



*Love Cycles presents*

# Love Skills

## A Virtual Class for Couples with Linda Carroll

### Love and Relationships in Quarantine

Remember, this information is not meant for people who are dealing with more serious issues of personal safety, untreated mental health issues, or addictions of any kind with themselves or their partners. For anyone experiencing these problems, please call your local caregivers, health providers, or 911 to get immediate help.

#### 13 Tips to Help Couples Survive—and Even Thrive—During the Pandemic

##### 1. Pay Attention to What's Working

“Have you recently noticed how loud your partner chews? That her placement of items in the fridge is illogical? That his consumption of toilet paper/soap/the good snacks is remarkably high? If so, you might be married during a pandemic.”

- Belinda Luscombe, Time Magazine

No matter how loudly your partner chews, cool it with the criticism, even if it provokes strong feelings in the moment. Perhaps your partner has a different relationship to order than you do, does things in an opposite way, or has habits you find annoying; but remember, everything is exaggerated right now, including intolerance. Fight the urge to criticize and set a goal for yourself to notice and appreciate all the things your partner is doing right.

In one study using brain scans, couples in China and the US in long-term *happy* partnerships showed activity in three brain regions: the region associated with empathy, the one reserved for managing one's own stress and emotions (which is also called “emotional regulation”), and a third that develops our “positive illusions,” which is to say the ability to overlook what you don't like about your partner and focus on what you do like. Fortunately, we can improve all three of these qualities, including empathy, if we are willing to develop them.

One of the best (and more difficult) ways to develop empathy is to start noticing the impact of what you do on your partner. For example, you may like loud music playing which you find soothing, but for a person who has an issue with “information overload” or is noise sensitive, this can actually feel and sound painful. If you are someone who isn't bothered by dishes in the sink but your partner is, instead of insisting you do things your way, why not be generous by cleaning up to make life easier for them? We can certainly grow in our capacity to be kinder, and since generosity has been found to be the most important quality in a healthy relationship, there is no better time to strengthen it in ourselves than now.

This advice doesn't imply that we should deny things that are truly unacceptable, dangerous, or emotionally harmful. But so many of our criticisms of one another can be tempered by increasing our tolerance. I always find it helpful to remind myself of my own annoying habits, things that my partner has to put up with living with me, as a way to help me manage my critical eye toward him.

## **2. Give each other space to be different and their viewpoint not to be wrong even if you have conflicting ways of managing the news input.**

"The first thing you should know about me is that I am not you. A lot more will make sense after that." – Source unknown

One person may want to watch the news all day, and for that person, it makes sense. Somehow, watching people speak about the pandemic, even if they are telling us how bad it will get, can serve as a reassurance that the world is still there. For their partner, though, listening to endless speculation about possibilities of disaster, loss, and death may seem to be "negative thinking" or "fake news"; they may instead prefer to just read the headlines in the morning and not talk or think about it again all day. Who is right? Both are, and therein lies one of the biggest challenges in our relationships: two people can have opposite points of view and both be right. We need to make space for each other's ways of handling this issue.

If your differences spill over to areas that seem more serious, such as having different beliefs about issues of safety and social distancing, find an agreed-upon objective source and write out a list together that is based on science and a third party's expertise rather than your own interpretations. For instance, here is an objective list of safety rules put out by the American Red Cross:

<https://www.redcross.org/about-us/news-and-events/news/2020/coronavirus-safety-and-readiness-tips-for-you.html>

## **3. Create a schedule.**

I was already familiar with the term *anticipatory anxiety*, which refers to stress that occurs when we think about an event that might happen in the future. Recently, however, I learned a new term: *anticipatory trauma*, which is a more severe type of future-focused distress.

Schedules and the structure they offer provide a sense of stability and some ability to predict our future, which can reduce both kinds of distress. There is so much about this pandemic that we cannot control, and so it is important to find ways to control what we can. A schedule offers this possibility.

My granddaughter, who is 12, told me yesterday that she can't remember what day it is and that even daytime and nighttime seem to blend together. Fortunately, she has tutoring, guitar lessons, and school sessions. However, she admitted that some of her friends who don't have that structure are on their screens all day and well into the night, and they seem to be having a harder time coping than she is.

As couples, we can come up with a loose schedule to normalize things. We can use this schedule to set ground rules about noise and interruptions and to plan exercise, work, and special time together, such as a nice dinner or a mid-morning cup of tea or coffee.

#### **4. Make time for hanging out, learning new things together, or play.**

Play is a tricky word for some of us, and the instruction to “make time for it” can create its own anxiety—but it’s still very important. For one thing, playing increases energy, motivation, and optimism. For many of us, we could hang out on the couch endlessly, but once we start thinking, creating, and moving, we start feeling alive again. Think of some things you have never done together: puzzles, virtual dancing lessons, bridge, yoga, or any other new activity. Watch nature documentaries or TED talks or try a genre of movies you have never looked at. In our case, we learned about dog grooming, which was quite challenging (and fun) as we used our labradoodle’s overgrown coat with tangles and clumps as our project.

#### **5. Replace judgement with curiosity.**

“Talking is the most dangerous thing people do, especially when they are stressed, and listening is the most infrequent thing people do, especially when they are stressed.”

– Dr. Harville Hendrix, psychologist and founder of IMAGO therapy.

For those of you who have worked with me or other relationship coaches, you know that we put a lot of time into teaching you how to listen to one another. Listening is truly an art, and the more we practice, the better we get at it. I have a whole chapter on listening in my book, *Love Skills* because it is so important. Make the commitment to yourself to use this time to become a truly skilled and empathetic listener. You can learn so much about your partner and yourself by doing this, which will increase the well-being of your relationship.

“With all the new responsibilities brought on by the coronavirus, it may feel like your spouse is not doing enough or has committed an act of personal treason, but it’s more likely that they’re just distracted, hungry or have motivations that are invisible to you,” says Dr. Helen Fisher, writer and researcher of love. “High stress always brings out people’s relational coping skills, or lack of them.”

Asking your partner what is going on if you don’t understand their behavior, responses, or what appears to be a lack of follow-through, and listening to their answer with interest and a little kindness thrown in, can have an amazing positive effect on your relationship.

#### **6. Let them feel bad—or ok -about the current crisis.**

We are not with our clone; we know that opposites attract, and often this is reflected in a person who might be called optimistic being with a partner who is more pessimistic. Sometimes this can work well and even be humorous. But when together 24/7, the differences can become a source of real annoyance.

It’s so important that we don’t judge each other for how we are managing this time of massive change and loss; it’s impossible for any of us to get through it in the same way as our partner. My husband continually looks for signs of the best outcome, which comforts him; I look at the worst possible scenario because, somehow, I have the idea that if I can anticipate the worst, I won’t be surprised. Making room for two points of view is an essential relationship skill, and doing it during a pandemic will give you a black belt in communication.

## **7. Make an appointment for your fights.**

If an issue starts to escalate, I suggest that one of you call time-out and the other should agree. Imagine putting the issue in a little red box and closing the box, not denying the trouble but not letting it get out of hand by postponing any discussion about it for at least a day.

When we are distressed, our body gives a response called “flooding.” We know that stress exaggerates the fight-or-flight response with flooding, and it can be easy for the mellowest among us to turn a quibble over how to cook the spinach into an all-out fight.

Emotional regulation is an essential skill for love and communication, and in the intensity of excessive togetherness, a small thing can quickly escalate. Manage yourself by stepping away or agreeing to leave the issue alone if your partner asks for a time-out. Remember, sometimes the urgency to have our say about something is a sign to hold off on speaking; the way we bring up a troubling topic with our partner can have a huge effect on how willing they are to listen to us. Too much intensity may close off an opening for a conversation. This is a time to learn and practice skilled communication like never before, and sometimes that means calming ourselves down before speaking.

## **8. Set the time aside for “the difficult” conversation.**

Being silent about illness and mortality creates a lot of a burden for the people we love as well as health care workers, should we need to have those conversations. If one of you gets sick, is there a plan? If you both get sick, where do the cats, kids or dogs go? Have you been clear about whether you would want to go to a hospital, be on a ventilator, let friends and family know what is happening? Do you each have access to common funds, and information you will need financially and in other ways which involve the life you share? While the chances of this happening are not great, they are higher than they were before the pandemic and it’s important to talk about these issues together.

Talking about these hard topics, is a way to live well and with greater ease.

## **9. Respect the new invisible boundaries and learn to be apart, together.**

“Our romanticized notions of love tell us that if we love each other we should always want to be together. Our lived experiences of love teach us that togetherness and separateness are an inhale and an exhale. They coexist and each enhances the other.”

– Alexandra Solomon

It’s essential that you find your own space away from one another and respect those boundaries, even if they are occurring in the same room. I am hearing from many individuals who are feeling intruded on by their partner. In Love Skills, I talk about different styles of connecting. Some of us are remote connectors (like islands), while some of us always want to connect, like waves. A wave might want to talk all the time, while an island needs lots of time to think, read, or daydream. Negotiate for the other person’s time even if they are physically in your presence.

## **10. Enjoy the strength of your sexual relationship and/or find compassion for one another over the lack of it.**

For many couples, regular sex and compatible libidos are a delightful part of their lives together. For others, it's a painful topic that is filled with desire discrepancy, a troubled history, or one person cutting the other off. If this is a thorny issue between you, right now is not the time to try to work it out without guidance and outside support. It may be a good time to agree to table the topic. Alternatively, you could agree to some psychoeducation by watching videos together or taking an online class on how to start safely talking about it and even rekindle desire. However, this is not the time to be in a power struggle about this issue without receiving help.

However, no matter the state of our sexual relationship, one of our most important needs is physical touch. It is a great oxytocin releaser in the brain; it helps us feel calm and safe. If you are both healthy, and if sex is a hard topic, try giving each other foot massages or back rubs, or hold hands if you go for a walk. Sometimes a wordless hug can go a long way in comforting your partner and helping both of you feel a warm and loving connection.

## **11. Self-nurture and self-care, remembering that it looks different for different people.**

We all need fresh air, nourishing food, exercise, and connection to support our health, but we differ in how much we need and how we go about obtaining these essentials.

Some of us like to read, draw, paint, spend time on social media, or write in our journal. Other people need physical exercise regularly and intensely. You may like to sit in your garden if you have one. Maybe you need to find a place in your house where you can't see another person, even if it's just a closet. The important thing is that you find out what nurtures you—and that you find the space and means to make it happen while also allowing your partner the space to experience it differently for themselves. Some of us are connectors and need to reach out and talk frequently to friends and family. Others, though, may feel more isolated and helpless when doing so; for them, reaching out to others in this way may not be something that feeds them at all. Some people may also frequently want comfort food while their partner makes green smoothies all day long.

There are certain basic points of agreement that are essential to find during this time. Limit alcohol and drugs. Stay safe. Take your medications if they are prescribed. Beyond that, if you have preexisting mental health issues, make a plan for if your symptoms worsen, which they might. Let your partner know how they can help and make a plan for how to support yourself.

Remember that we are each responsible for knowing what supports, sustains, and nurtures us, and for finding ways to do it while life as we know it is temporarily on hold. Living with another person full-time requires us to give them the space, time, and respect to nurture themselves in their own way.

## **12. Practice gratitude.**

First of all, this advice is not meant to encourage us to deny our fear, hold back our tears, or minimize our suffering and loss; rather, it is a reminder to include gratitude in the mix.

Gratitude is one of the most powerful tools we have to help us stay well. We know from research that a daily gratitude practice is good for us: it helps us reduce stress, get better sleep,

and stay healthier. You can't force it, though, and if it's hard to do, be empathetic to yourself and try it again the next day.

Multiple studies show that taking time to be thankful for what is working improves physical, spiritual, and psychological health. It enhances empathy, reduces hostility, and can even ease depression. Beginning the day with appreciation for our partner and ending it with those things that remind us of our fortune and well-being in our lives (and sharing them out loud) is a great way to help one another through this perilous time.

### **13. Take this advice from a former prisoner of war.**

My dear friend Phyllis Pilgrim, who many of you know from Rancho La Puerta, was interned as a prisoner of war during WWII in Java with her mother and brother in a Japanese internment camp for women and children for several years.

When asked how she got through those years, she recalled her mother's words: "Every day, see something beautiful, say something beautiful, and do something beautiful."

Wouldn't it be a game changer if every day you could see something beautiful in or about your partner, tell them, and do something for them to make their life easier?