

Too Close for Comfort – Helpful Tips for Stressed Out Couples Working from Home

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At a glance

- When couples live together and work together from home for long periods of time it can create relationship stress
- Your relationship needs alone time to grow. Follow some simple steps that help you support your partner but find the time and space you need for yourself too.
- Look after yourself – it will help your partner too
- Seek counselling or other help if you find relationship stress starting to be too much for you.

When loved ones can be too much of a good thing

In 2011 the European Space Agency conducted a preparatory study for future missions to Mars. Six people lived in a small space barely bigger than a garage for 520 days. They survived and demonstrated human resilience dealing with things like isolation and cramped living conditions. When asked about the experience, Patrik Sundblad, human life sciences specialist at ESA, said the simulation had proven successful. "Yes, the crew can survive the inevitable isolation that is [essential] for a mission to Mars and back. Psychologically, we can do it." Of course, most of us aren't professional astronauts training for confinement, but working from home and living with our partners 24 hours a day can become similarly claustrophobic very quickly and require resilience.

As individuals within relationships we need our own personal space, time to decompress after a long work day or the ability to pursue solo interests. But when couples live together, work from home together and get no break from each other, that togetherness can start to feel like too much of a "good thing." Finding ways to create separation in both your home-based work day

as well as your free time can help reduce strain make the time you do spend together more meaningful.

Supporting your partner in a way that's good for them – and you

When a loved one is stressed some people will try to solve that stress for them. If they're worried about losing their job, we'll start job hunting searches to help. When they're having difficulties with a project or their boss, we might say "don't worry" or "you're obsessing over this, it will be fine." The truth is that, in getting involved, we might add to a partner's burden because now they have our feelings to worry about too.

Other factors can cause relationship stress too, especially when couples are spending so much time together. If you're stressed but your partner remains disengaged or disinterested, this can lead to further relationship tension and potential confrontation. Or if one partner remains employed while the other loses their job, the dynamic can stir up feelings of resentment and place stress on the relationship.

Whatever the exact cause of stress for couples, here are some ideas to consider for ways to show appropriate support without getting overly involved and making matters worse.

- **Listen without advice** – make your role about giving some undivided attention each day to listen to your stressed partner. Maybe set aside 15 minutes or a half hour at the end of the day. Do this without feeling the need to offer advice or brainstorm a solution. Often just helping them to offload the things on their mind can be the best support.
- **Don't dismiss the problem** – telling a partner not to worry is not the answer. Instead simply empathize with your loved one, showing them you see and hear what is concerning them.

- **Ask them what they need** – sometimes the smallest gestures can make the biggest impact. Ask directly what you can do? Make yourself scarce and get out of the house for an hour. Take over your partner’s turn to unload the dishwasher or put the kids to bed, and give them some extra breathing room in their day or evening.
- **The power of distraction** – give your loved one a mental break with an unexpected suggestion to break their daily routine of work, stress, sleep and work again. Get your partner away from their computer screen and into the fresh air for a neighborhood stroll. If the weather is warm, watch home movies in the backyard, or start a new family tradition of games night once a week.

Setting better boundaries to protect yourself and them

The best way to support a stressed partner, is by staying mentally fit and minimizing your own stress and anxiety. However much we may want to, we cannot rescue our partner from whatever is creating stress. But making some changes in your work routines, around your home and in your relationship habits can help you stay strong for them – and for yourself.

- **Create alone time opportunities** – finding time for yourself and your partner too is essential. Instead of crashing onto the couch together every night to watch the news or a television programme, find a quiet corner to do things just for you: read, listen to a podcast or check in with friends on the phone or via social media. Physical time apart, even in different rooms, can have a similar effect to being gone for an evening or away from home on a trip.
- **Multi-office home** – when we first start working from home together it’s novel to be at the dining room table, tackling the work day side by side. But competing zoom calls, the sound of your partner’s typing and differing work routines can soon become problems. Create separate work spaces wherever those may be. If that can’t be in separate rooms, look to section off a corner of your room with furniture. Even moving a desk to the furnace or mechanical room or setting up a small table in a storage cupboard or box room can help temporarily.

- **Get support for yourself too** – if your partner is stressed, it's unlikely they are able to provide support for you if and when you may need it. Make sure to keep your own support systems strong. Check in once a week with a family Facetime or other video call. Physically call friends. Use LinkedIn and other professional networking solutions to stay in touch with business contacts, colleagues and favorite former coworkers. All can help.

Knowing when and where to get help

If your partner's stress isn't an occasional thing, if it gets worse or becomes constant, it's time to get more professional help. Ongoing stress, if left untreated, can cause high blood pressure, heart problems and even strokes as well as mental health disorders and depression. Talk to your partner and let them know that you think it would be a good idea for them to get a checkup with their doctor. Or either of you can contact one of the many resources that specialize in providing relationship, stress and mental health counselling and support to those who need it. Below are some useful organizations that can help you and your loved one begin the process of de-stressing and feeling better.

- Relate – www.relate.org.uk – the UK's largest provider of relationship support
- CALM – www.thecalmzone.net – Campaign Against Living Miserably, phone and web support
- Anxiety UK – www.anxiety.org.uk – support service for anxiety issues