your Marriage/Relationship

How to make the best of the “Lockin”

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Brendan O'Shaughnessy

1. Introduction

We are living in strange times and having an optimistic outlook generally, I was thinking that the current COVID-19 situation would be a good chance for us to slow down and appreciate our relationships. However, several people have mentioned how being full time with the one you love may be less of a 2nd honeymoon and more of a precursor to 1st divorce. Based on my 30 years of working with couples as a marriage/relationship counsellor, I would like to offer a few insights that may help you.

1. The List

Most couples arrive at counselling with a list of things that are wrong with their partner. Occasionally these are written lists, but more usually are a mental list that has been painstakingly developed over time.

The expectation is that the counsellor will see the virtue of the list and succeed in getting through the partner. However, I ask what you could do to help the relationship? A typical answer is “Well I’m no angel, but the other person is the real issue” and back we go to the list.



The list brings up two issues.

a. No one likes to be told what to do, especially if we know it is valid.

b. It takes personal responsibility away from both people e.g. “I did what was on your list and you are still not happy”

The alternative is to ask yourself “What can I do to make this relationship better? If we put the same effort into answering this question for ourselves as we do to preparing the list and looking for instances that support the list, we are on the right road. It is much easier to follow a plan you come up with yourself than doing what you are told. When we see our partner making the same effort, our relationship is on an upward spiral rather than downward.

2. Talk without Blaming

I sometimes invite a couple to help the other person to understand where they are without blaming the other person. This is usually a very challenging request, as normally, the conversation starts with “I feel bad because you do” The biggest part of this challenge is trying to explain yourself without attacking the other person. It is amazing how some people are totally stuck for words then this option is taken away and an insight as to how much of their conversation is spent attacking. Try listening to what and how you talk with your partner. Your words have the power to crush, so be careful of how you use them. Really helping your partner to understand how you feel during lockdown is a good first step to jointly working on strategies to alleviate upset, anxiety and boredom.

1. Listen without Judging

The opposite side of talking is working on your listening. How many times do we hear but not listen? Couples believe they know each other well enough that they don't need to listen and learn. However, people change and especially under these circumstances, we can get to know our partners more deeply.

Really listening requires curiosity. What is it they are telling me about themselves? The facts are not that important compared to the underlying message e.g. "We need to buy more groceries" = I'm scared. The greatest gift you can give your partner in a conversation is to let them know you hear how they feel.

2. Time together

This may seem like a strange heading, given that you may be in lockdown for weeks together. However, this is a delicate balance act between having quality time together, working through a daily routine and having individual space and time. Too little or too much of any of these and we are in danger of getting frustrated with ourselves and our partner. Arrange a date night and turn off phones etc. Take the time to talk and listen.

3. Children



When children are younger, they become our priority. Over the years I have heard how couples lose themselves, and each other, making their children safe and secure.

But Happy Parents = Happy Children. Children can sense when all is not well between their parents and some will act out to get their parents to work together to fix them. Date nights and alone times for parents will make our children more secure. This takes work, especially where parents are also learning to work from home, but worth the effort for everyone.

4. Conclusion

To paraphrase Charles Dickens, this could be the Best of Times or the Worst of Times. Take time to respect and appreciate each other and it will be the best of times. Take each other for granted and it could be the worst of times. It takes work to make time, talk carefully, listen curiously and connect deeply. The good news is the choice is yours.

If you need more specific support, please feel free to contact a counsellor by visiting www.iacp.ie

Autobiographical statement:

Brendan O'Shaughnessy is an IACP accredited counsellor/psychotherapist/supervisor in private practice. He worked part-time with the Cork Marriage Counselling Centre for 28 years and has a higher diploma in Counselling from UCC. Brendan has been on the board of various charities, including the National Domestic Violence Agency. Brendan is now semi-retired from a multinational electronics company.

Contact details:

He can be contacted by email at brendanoshaghnessy@hotmail.com or www.brendanoshaghnessy.org