

**Advent Marriage Retreat: A Couple's Advent Journey**  
**Our Lady of Bethesda**  
**9 December 2020**  
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**Practical Tips:**

**Basic:**

- Acknowledge what is happening (“name the process”)
  - What is different?
  - How are you being impacted?
  - What feels hard?
- Be mindful of thoughts and emotions that impact your behaviors
  - What happens on the inside and how does this translate to your external actions
  - When I'm overwhelmed I tend to withdraw (lose connection, feel more lonely)
- Be compassionate towards yourself and your spouse
  - *None of us have experienced this before!*
  - We all need grace, a lot of grace...
- Take time for yourself (balanced with marriage and family life)
- Seek relational connection outside the home
- Create playfulness
- Get fresh air daily!
- Attend to your spiritual life (Sacraments and prayer!)

**Summary: for you as a couple...**

- Name what feels hard
- Talk about what has changed
- Discuss *how* you want to navigate the new reality
- Create moments of positive connection and bonding

**THEME: BE INTENTIONAL!**

**Create a foundation of safety to thrive [in our relationships]**

Taken from: Stanley, S. M., & Markman, H. J. (2020). Helping couples in the shadow of COVID-19. *Family process*, 59(3), 937-955.

**Emotional:** ability to relax around the other, to speak and be heard, to listen, to be accepted and to work together as a team

- Maintaining emotional safety is challenging AND COVID complicates it
  - Increased stress/strain may lead to more arguing (especially with more time together and increased challenges to deal with)
  - Significant loss of intimacy due to limitations/restrictions that impact how we typically connect (e.g., travel, going out to dinner)
- How to buffer the effect of stressors
  - Being responsive
    - “Really listening”

- Being interested in what your spouse or loved has been thinking or feeling
- Creating moments of positive connection

**Commitment:** Having a sense of “us with a future”

- Commitment helps to create secure attachment; the foundation for trust and safety
  - When stressors or circumstances overwhelm the equilibrium it leads to frustration in the moment that undermines the foundation
- We need to recognize [the impact of COVID] and be mindful of **the ‘danger’** it poses to the equilibrium
- **The antidote** is protecting a sense of future in the midst of fear and uncertainty
  - **TIP:** *circumvent escalation that compounds threats by reinforcing you are a team and have a future; to know that we are not alone!*
  - *Hard times can actually deepen our commitment (research supports this!)*

### 3 Keys to Protect the Relationship

Taken from: Stanley, S. M., & Markman, H. J. (2020). Helping couples in the shadow of COVID-19. *Family process*, 59(3), 937-955.

**1. Decide, don’t slide:** a simple reminder to optimize thinking carefully and working together during times of transition

- External stressors and loss make it all the more important to consider how you can make decisions to protect from further loss
  - e.g., focus on building a reservoir of emotional and relational resources to buffer against stressors
  - Basic tips mentioned previously
- Talk about changes
  - e.g., who does what around the house?
- Explore and share important expectations in your relationship
  - Think about and share vs. assume that you are on the same page
  - Navigating changes in children’s routines

### Guidance to... Improve Communication and Clarity about Expectations

- Who does this or that in this present time?
- How does working remotely affect you as a couple?
- If one of you is still working outside the home, how does that affect you both and the family? Is there added risk and concern? How can you work together coping with that?
- What does positive time together look like, now?
- Money, income, debt—in what ways (if any) will it have been better to make clear decisions?
- Do you need to adjust parenting patterns (especially, given disruptions in regular school and work routines)?
- What rules will you set for seeing friends and families?
- How do you deal with family members who are at high risk, are sick, or who pass away?
- What do you do with wedding plans (or other family ceremonies)?

(Stanley 2020, as cited in Stanley & Markman, 2020, p. 946)

**Practical TIP:** Come up with a “brake signal” to pause ‘damaging interactions’

- This is an agreed upon signal for when the time out is needed (so behavior is not misconstrued as withdrawal)
- Approach this as a team!
- Successfully applying the brakes
  - Define how you will use the time out
  - What signals it
  - What behaviors (each of you, respectively) will you use to calm down
  -

## **2. Make it safe to connect**

- Feeling accepted and connected are foundations of being open and vulnerable in healthy relationships
- Consider what each spouse, and both together, can do to keep it safe to talk, connect, and provide emotional support to one another
- Express gratitude (e.g., write down and share 5 blessings)
- Adding structure to conversations
  - Place boundaries around the time when ‘tough topics’ are discussed (e.g. money)
  - Plan for these moments so that other times of connection are ‘protected’ (without the lingering, vague sense of... Will the conversation digress into a charged topic)

**TIP(s) for dialogue:** *feeling heard and supported is a way to create intimacy*

- Expressing
  - Focus on sharing from your own “internal world”
  - e.g., share about the specific experiences, thoughts, and emotions that capture/reflect how you were ‘impacted’ in the midst of day-to-day interactions and more overarching situations/experiences
- Responding
  - The power of listening and attending to your spouse
  - Value of “being with” vs. trying to craft a solution

## **3. Do your part**

- What can you do to strengthen and protect the relationship?
  - Vs. “If only my husband would do X, then...”
  - Or... “If only my wife did Y, then...”
- When prone to reactivity pause and consider...
  - What can I do right now to be the best possible spouse in our relationship?
  - What is under my control?
  - What can I hand over to God?
- Interrupt chains of blame and negative interactions
  - Underlying positive

- What is the good in your spouse's reaction or behavior?
- Return to gratitude

### **Additional Reflection w/ other TIPS**

#### ***How do I nourish and care for myself?***

##### **Physical, emotional, relational, spiritual**

- Develop a routine
  - Work, family, prayer
- Get outside (even images and sounds)
  - 15 min. A day is beneficial to your health and well-being
- Be active
  - Helps you stay healthy
  - Mood booster
- Tend to your relationships
  - Expand your horizons (e.g., puzzle; new instrument)
  - Virtual double dates (e.g., wine, dinner, etc.)
  - Practice being a good listener (attentive and responsive is key!)
- Nourish your soul
  - Designate a time and space for prayer
  - Create a routine; anchors throughout the day

#### ***How do we want to grow as a couple?***

- Make time for fun (i.e., create moments of positive connection; BONDING!)
  - This helps to buffer the effect of stressors and create the reservoir
- Find novel and challenging activities to enjoy together
- With kids this is hard!
  - Old enough to be alone at home... Go for a walk
  - Connect after bedtime

Even short periods are great!

**\*\*\*If you individually or as a couple are really struggling seek additional support. Consult with a priest, schedule a therapy session...**

### **SEE RESOURCES LIST**

#### **Closing thought/reflection**

Do not look forward in fear to the changes in life;  
rather, look to them with full hope that as they arise,  
God, whose very own you are, will lead you safely through all things;  
and when you cannot stand it, God will carry you in His arms.

Do not fear what may happen tomorrow;  
the same understanding Father who cares for  
you today will take care of you then and every day.

He will either shield you from suffering  
or will give you unfailing strength to bear it.  
Be at peace, and put aside all anxious thoughts and imaginations.

-St. Frances de Sales