

Marriage and divorce amid pandemic: Experts weigh in

by [David Crary](#) in the [March 10, 2021](#) issue



Kayleigh Cousins during her wedding to Cody Cousins at their home in San Diego.
(Kristen Pritchard Photography via AP)

For many US couples yearning to be married, the pandemic has wreaked havoc on their wedding plans while bolstering their teamwork and resilience. For couples already married, it has posed a host of new tests, bringing some closer and pulling others apart.

Spending more time together—a common result of lockdowns, furloughs, and layoffs—has been a blessing for some couples, who gain greater appreciation for each other. For others, deprived of opportunities for individual pursuits, the increased time together “may seem more like a house arrest than a fantasy,” suggested Steven Harris, a professor of marriage and family therapy at the University of Minnesota and associate director of a marriage counseling project, Minnesota Couples on the Brink.

Gregory Popcak, a psychotherapist in Steubenville, Ohio, who specializes in marriage counseling for Catholics, says the pandemic has been particularly troublesome for spouses whose coping strategies have been disrupted.

“For couples who had a tendency to use their business to avoid problems, the pandemic has made things infinitely worse,” he said. “The lockdown has raised the emotional temperature a few notches. . . . Things that were provocative before are now catastrophic.”

Comprehensive national statistics on marriage and divorce during the pandemic won’t be compiled for many months, but the numbers available thus far from a few states suggest there’s a notable decline in each category.

In Oregon, divorces in the pandemic months of March through December were down about 24 percent from those months in 2019; marriages were down 16 percent. In Florida, for the same months, divorces were down 20 percent and marriages were down 27 percent. There also were decreases, though smaller, in Arizona.

One reason for fewer divorces: in many states, access to courts for civil cases was severely curtailed during the pandemic’s early stages. Another reason, according to marriage counselors, is that many couples backed off from a possibly imminent divorce for fear it would only worsen pandemic-fueled financial insecurity.

For countless couples on the brink of marriage, the pandemic plunged fine-tuned wedding plans into disarray due to restrictions on large gatherings and wariness

about long-distance travel.

In San Diego, Kayleigh and Cody Cousins initially planned an April wedding, postponed it after the pandemic took hold, rescheduled it for December, then had to shift gears again when a new lockdown was imposed.

“That was devastating,” Kayleigh said. “We said, ‘Let’s just do it on Zoom.’”

So they set up an altar at home, recruited a friend to officiate virtually, and had a wedding ceremony on December 27 watched remotely by about 40 of their friends and family.

Professionally, Kayleigh helps her husband run a tree-cutting service, so they understand each other’s work demands. For many couples, there’s work-related friction.

Danielle Campoamor, a freelance writer in New York City, says she and her partner of seven years find themselves arguing frequently as the pandemic complicates the challenges of raising their two children and earning needed income. She works from home; he commutes to an Amazon fulfillment center.

“He goes to work for 12-hour shifts,” said Campoamor, 34. “I’m left alone helping my six-year-old with online learning, potty training my two-year-old, cooking, and cleaning.”

“There are days when I think, ‘Yes, we can do this,’ and other days I say, ‘No way that I can do this,’” she said. “We don’t have time to discuss our relationship, to work on improving it—or on separating. Sometimes I don’t have the capacity to remember what day it is.”

Atlanta-based attorney Elizabeth Lindsey, president of the American Academy of Matrimonial Lawyers, says she and other divorce lawyers generally have kept busy, in some cases grappling with pandemic-related complications regarding child visitation rights.

She expects there will be pent-up demand for divorces once the COVID-19 threat eases.

Recent months have been busier than usual for Louise Livesay, a lawyer in St. Paul, Minnesota, who specializes in collaborative divorce—a process in which the spouses

are represented by attorneys seeking to negotiate outcomes fair to both parties.

Livesay said the stresses of the pandemic exacerbated existing strains in some marriages, pushing couples toward divorce. But she said many of her clients were eager to avoid contentious litigation and were open to equitable financial arrangements.

“I found people to be a bit more willing to work toward solutions when things are difficult,” she said.

For other couples, a key problem is loss of their prepandemic routines.

Harris described one troubled couple who entered marriage counseling a year ago, just before the pandemic took hold.

Now the wife feels pressure to keep working, Harris said, while the husband tries to help their children with online schoolwork even though his teaching skills aren’t great. His beloved adult hockey league has shut down.

“They’re in this relationship that’s struggling, and all their coping mechanisms are stripped away,” Harris said. “My heart breaks for them.”

In the Catholic Diocese of Arlington, Virginia, psychologist Michael Horne, who counsels couples on behalf of Catholic Charities, has observed one heartwarming development that he attributes partly to the pandemic. There are now 20 couples enrolled in the agency’s adoption program, up from seven a year ago.

“Having more time together has afforded couples time to have those really important conversations,” he said. “What does it mean to be a family?”

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