



# Not Allowing Circuit Breaker to Break Your Marriage

*Transcending a crisis as a couple*

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*Circuit Breaker? Social distancing? Wearing masks? Flatten the curve? Work from Home? New Normal?*

A few months ago, we had never even heard of these terms. Now, they are widely used in our everyday conversations with family and friends. For many of us, this daily life still feels very surreal. As we struggle to keep up with the changes in our lives, it is during this time, that our mental health comes to the forefront of our lives, even more so than our physical health. This unprecedented crisis caused by a hidden enemy - the novel coronavirus called COVID-19 - has left us with an unprecedented set of unfamiliar emotions. I called this pandemic the BIG DISRUPTION.

We are certainly living in times of great prolonged uncertainty. Many people have been furloughed or left unemployed, as demand outweighs the supply for jobs; struggling families are living from hand-to-mouth, not knowing how they are going to live through not just tomorrow, but the months ahead. We are not waiting for things to return to normal, instead most of us wonder what “normal” will even look like after this blows over. And for that matter, when is it going to come? How are we going to live through, let alone embrace it? These are some questions left unanswered and are not helping us attain that desired sense of certainty and control. Although we know change is the only constant, the question is how do we respond to these changes, so that we not only survive through them but come out stronger and more resilient.

The threat of the virus is real, and some of the worst impacts are on marriages and families. Many marriages may have already been struggling before this pandemic swept us off our feet. The virus could even be the deal breaker as to whether a marriage survives or collapses. Before we lose hope, we must reframe it to believe that this pandemic may even be a blessing in disguise to rekindle fading marriages. However, there is one catch – you need to work at it, or should I say “re-work” at it.

If you are feeling the negative effects of the crisis, your spouse may just be in the same boat as you, just like many other couples facing this crisis now. The truth is we are not alone in this. As the saying goes “it takes two hands to clap” and hence, it would take both of you to overcome this pandemic challenge and make your marriage better. I am sure you have your doubts with questions in your mind like, “*If even in normal times, we can’t make it better, how will things be better for us now with an external stressor?*”. I can only believe that in every crisis, there are opportunities to change our perspectives, turn things around, and grow. For all we know, this crisis may be the turning point for

you and your spouse to look at your relationship differently. The key to survival and improvement is taking ownership of your marital relationship.

Let's take a look at some ways that you could make things better for your marriage:

### **1. Normalize your emotions**

We are dealing with Prolonged Uncertainty— in the sense that, not only do we feel uncertain, we don't know when our feeling of uncertainty will end. We wonder if we will face salary reductions or retrenchment. Will we ever stop being so paralyzed with fear and anxiety? This is loss on a massive scale. It is Ambiguous Loss, the sense that we have lost so many intangible elements of our normal lives that we can hardly identify what we are missing. And because it is ambiguous, it is difficult to know what we are mourning for. Grief expert David Kessler has described this as *"the loss of normalcy; the fear of economic toll; the loss of connection,"* and says that *"we are not used to this kind of collective grief in the air."* Hence, we must acknowledge our own emotions of anger, sadness, disappointment fear, and anxiety residing in us and normalize them as much as we can. When we try to deny or suppress the reality of these emotions, it will take us longer to adapt to the changes that we need to make. We may even run the danger of dumping our emotional load on our family members and that is certainly not helping anyone. Learning to identify, acknowledge and articulate it out ***"I am stressed and anxious right now and it's normal to feel this way"*** - whether to ourselves, our journals, or our loved ones - would serve to benefit our mental wellness and people around us.

### **2. Create new routines**

Routine can be an anchor. No matter what's going on in our day, knowing that we will be having our home workouts at 6pm, dinner around 7 pm, and going to bed around 10.30pm, can be a real comfort. The certainty of our routine can help us to manage the uncertainty that life throws at us. Coping with unpredictable periods of time can feel more doable when we have a structure in place to look to. Integrate your daily routine with a Work Highlight of the day. Before you dive straight into work each morning, set aside time to list out your daily schedule and identify the Highlight of your day. Your Highlight gives each day a focal point. You create your own reality by choosing what you pay attention to, rather than letting things happen for you.

Your daily routine should also include mini rituals of connection. Schedule short breaks in between your work and have mini catch up sessions with your spouse, like how you would text each other while both of you were in office. Schedule meal times together to talk about events or happenings of the day can foster personal interaction which may have been lacking in the past. Developing a daily routine can help us to feel more in control of everything and help us to make room for all that is important. Routine can aid our mental health. It can help us to cope with change, to form healthy habits, reduce our stress levels and more importantly, form new rituals of connection with your spouse.

### **3. Work as a Team**

In marriage, you sometimes forget you are on the same team as your spouse. Your spouse is not your enemy. The two of you are one. If your partner wins, so do you. If your spouse loses, you do too. Your relationship wins. You will be amazed at how your marriage will thrive when you work together. You help cover each other's flaws and leverage each other's strengths. When one falls, the other helps him or her up. This is what marriage is all about. When you function well as a team with good coordination, your marriage will face less conflict and tension.

Coordination requires couple communication and identifying a way to work together by tapping on both partners' talents and abilities. When your efforts are coordinated, life goes more smoothly, and more is accomplished. For instance, your wife may be good at cooking, but you are not. You may be good at supervising your children with their schoolwork but your wife may not. Reinforcing your couple strengths can help reduce each other's burden and stress. Your initiative and proactiveness in encouraging and supporting each other will have a positive influence on the marital relationship. Your spouse will certainly appreciate you for lending a helping hand. It also creates that sense of "we are in this together" mentality, that not only eases each other's stress, but also promotes appreciation and admiration for each other.

#### **4. Give each other space for self-care**

Living under one roof 24/7 can be very challenging and tough for everyone. Understand that everyone needs their own space and "me" time alone from the busyness and demands of each day. Establish a workable boundary that allow each other space to 'breathe" and relax on their own on a daily basis. Integrate this as a daily family routine, not only for your spouse but also for your children. If you feel stress and challenged during this time, they too are not spared. Communicate your needs to each other about when will you be taking these self-care breaks so that boundaries are clear and you will not be disturbed. You also need to keep in mind that your spouse's way of self-care may be different from yours, but remember to accept them and acknowledge that that is the way they believe will help them to rest and recharge. Be an encourager; do not criticize.

#### **5. Create Family Bonding Time**

Once work is over for the day, it is time for you to take this opportunity to bond with each other through creativity. Family board games is a way to get everybody engaged and communicate and at the same time, bringing in that element of fun and laughter. Perhaps, it is also a chance for you to finally know the other side of your spouse and children which you may not be aware of. Games, activities, and conversation starters have a funny way of revealing personalities in a very authentic way. Your children and spouse may even appreciate the lighter side of you that you can build on.

#### **6. Re-engage with your spouse**

At the end of the day, carve out some time to re-engage with your spouse alone away from distractions and disruptions. Check on each other. Who has reached out to you out of the blue recently? Whom have you reached out to? How are you emotionally coping with work at home, children, cooking? Is it too overwhelming? How can I support you? This is also the time to slow down and practice listening to your spouse as they share their "stories". Life is a story to be completed. Stories have a way of connecting people in a deeper way, allowing us to be more vulnerable and authentic with each other. Sharing our experiences and feelings helps us understand and empathize better, resulting in a deeper emotional connection. Our response should then radiate love, grace and support.

#### **7. Practice forgiveness and appreciation**

Forgiveness is part of love. All of us are imperfect, we are prone to mistakes, we hurt each other unintentionally or intentionally. One of the key pillars of a thriving marriage is the ability to forgive one another. We cannot put our hands to our hearts and say we truly love our spouse but be unwilling to forgive. Conflicts are inevitable; the key is not the issues or the conflicts itself, but rather, the attitude and willingness to repair. We can be equipped with all the skills to repair but without an attitude of forgiveness, the repair will not last. Apart from forgiveness, we also need to learn to appreciate one another. It cultivates gratitude in our hearts, and it serves to provide validation,

importance, and value to what one is trying to do for the marriage relationship. Always strive for appreciation and forgiveness instead of criticism and contempt.

## **8. Seeking social support and connection**

Making the time and effort to reach out to our extended families and friends virtually on consistent basis enables us to stay connected, especially now that we are forced into social distancing. Reaching out as a couple to other couples alike helps to maintain that community spirit and is also a platform to share our own experiences during this challenging time. While you may not be able to physically share your conversations over food and drinks, you can still make that effort to reach out virtually for support, comfort and encouragement. You may even share best practices and routines with your couple friends to improve your marriage and family relationships.

## **9. Pray**

Lastly, as Christians have this saying: “A family that prays together, stays together.” We all face tragedies and negative events in life. Now, we are dealing with a hidden enemy (COVID-19 pandemic). Some of us choose to be boxed in and have forgotten that God is not boxed in, rather He is in total control. He knows our fears and anxiety. Instead of feeling despair, we must see what opportunities this crisis is offering us. How are we going to witness for Jesus? Are we seeking and seizing the opportunity to encounter God in new ways, trusting that God does not allow things to happen without a reason? This could be a good time to discern our faith and put it into action. Take the lead in encouraging your family to pray as one. Make time to also pray alone with your spouse, to seek guidance in how you could strengthen your marital relationship and reach out to others who may be suffering and are more vulnerable to the pandemic.

This prolonged uncertainty that has brought about new challenges and threats to your marriage is understandably not easy to deal with. But losing hope is not the solution. It will pass. We hope that the above ways can help both of you to evaluate your relationship and discover new ways to not only survive through these challenges, but to also realize that your marriage means more than a pandemic. Believe that both of you can fight this together and emerge stronger.

### **References:**

*Adapted from For a Great Marriage: Work together as a team by Dr. Steve Stephens.*  
*Adapted from The Mental Health Benefits of Having A Daily Routine by Blurt Team.*  
*Adapted from Finding Meaning: The Sixth Stage of Grief by David Kessler*