

Keep Your Relationship Healthy in Quarantine With Dr. Julie Gottman

Susan David: During a crisis, our relationships become especially important. Our connections with those we love are what carry us through trying times. We comfort and care for one another and help each other process difficult, new realities, but one of the cruelest ironies of the coronavirus pandemic is that it fundamentally threatens the dynamics of our relationships just as we need them most.

On the one hand, social distancing forces us away from many of the people we treasure and rely on. On the other, stay-at-home orders push us into sometimes claustrophobically close quarters with our partners, family members, and roommates. Thankfully, there are strategies we can employ to make it through this anxious period with our relationships intact, perhaps even strengthened.

This is Checking In with Susan David. You're likely experiencing frustration with the people you care about right now. Such feelings are completely understandable. However, just because we feel resentful or angry does not mean we are obligated to act on those emotions in ways that do harm to ourselves and to the people we love.

In fact, this week I got an email from a reader that illustrates this point perfectly, and I'd love to read it out, "Hi, Susan. First, I wanted to say thank you. I read Emotional Agility after hearing an interview some time ago. It immediately resonated with me from top to bottom. I remember first putting into practice some of these concepts one morning when I'd had an argument with my husband. The first thing he said to me on this morning was a criticism of something I'd said online. I'm a bit of a hothead and he's not. I snapped at him, and he sighed at me, and we went on with our mornings without saying another word. He was in the shower when I was about to leave, and before I walked out the door, I paused, walked back through the house, and threw open the bathroom door. He was still soaking wet, and I threw my arms around him.

"I thought you were mad at me," he said, surprised. "I am," I said, "and I'll probably be mad all day, but I love you, and I couldn't bear the idea that something bad could happen today, and that, that would have been how we left it." And that was the beginning of a whole new understanding, both between the two of us and between me and the world. The idea that I could feel one thing and do another was, simply put, a superpower. I could be angry about something and do the thing anyway. I could be sad and still do the thing. Whether it was work or running long distances or cleaning the bathroom, my feelings no longer owned my actions.

Today, all around me, I see the same sort of functional duality. I've started calling it a bothness. Right now everything is terrible. It's true. It just is. But everything is also as beautiful as it ever was. That hasn't changed. People die when the sun is shining, forest burn as birds sing. Children are stolen as rainbows break through the clouds. The world is full of bothness, and today, I see that the people who understand that it's both are the ones who are still carrying on, the people who can cry about how awful it is, and then watch the sunset and smile.

It's not toxic positivity or naiveté, both of which really rankle me. It's not ignoring the bad or shoving it down. I think of it as a radical acceptance, wrapping our arms around both at the same time, and I love it. Maybe I love-hate it. Very best wishes, Lisa."

I love this idea of boldness because it speaks to the ability to be emotionally agile and flexible in our relationships, whereas so often what we see is the opposite, rigidity and inflexibility.

In our immediate relationships, we tend to succumb to two common hooks. The first is what I call thought-blaming. "I thought she was being aloof, so I stopped sharing information on the project. I thought he was going to start in on the finances, so I walked out of the room. I thought she should make the first move, so I didn't call, and we haven't spoken since." In each of these examples, the person blames his or her thoughts for his or her actions or inactions. When you thought-blame, there's no space between stimulus and response for you to exercise real choice. Thoughts in isolation do not cause behavior. Stories don't cause behavior. We cause our behavior.

The second hook in relationships is wrong-headed righteousness. They say in a court of law, you never get justice. If you're lucky you get the best deal possible. In other areas of life though, we get so hung up on the idea of justice or vindication, or having it proved beyond a shadow of doubt that we are right, and the other person is wrong. Anyone who's been in a romantic relationship for more than just a few months, knows the moment in an argument when you realize, "ah, the troubled waters have calmed." Some kind of understanding, a truce perhaps, has been reached, and the best thing you could do right now would be to shut your mouth, let it go, turn off the light, and go to sleep. But then something compels you just to say that one more thing, one more time, to demonstrate that you in fact were right, and that your spouse or partner was wrong. And all hell breaks loose again.

Right now it's especially important to look for small solutions. Big changes are tough to make during the pandemic. The job market is difficult. Travel is risky, but the little and yet enormously powerful choices remain available to you, and they can add up to big results. Any sea captain will tell you that if you steer a ship just a few degrees this way or that way, you completely alter the trajectory over the course of a long journey. It may end up hundreds of miles from where it would have been without that slight adjustment. Think of your relationships in the same way, turn too sharply, and you might capsize, but a slow, gentle change will get you to where you want to be when you get hooked on a thought or being right. See if you can ask yourself this, "I might be right, but is my response serving me? Is it bringing me closer to being the partner, the person, the parent, the loved one that I most want to be?"

I wanted to dig deeper into this idea, and so I invited one of my favorite thinkers and one of the world's foremost experts on relationships onto the show. Dr. Julie Gottman, along with John Gottman is the co-founder of the Gottman Institute and the Affective Software Corporation. Julie and John, for decades, have been studying and working practically with clients and patients, surfacing what it is that helps relationships to thrive, and this question could be no more important than during these challenging times. Julie, I'm delighted to speak with you.

Julie Gottman: And Susan, thank you so much for the opportunity. I appreciate that.

Susan David: Julie, one of the hardest things about this moment that we're all in right now is that so many of us are in close quarters with people that we love. I'm wondering what you're seeing in your work and how your research and practice speaks to what it is that people might be going through.

Julie Gottman: So one of the things that I'm thinking about regarding being in a pressure cooker that COVID-19 has enclosed us inside of, is that with our partners, we can be annoyed as all get out at times, especially the small little things that they may do that has annoyed us over the years that maybe we've ignored, but now, those things are magnified because we're seeing them 24/7. So one of the most important things couples can do is look for what your partner is doing right, not what your partner is doing wrong.

Susan David: I think that's so powerful. One of the things I find so fascinating about your work is how partners make bids for emotional connection, these tiny efforts to reach out, and you're finding that how the other person responds to these bids speaks volumes about the long-term success and effectiveness in the relationship. This idea that one of the most important ways that people can respond to bids is what you call turning toward, that you are actually acknowledging your part that might even be a grunt of acknowledgement, or it might be wholehearted participation, but you are really connecting with your partner rather than turning away from, or even against them. Julie, I'm curious. Why now would it be particularly difficult for people to turn towards their partner?

Julie Gottman: Yeah, that's a wonderful question. The reason is that in our ordinary normal lives, when we've been working, typically people are apart about 10 hours a day, and during that time they are enriching themselves with other connections out in the world.

Now, when we're together 24/7 and those connections can only be made through a screen or a phone, we have only our partner that is fully present with us, and then we see those little things that are not perfectly aligned with us, that are annoying, that frustrate us and so on. So there's a building of frustration that can occur or resentment or discomfort when we are thrown together in a much more intensive time allotment than we are accustomed to. The other thing too, is that people have different need in terms of introversion versus connection, so some people need more alone time. Some people really want distance from their partner, rather than togetherness all the time. But with COVID-19, that is much more difficult to achieve, that interpersonal distance that balances out our need for connection. So what people can do during these times, even if they're

living in a single room, is that they can build in disconnection just for a designated point of time, especially if they plan for it, if they share when they would like some alone time, and then they can go into a separate corner of the room. The important thing here is to have the designation that this is going to be your alone time. Otherwise, if you just retreat, shut down, distance from your partner without letting your partner know why you're doing that or when you're going to return to connecting, your partner has a chance of feeling rejected and then hurt. Just letting your partner know what your needs are and telling them what your needs are in a positive way, what you do want rather than what you do not want is the most effective way of creating that balance between interpersonal space and connection.

Susan David: And this of course requires people to know themselves to some extent and know what their needs are, and to also be in touch with their own emotions, so that a sense of rising frustration, where they might get stuck in that frustration and resentment, that they are more attuned to it as it's being experienced, and they have a sense of why they're having that frustration, and then being able to articulate that. Would that be a fair assessment?

Julie Gottman: I think that's very fair, Susan. I would also add though, for better or for worse, the length of this sequestration with COVID is allowing us also to have more time for reflection on our own feelings and to figure out that, that frustration, when it begins to rise inside of our bodies, we can feel it coming up is a signal to us that something isn't right. What do we need? Maybe it's alone time, maybe it's deeper connection. So, paying attention to ourselves now and looking at the signals that are our gauge for what our needs are inside of our bodies is an advantage, actually, that's the silver lining, one of them, within this sequestration period.

Susan David: What about situations in which there's an emotional mismatch, for instance, where one person in the relationship, whether that's a close relationship or a currently socially distant relationship, is feeling extremely anxious or needy, or I'm wondering about how we can more effectively navigate this feeling of emotional mismatch where you feel like you are being unheard or unseen or where someone else in the relationship is feeling that you're being very anxious, and they're struggling with how to navigate that effectively.

Julie Gottman: Hmm. Okay. So let's talk about stress reducing conversations and great listening. So when you have an emotional mismatch, what's really missing there, is the person who may not be very comfortable with emotions hears the stress or the anxiety of their partner, and they want to fix it. They feel inside themselves, often, the anxiety their partner's feeling, the discomfort. It's terrible for them to feel it too, and so they really want to relieve both themselves and their partner, and at times, when it continues day after day, they may feel really powerless, really helpless, to know how to fix it for their partner. And the big answer here, which is backed up by our research and that of other psychologists as well, is that you don't have to fix it as a listener. In fact, fixing it can feel terrible to the other person because it inadvertently, unintentionally gives them the message of, "what? You don't think I'm smart enough to solve this myself?" That's not the message we want to give to the person who's really anxious and wrestling with something. So instead, empathy, just simple empathy, statements of, "god, that sounds terrible. You must feel really upset.

I know this is really hard,” things like that help the person who’s anxious to feel less alone, and it’s connection and feeling less alone that tends to reduce stress.

Susan David: Julie, thank you so much. The very last question that I have, or really I’m wondering if you can speak a little bit to this idea. Both of us in our work, talk about love and values as being qualities of action, as daily choices, and I know, you know, in your work you talk about love is less of a feeling and it’s more of a daily commitment, a daily choice that one makes. I’m wondering if you wouldn’t mind speaking to the idea of love as an action in the context of COVID-19.

Julie Gottman: So what we’re talking about here is in the period of COVID-19, how can you shine for your partner, and how can your partner shine for you? That’s really what we’re talking about. How can you be your best, loving self for your partner? So, as an example, John is the most wonderful human being and husband on the planet, and he also has some underlying physical vulnerabilities that make COVID-19 very dangerous for him, so during this period, I’ve taken on doing every single errand outside the house because that’s my way of loving him, protecting him, keeping him safe. In turn, he is doing more inside the house because he knows that takes some burden away from me, so he is doing more of the cooking, more of the cleaning of the dishes, and so on, which is a loving gesture for me. He’ll go get me an orange at night, not only coffee in the morning. So we’re looking for little ways of gifting each other with action. That’s what indicates the love that we have for one another, and I encourage all your listeners to turn towards their partner and have a conversation today asking each other this question, how can I shine for you, how can I love you even better this week?

I think, Susan, that both of us really understand that COVID-19 is creating tremendous pressure on families today, but what we’ve been talking about today is really how there can be even a golden lining within this very difficult period, a time when you can grow even closer to your partner, more connected to your partner, and also more loving as a person, yourself. So thank you so much for the opportunity to speak with you today.

Susan David: It’s been so wonderful to chat, Julie. Thank you so much. That’s all for today. Be well, stay safe, and let’s check in next week.