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Romantic Relationships during a Global Pandemic

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The COVID-19 pandemic and its associated restrictions and isolation raise multiple challenges for individuals, couples, and families. People have been faced with developing and maintaining relationships separated from family and friendship networks outside of those living under the same roof while coping with disruptions in work, childcare, and daily routines. Pandemic-related restrictions also have limited the ability to initiate new relationships and maintain developing relationships. Thus, the stressors associated with the COVID-19 pandemic can threaten the ability to successfully navigate romantic relationships at all phases of relationship development, and as a consequence, potentially impair individuals' emotional and physical health (Pietromonaco & Collins, 2017).

To understand and organize the numerous processes affecting relationship maintenance and development, we apply a major relationship theory, the vulnerability-stress-adaptation model (VSA; Karney & Bradbury, 1995), which focuses on identifying the key predictors of relationship outcomes in existing couple relationships (also see Pietromonaco & Overall, 2021). The VSA model suggests that relationship quality and stability depend on the severity of life stressors together with enduring personal vulnerabilities. Our aim in this chapter is to review new and emerging research that examines shifts in romantic relationship processes associated with stress linked to the COVID-19 pandemic as well as personal vulnerabilities. We evaluate the extent to which the findings support the VSA model. We also extend the VSA model to consider how pandemic-related stress and other life stress together with enduring personal vulnerabilities may impact the initiation of romantic relationships among those not in established relationships.

In this chapter, we first provide an overview of the application of the VSA model to understanding romantic relationship processes over the course of the COVID-19 pandemic. Second, we review emerging research examining stress from the COVID-19 pandemic and relationship outcomes in established relationships, and how those outcomes are shaped by enduring

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personal vulnerabilities. Our review focuses primarily on research that compares relationship outcomes prior to and during the pandemic or shifts in relationship outcomes over the course of the pandemic, which provide methodological advantages over studies examining outcomes at only one point in time. Third, we discuss processes that may mitigate disruptions in established relationships and promote resilience. Fourth, we consider how stress from the COVID-19 pandemic may impact relationship initiation and newly developing relationships. Finally, we discuss several directions for future research that will be critical for understanding the longer-term implications of the pandemic for both ongoing and newly developing romantic relationships.

VULNERABILITY-STRESS-ADAPTATION MODEL

The original VSA model suggested that both external stressors and enduring personal vulnerabilities shape adaptive relationship processes, which in turn, impact both relationship quality and stability. Our framework modifies the VSA model to take into account the unique stressors associated with the COVID-19 pandemic (e.g., concern about the disease, quarantine-related social isolation, financial setbacks), and extends the model to consider how initiating and nurturing new romantic relationships might be impacted by the pandemic. Figure 13.1 illustrates the modified conceptual framework (adapted from the original model in Karney & Bradbury, 1995 and modified models in Pietromonaco & Overall, 2021, 2022b, in press), which suggests that the COVID-19 pandemic will give rise to multiple external stressors (Path A). These stressors can impact both relationship initiation attempts (a new component in the current framework) as well as adaptive dyadic relationship processes, which in turn, can amplify the effect of external stressors (Path B). Furthermore, difficulties with relationship initiation also can interfere with the development of adaptive relationship processes (Path C). When adaptive dyadic relationship processes are impaired, relationship quality and stability are threatened (Paths F and G). In addition, enduring personal vulnerabilities (e.g., attachment insecurity, emotional and physical health), as well as strengths (Pietromonaco & Overall, 2022a), can shape relationship initiation and adaptive dyadic relationship processes and amplify (or reduce) the impact of external stressors (Paths D and E).

EXTERNAL STRESS, RELATIONSHIP PROCESSES IN ESTABLISHED RELATIONSHIPS, AND RELATIONSHIP QUALITY (PATHS A, B, C, F, G)

A large body of research reveals that external stress in general (e.g., economic strain, job loss) is associated with less adaptive relationship processes, such as being hostile, critical or unsupportive, along with declines in

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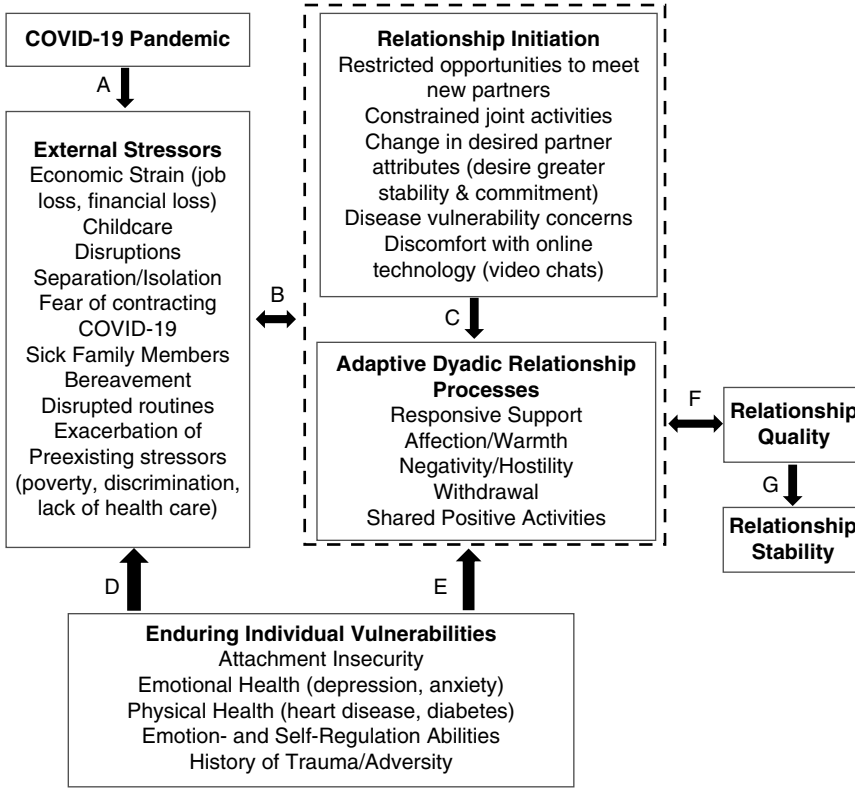


FIGURE 13.1 Potential impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on relationship processes and outcomes. The framework (Adapted from Karney & Bradbury, 1995 and Pietromonaco & Overall, 2021) suggests that the COVID-19 pandemic will create a variety of external stressors that may shape both relationship initiation and adaptive dyadic relationship processes, which can intensify the adverse impact of external stressors, lower relationship quality, and threaten relationship stability. The impact of pandemic-related stressors can be exacerbated by preexisting stressors (e.g., low income or experiencing discrimination). Couples in which one or both members have enduring vulnerabilities (e.g., attachment insecurity, depression) will be more likely to experience greater negative and fewer positive interactions, and the impact of external stressors may be heightened. The figure was adapted and modified from "Applying relationship science to evaluate how the COVID-19 pandemic may impact couples' relationships" by P. R. Pietromonaco and N. C. Overall, 2021, *American Psychologist*, *76*(3), 440 (https://doi.org/10.1037/amp0000714), Copyright 2021 by the American Psychological Association.

relationship satisfaction over time (Neff & Karney, 2009, 2017; Nguyen et al., 2020; Pietromonaco & Overall, 2021; Williamson et al., 2013). Although living with a close other (e.g., romantic partner) is associated with greater well-being and less distress both before and during the first 6 months of the COVID-19

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pandemic (Sisson et al., 2021), even those living with romantic partners must cope with multiple stressors arising from the COVID-19 pandemic, including disruptions in social life, finances, and work life, social distancing, the need to balance work demands in the face of no child care, and the frustration associated with loss of control and routines across many domains. This stress occurs in a context in which, compared to before the pandemic, people assign greater importance to the family but also expect greater relational conflict during the pandemic (Funder et al., 2021). The continuing stress across multiple domains will tax many individuals' cognitive and emotional resources, and this depletion is likely to impair their ability to effectively connect with new romantic partners and to respond constructively in their relationship interactions when problems arise (Buck & Neff, 2012; Neff & Karney, 2017).

Research on relationship functioning before and during the COVID-19 pandemic shows adverse effects on established romantic relationships, including declines in relationship satisfaction (Haydon & Salvatore, 2022; Pauly et al., 2022; Schmid et al., 2020), and decreased relationship functioning and family functioning among couple members who experienced greater stress (e.g., financial status, work, living conditions) during the first mandatory COVID-19 lockdown in New Zealand during March 28–April 28, 2020 (Overall, Chang, et al., 2022). One of the few studies of individuals ($N = 411$ individuals) in same-sex relationships during the pandemic revealed a similar pattern (Li & Samp, 2021): Individuals who perceived greater threat from COVID-19 or who reported a great negative impact of the pandemic on their daily life (e.g., on finances, resources, health care access, social activities) expressed greater complaint avoidance (i.e., avoiding letting their partner know when they had a problem), lower relationship satisfaction, and reported being more likely to end the relationship. Furthermore, the association between experiencing a more negative impact of the pandemic on daily life (assessed across a variety of domains including finances, resources, health care, and social activities) and lower relationship satisfaction was more pronounced for persons of color (vs. non-Hispanic White individuals) or individuals with a high (vs. low) level of internalized homophobia. Although there is also evidence that relationship satisfaction prior to the pandemic predicted greater stress during the pandemic (Pauly et al., 2022), these studies, taken together, align with the theoretical framework presented in Figure 13.1: More adverse effects of the pandemic appear to be associated with poorer relationship outcomes among individuals in mixed-gender and same-gender relationships.

Some evidence also suggests that interpersonal violence victimization increased during the pandemic. Individuals in romantic relationships (the majority were married) who experienced greater stress related to the COVID-19 pandemic also reported greater interpersonal violence victimization during the pandemic (Gresham et al., 2021). Similarly, individuals reported engaging more frequently in acts of interpersonal aggression during shelter-in-place

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COVID-19 restrictions compared to their retrospective reports of interpersonal aggression during the six months prior to those restrictions (Parrott et al., 2022). Not all evidence, however, points to an increase in interpersonal aggression. A study using police reports of domestic violence incidents (vs. the self-reports of behavior used in most studies) in New Orleans, Louisiana did not find an increase in domestic violence from the year before the pandemic to the initial shelter-in-place order (March 16–May 15, 2020), or during the first reopening (May 16–June 12, 2020); however, reports did increase during the second reopening (June 13–September 29, 2020), especially in areas where domestic violence incidents were typically higher (Shariati & Guerette, 2022). Moreover, examining other types of psychological aggression, parents experiencing greater stress during the first mandatory lockdown in New Zealand reported increased verbal aggression toward their partner, taking into account their level of verbal aggression prior to the lockdown (Overall, Chang, Cross, et al., 2021).

Parents may be especially taxed by the pandemic because they often are trying to manage childcare and online schooling while fulfilling job responsibilities from home, being isolated from important others and support networks, as well as dealing with losses (e.g., economic, health, routine, space, time). This idea is supported by a study of Australian parents that found that, compared to data from parents in cohorts prior to the pandemic, parents reporting on their mental health during the pandemic (April 2020) showed an increase in depression, anxiety, and stress as well as in the use of alcohol. Parents also reported greater strain in their relationship with their partner, and experienced more irritability with their children and less expression of positive feelings in the family (Westrupp et al., 2021). Similarly, a Canadian study using longitudinal data from over 1,000 women that included three waves of data collection before the pandemic (collected from April 2012–October 2019) and one wave during the pandemic (May 20–July 15, 2020) found that mothers showed increases in both depression and anxiety during the pandemic compared to each of the three pre-pandemic timepoints (Racine et al., 2021). Parents' declines in emotional well-being during the early pandemic months may partly reflect the difficulties couples face as they attempt to negotiate parenting and balance work and family roles amid the constraints of the pandemic.

Additional research illustrates that couples experienced difficulties with both parenting and relationship quality. In a study examining parental stress prior to the COVID-19 pandemic and during the first lockdown (April 2020) in the Netherlands, increased parenting stress during the pandemic was associated with increases in coercive parenting and declines in constructive coparenting (Lucassen et al., 2021). Similarly, in a study assessing parents prior to a pandemic lockdown and during a mandatory lockdown (March 26–April 28, 2020) in New Zealand, difficulty with sharing the increased housework and

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parenting as a result of the pandemic was associated with greater relationship problems and dissatisfaction (Waddell et al., 2021). These results early in the pandemic contrast with a recent review of cross-sectional and longitudinal evidence suggesting that the declines observed in emotional health early in the pandemic may have returned to baseline by the middle of 2020 (Aknin et al., 2021). However, this analysis of *average* declines did not evaluate whether the effects were stronger for some individuals and families and buffered for others. Aknin et al. (2021) point out that several studies (conducted in the first half of the 2020 after the onset of the pandemic) found that individuals who spent more time taking care of children or managing their homeschooling during the pandemic experienced lower well-being and greater distress (Bu et al., 2021; Giurge et al., 2021; Lades et al., 2020), and variables such as these need to be considered as potential moderators of emotional health trajectories over the course of the pandemic.

This point reinforces the importance of examining both emotional health and relationship outcomes as parents and families endure stress as the pandemic progresses. To illustrate, in the New Zealand study described above, parents who were more distressed during a lockdown (March–April, 2020) reported greater harsh parenting (e.g., yelling or shouting at their child) controlling for both pre-pandemic distress and parenting, but only when they also perceived less support from their partner (McRae et al., 2021). Parents who were more distressed during lockdown also showed lower warm/responsive parenting, but only if they reported a lower level of cooperative parenting. Moreover, additional assessments on these families in another lockdown in the second year of the pandemic (August–September 2021) illustrated that parents showed declines in psychological (greater depressive symptoms, lower well-being) and physical health and in couple (reduced commitment and greater problem severity) and family functioning (reduced family cohesion; family chaos) across the first 1.5 years of the pandemic (Overall, Low, et al., 2022).

Yet, although these studies generally reveal adverse effects of the pandemic on relationships, growing evidence suggests that how the pandemic impacts relationships will vary widely rather than have a uniform effect on all couples' relationships. In line with this idea, data collected in May 2020 from a sample of over 3,000 individuals in Australia indicated that, among those with a living with a partner, 30.7 percent reported that their relationship had improved during the pandemic, and 15.7 percent reported that their relationship had become worse (Biddle et al., 2020; for similar findings, see Vowels et al., 2021). Variation across couples also is evident from findings in a study of couples (117 mixed-gender couples) that showed an increase in relationship instability (e.g., the extent to which individuals thought about breaking up with their partner) from early in the pandemic (Wave 1 during May 2020) to six months later but only when individuals also perceived greater general stress in their lives at Wave 1 (Ogan et al., 2021). (This association was not found when

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individuals perceived more economic pressure or expressed greater concerns about the pandemic at Wave 1.)

Further evidence for variability comes from data on divorce rates. Counter to predictions that divorce rates would surge as a result of the pandemic, the best evidence so far indicates that divorce rates have declined. Specifically, in twenty US states with available data, divorce rates in eighteen states were actually lower than expected in 2020 compared to pre-pandemic change from 2018 to 2019 (Westrick-Payne et al., 2022). On the one hand, this evidence may suggest that many couples were more resilient than expected during the pandemic and perhaps benefitted from strengths such as entering the pandemic with fewer vulnerabilities, or by engaging in relationship-enhancing behaviors such as spending more quality time together. On the other hand, it is also possible that economic and situational constraints prevented some couples from filing for divorce. Moreover, although the joint challenge of the pandemic enhanced stability for many couples who were functioning well, it may also have increased the vulnerability of a smaller proportion of couples who entered the pandemic with more difficulties and less social reserves. Additional data over a longer period of time are needed to fully evaluate the impact of the pandemic on the divorce rate as well as on relationship breakup in non-marital romantic relationships.

Moreover, for some couples, adaptive relationship processes may help to buffer the effects of pandemic stress on relationship quality. For example, evidence from an Australian longitudinal study of 502 parents indicates that those who experienced high levels of support from their partner, family, and friends up to fourteen years *prior to* the pandemic evidenced higher relationship quality during the pandemic (Biden et al., 2021). Other work suggests that the pandemic may also open opportunities to bolster adaptive relationship processes such as by working together as a team to combat external threats (Pietromonaco & Overall, 2021). This idea may explain why a study of 654 individuals in marital, cohabiting, or dating relationships found no differences in relationship satisfaction or partner blaming, and neither variable was associated with pandemic-related stress (Williamson, 2020). Similarly, a three-week diary study of seventy-two Israeli couples (Bar-Kalifa et al., 2021) found that COVID-related stress was not associated with either daily perceived partner responsiveness or daily relationship satisfaction, even though daily reports of COVID-related stress were associated with lower positive mood and higher negative mood.

Recent work also suggests that couples in which one partner is exposed to patients with COVID-19 as part of their job may show greater resilience when individuals believe that their partner holds similar views about the world during the pandemic. A study of frontline health care workers and their partners showed that health care workers and their partners who reported having a shared reality (e.g., that their partner shared their thoughts, feelings, and

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concerns about the world during the pandemic) also reported greater perceived support (health care workers) or support provision (partners), which in turn, was associated with their greater relationship satisfaction (Enestrom & Lydon, 2021). In addition, when the partners of health care workers reported having a shared reality, health care workers perceived greater support, which predicted health care workers' greater relationship satisfaction (Enestrom & Lydon, 2021).

Although all of this evidence suggests some resilience in the face of the pandemic, a host of factors is likely to shape the extent to which couples can remain resilient or collapse under the added strain of the pandemic. Some of the emerging research indicates that couples facing greater stress, such as simultaneously managing the demands of work and care for children in the absence of regular childcare and school (Overall, Chang, Cross, et al., 2021; Overall, Chang, et al., 2022; Schmid et al., 2020), dealing with preexisting stressors such as discrimination (Li & Samp, 2021) or prior experiences of domestic violence (Shariati & Guerette, 2022), are likely to experience greater difficulty during the pandemic.

ENDURING PERSONAL VULNERABILITIES (PATHS D AND E)

As shown in Figure 13.1, a variety of preexisting enduring personal vulnerabilities (e.g., attachment insecurity, depression) can shape how people perceive and respond to pandemic-related stress as well as how they engage in relationship initiation and adaptive dyadic processes. A growing set of studies illustrate the impact of personal vulnerabilities on relationship processes during the pandemic.

Attachment insecurity – either attachment anxiety or avoidance – is a vulnerability that disrupts relationship functioning, especially under stress (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2017; Simpson & Rholes, 2017), and therefore is particularly likely to interfere with relationship dynamics during the pandemic (Pietromonaco & Overall, 2021). Attachment anxiety is associated with experiencing and expressing greater distress, relying excessively on partners for reassurance and support, and worrying that partners will not be responsive enough. These tendencies give rise to a host of problematic relationship behavior, including destructive communication patterns, difficulty resolving problems, and lower relationship quality (Campbell et al., 2005; Jayamaha et al., 2017; Overall et al., 2014; Simpson et al., 1996). Attachment avoidance is associated with the expectation that partners will not be responsive, and as a result, highly avoidant individuals downplay distress, limit closeness and support, and withdraw from conflict and/or express hostility (Beck et al., 2014; Girme et al., 2015; Overall et al., 2013, 2015; Pietromonaco & Barrett, 1997; Tan et al., 2012). These strategies maintain distance at the expense of intimacy,

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problem-solving, effective communication, and relationship quality (Overall et al., 2013, 2015; Tan et al., 2012).

These attachment patterns are especially likely to emerge in the face of stress, such as the stress experienced as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. Providing supportive evidence, research assessing relationship functioning during the pandemic suggests that greater attachment anxiety and avoidance are associated with lower relationship quality (Eder et al., 2021), and greater attachment avoidance is associated with poorer perceived support (Vowels & Carnelley, 2020). Individuals' attachment insecurities and their associated reactions also are likely to impact their partners, who must cope with demands such as needs for excessive reassurance in the case of anxious-attachment, or for distance in the case of avoidance. In general, when people have partners who are anxiously attached, they tend to have more difficulties communicating effectively, problem-solving, and being responsive, and are less satisfied in the relationship (Butzer & Campbell, 2008; Carnelley et al., 1996; Overall et al., 2015; Tan et al., 2012). Similarly, when people have partners who are avoidantly attached, they also are less effective in communication and problem-solving, and are less satisfied in the relationship (Beck et al., 2013; Girme et al., 2015; Overall et al., 2013, 2015). Partners are especially likely to have difficulty managing the needs of insecurely attached individuals in the context of pandemic quarantines in which couple members are confined together and isolated from others in their social network and may be experiencing additional stress themselves.

In recent work, we examined the extent to which attachment insecurity, along with stress experienced as a result of enduring a COVID-19 lockdown, predicted relationship and family functioning during the early months of the pandemic (March–April 2020), controlling for pre-pandemic assessments (Overall, Chang, Pietromonaco, et al., 2021). Individuals higher in attachment anxiety showed an increase in relationship problem severity during the COVID-19 lockdown, but in line with a diathesis-stress perspective (Simpson & Rholes, 2017), this pattern emerged only when they also experienced higher stress related to the lockdown (Overall, Chang, Pietromonaco, et al., 2021). The impact of individuals' attachment anxiety also spilled over to their partners: Partners of anxiously attached individuals showed decreases in relationship satisfaction, relationship commitment, and family cohesion, and an increase in the severity of relationship problems, but only in the context of experiencing higher pandemic-related stress. Attachment avoidance was associated with partners reporting reduced problem-solving effectiveness and less family cohesion, regardless of individuals' level of pandemic-related stress (Overall, Chang, et al., 2022).

Preexisting vulnerabilities also include broader attitudes that are connected to how couples manage power in their relationship. Hostile sexism reflects the belief that men, and not women, should hold social power and authority within the family (Glick & Fiske, 1996). Men who endorse beliefs consistent

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with hostile sexism are more likely to perpetrate aggression in their relationships, particularly when they feel a loss of control or power (Cross et al., 2019), as may happen when couple members lack control over the many constraints associated with the pandemic or experience problems in their family relationships. Consistent with this idea, men who endorsed beliefs consistent with hostile sexism prior to the pandemic also reported engaging in greater aggressive behavior toward their romantic partners and children during a COVID-19 lockdown (April–March 2020), especially when they experienced loss of power in their couple relationship or poorer quality parent-child relationships (Overall, Chang, Cross, et al., 2021).

A variety of other personal vulnerabilities such as poor emotion regulation (Low et al., 2021) and neuroticism (Kroencke et al., 2020) predict greater distress during the pandemic, and thus are candidates for interfering with adaptive relationship processes. Depression and anxiety rose during the early months of the pandemic (Aknin et al., 2021; Twenge & Joiner, 2020), and individuals with vulnerabilities such as insecure-anxious attachment have shown an increase in depression and anxiety from before the COVID-19 outbreak and associated lockdowns (mid-January to March 2020) to during the pandemic (April–May 2020) in the UK (Vowels et al., 2022). Furthermore, emotional distress can heighten perceptions of pandemic-related stress (Westrupp et al., 2021) and undermine adaptive relationship processes (Barry et al., 2019; Gordon et al., 2013; Knobloch-Fedders et al., 2013; Overall & Hammond, 2013; Pietromonaco et al., 2022). Similarly, having a preexisting physical health condition, such as those associated with greater susceptibility to COVID-19 (e.g., cardiovascular disease, diabetes) and more severe illness (Alyammahi et al., 2021), has been linked to greater stress and distress during the pandemic (Westrupp et al., 2021), increasing the likelihood that relationship disruptions will occur. Additional work is needed to examine how these vulnerabilities may shape couples' relationship dynamics and outcomes before and during the pandemic as well as after recovery.

VARIATION ACROSS COUPLES IN ESTABLISHED RELATIONSHIPS: MINIMIZING RELATIONSHIP DISRUPTIONS AND FACILITATING RESILIENCE

We have proposed that couples' trajectories over the course of the pandemic will vary from chronic, prolonged distress to stable resilience (Pietromonaco & Overall, 2021, 2022b), similar to the variation seen in individuals' responses to loss and trauma (Bonanno, 2004). As suggested in Figure 13.1, and consistent with the research reviewed here, couples' trajectories will depend on the severity of pandemic-related and other stressors, enduring personal vulnerabilities, and the extent to which couples are able to engage in adaptive relationship processes.

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Couples who entered the pandemic with relatively low risk (economically stable, few individual vulnerabilities, and generally adaptive relationship strategies) and who experienced minimal personal and social losses as a result of the pandemic may be most likely to show resilience. They may even reap benefits from opportunities during lockdowns to spend more time together in novel and/or relaxing activities that promote relationship growth and intimacy (Gable et al., 2006; Girme et al., 2014). This idea remains to be examined in empirical studies within the context of the pandemic, but one qualitative study of open-ended survey responses ($N = 200$) and semi-structured interview responses ($N = 48$) during the early months of the pandemic (March 30–April 21, 2020) in the UK offers some indirect support. Among participants who indicated that their relationships had improved during the pandemic (28.6 percent), some individuals noted that their relationships benefitted from spending quality time together in meaningful activities (e.g., shared activities such as playing board games), as well as from appreciation of their partner and working together as a team (Vowels et al., 2021). Coping effectively with pandemic-related adversities, such as through teamwork (Vowels et al., 2021), may help couple members feel closer and more supported by each other. This idea is suggested by recent findings showing that individuals experiencing moderate-intensity exposure (e.g., experiencing power outages, disruptions to daily routine) to a disaster (Hurricane Sandy) showed increased perceptions of social support, less distress, and less attachment avoidance relative to two matched comparison cohorts (Mancini et al., 2021).

Most couples, however, will face more significant challenges, and how their relationship trajectories unfold will rest on their ability to practice adaptive relationship processes throughout the crisis (Neff & Broady, 2011; Pietromonaco & Overall, 2021). The literature on relationship processes in general, along with the research reviewed above, suggests potential intervention points for reducing destructive relationship processes and promoting resilience. These include effective communication, avoiding hostility/blame/criticism, banding together as a team to combat problems, and overcome obstacles, and both partners being committed and motivated to improve the situation. When both partners are supportive and cooperate as a team to overcome parenting obstacles during COVID-19 lockdowns, the risk of declines in relationship and family functioning is reduced (McRae et al., 2021). In addition, blaming factors outside of the relationship reduces the association between stress and lower relationship satisfaction (Diamond & Hicks, 2012). In line with this idea, diary data collected for fourteen days early in the pandemic (April and May 2020; eighty-one couples and twenty-nine individuals) and again seven months later (November and December 2020; fifty-five couples and twenty-four individuals) revealed that on days when women experienced greater stress, they were more likely to report more negative relationship behaviors and lower relationship satisfaction, but this association

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was reduced for women (but not men) who assigned greater blame to the pandemic for their stress (Neff et al., 2022). This effect for women was similar across the earlier and later wave of the pandemic.

Being supportive and responsive to each other's needs can foster resilience (Feeney & Collins, 2015; Pietromonaco & Collins, 2017; Reis et al., 2004) and dampen the ill effects of external stress (Pietromonaco et al., 2022). For example, greater perceived partner support predicted better psychological health and couple and parenting outcomes during the early months of the pandemic (Brown et al., 2020; Donato et al., 2021; Holmstrom et al., 2021; McRae et al., 2021; Ogan et al., 2021; Randall et al., 2022). Moreover, although parents on average experienced declines in couple and family functioning across mandatory lockdowns in 2020 and 2021, these declines were not evident for parents who perceived higher levels of support from their partners (Overall, Low, et al., 2022). Similarly, a longitudinal study examining couple members at the beginning of the pandemic (end of March 2020) and three months later found that those who experienced greater stress showed poorer relationship functioning, but this association was reduced among those who at the initial wave perceived their partners to be highly responsive (Balzarini et al., 2022). Support, however, must be calibrated to the partner's needs because too much support can make individuals feel inadequate (Zee & Bolger, 2019), and being highly responsive can be taxing for those under high stress and with some personal vulnerabilities such as avoidant attachment (Smallen et al., 2021). Other routes to resilience include sharing positive experiences (Gable & Reis, 2010; Gable et al., 2004), engaging together in novel, fun activities (Aron et al., 2000; Girme et al., 2014), and expressing gratitude (Algoe et al., 2010), all of which can promote relationship growth and intimacy.

Recommendations from a clinical perspective, informed by experiences conducting virtual couple therapy as well as informal survey observations, complement our suggestions regarding how to mitigate disruptions in established relationships and facilitate resilience (O'Reilly Treter et al., 2021). O'Reilly Treter et al. point to multiple challenges faced by couples, including assessing how to spend quality time together, balancing needs for time alone and together with less personal space, coping with pandemic-related anxiety and stress, and the potential increase in conflict and conflict escalation as well as interpersonal violence that may follow from pandemic-related stress (Bradbury-Jones & Isham, 2020; Gresham et al., 2021). Their recommendations for clinicians performing virtual couple therapy are equally relevant for couples themselves. They recommend that (a) even though couples may be spending more time together, it is vital that they incorporate *quality* time together that will enhance closeness and intimacy and set aside critical decisions and conflict for another time, (b) couples need to negotiate personal and shared time and space, (c) individuals' anxiety and concerns about the pandemic may need to be addressed, and (d) couples should be encouraged to

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use constructive techniques to manage disagreements, including separating problem discussions to assess the issues from problem-solving itself (O'Reilly Treter et al., 2021).

Couples who entered the pandemic with greater challenges (e.g., economic hardship, systemic inequality, and discrimination, more personal vulnerabilities) and who face multiple and more extreme stressors (e.g., loss of income, loss of housing, food insecurity) as a result of the pandemic will likely have the most difficulty maintaining adaptive relationship processes (Pietromonaco & Overall, 2021). These couples are likely to require more than guidance about effective couple communication and support strategies, which cannot solve intractable economic and social problems that are likely to be amplified by the pandemic (Pietromonaco & Overall, 2021). These couples are most likely to benefit from societal and structural support including economic and employment assistance, housing, childcare, and health care (Karney et al., 2018; Lavner et al., 2015) that will provide a foundation for couples to nurture and strengthen their relationships by practicing adaptive relationship strategies.

Pandemic-Related Stress and Relationship Initiation (Paths B, C, E, and F)

The original VSA model did not discuss relationship initiation, and most research on the COVID-19 pandemic and relationships has focused on married or cohabiting couples. However, an important and understudied question concerns how the pandemic may have shaped the way in which people initiate romantic relationships and their expectations and goals for those relationships. A few studies suggest how the development of new relationships may be affected by the pandemic and its associated stress. Similar to couples in established marital or cohabiting relationships, college students in dating relationships reported experiencing more adverse relationship outcomes during the pandemic compared to four months earlier, including greater relational turbulence (e.g., more chaotic, more stressful; Goodboy et al., 2021). The pandemic also was associated with less partner interference and less partner facilitation probably because of fewer opportunities for contact. However, to the extent that partners interfered more, relationship turbulence was greater during the pandemic; and to the extent that partners facilitated more, relationship turbulence was less during the pandemic (Goodboy et al., 2021).

For those seeking to begin a relationship, the pandemic may alter what they desire in a romantic partner. Individuals who evidenced greater concern about COVID-19 assigned increased importance to attributes related to partner stability (e.g., having financial resources, being faithful) and family commitment (parenting qualities, desire for children) after social distancing began compared to before it began (Alexopoulos et al., 2021). The threat associated with the pandemic may shift priorities to more stable committed relationships, but

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also create dynamics that limit the emergence of these connections. For example, research conducted prior to the COVID-19 pandemic found that people with greater perceived vulnerability to disease showed less affiliation (e.g., individuals rate their partner's behavior as more withdrawn and less friendly) and less attraction to potential partners (Sawada et al., 2018). This work may indicate that those who perceive greater vulnerability to COVID-19 may be more withdrawn and less friendly as well as feel less attraction when engaging with potential dating partners.

Other research also indicates that pandemic-related stress may amplify the need to connect with others, but reduce the ability to connect effectively with others, including potential romantic partners. In a ten-day experience sampling study examining anxiety and social processes during the pandemic, participants provided six reports at random times during each day as well as an end of the day report. Anxiety related to the COVID-19 pandemic was associated with daily reports of greater loneliness and wishing for more interactions with others when alone, but also with greater conflict with others and being more distracted when communicating with others (Merolla et al., 2021). Daily interactions in this study captured many different kinds of interpersonal interactions and did not focus specifically on those with potential or existing romantic partners. However, if these findings are applicable to romantic relationships, they suggest the possibility that people who are more distressed about the pandemic may be more likely to feel lonely and long for romantic connections while also being more likely to experience conflict as a relationship develops.

Computer-mediated communication such as video chats became commonplace during the height of the pandemic (Brown & Greenfield, 2021), and represents a typical way of meeting a new romantic partner during the pandemic while social distancing. Although this form of communication may work well for some people, recent work suggests that those who are apprehensive about video chatting also are more likely to worry about their relationships and feel lonelier (Curran & Seiter, 2021). For these individuals, attempting to get to know a new partner online may trigger feelings of loneliness or disconnection. Furthermore, communication with potential romantic partners via Tinder may be changing as a result of the pandemic. In a qualitative interview study of twenty-nine individuals, participants reported that they were more likely than prior to the pandemic to directly discuss concerns about health in general and sexual health as well as the possibility of transmitting COVID-19 (Noland, 2021).

The limited research on relationship initiation indicates that the pandemic and associated constraints are linked to greater turbulence in dating relationships, shifts toward desiring partners who are likely to be more stable and family-oriented, and more use of technology to meet new partners (vs. meeting them in person). Furthermore, those who are more anxious about

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COVID-19 may engage in less adaptive relationship behaviors that create greater conflict, which may impact how adaptive relationship processes evolve over the course of the relationship. In addition, some vulnerabilities – such as being anxious about virtual meetings with a partner – may undermine interactions with potential partners and lead individuals to feel more disconnected and lonelier. Our review primarily reveals that we still have much to learn about how the pandemic is shaping relationship initiation and newly developing relationships.

DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

The current perspective highlights the importance of taking into account multiple features of individuals' and couples' situations in evaluating the potential impact of the pandemic on relationship functioning, including the amount and severity of pandemic-related stress, enduring personal vulnerabilities, and adaptive relationship processes both before and during the pandemic. Most of the research has taken place in the early months of the pandemic and associated lockdowns, and further work is needed to understand how the pandemic may shape relationships and relationship processes throughout the remainder of the pandemic as well as afterward. Will some patterns persist even after the pandemic ends? Will couples who experienced declines during the pandemic recover as the strains of the pandemic lessen?

We have focused primarily on studies that examined relationship outcomes both before and during the pandemic. The importance of this comparison is illustrated by recent work examining age-related differences in emotional experience. Older adults typically experience more positive emotion (Carstensen et al., 2011), and older couples (compared to younger couples) typically are more affectionate and show less negativity during conflict (Carstensen et al., 1995). This greater emotional well-being among older adults also has been found in studies examining emotion across different ages during the COVID-19 pandemic (Carstensen et al., 2020; Sun & Sauter, 2021). However, in one study examining *within-person* age-related differences in emotion from before to during the COVID-19 pandemic, the age advantage for experiencing less negative emotion was reduced from before to during the pandemic (Sun & Sauter, 2021), possibly because the context of the pandemic makes it harder for older adults to regulate negative emotion by avoiding stressful situations. This example highlights the importance of examining, when possible, how individuals and couples were functioning prior to the pandemic and how that functioning may change over the course of the pandemic and during recovery.

In addition, it will be important to examine how the pandemic shapes relationship functioning throughout the pandemic and during recovery. Some work suggests that, in the face of a natural disaster (Hurricane Harvey),

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married couples (231 couples at the initial wave), on average, showed an increase in marital satisfaction from before to after the disaster, but that this increase returned to pre-disaster levels as recovery ensued (Williamson et al., 2021). Indeed, although we have outlined many studies that have shown that couples members' relationship satisfaction declined during the pandemic, compared to prior to the pandemic, others studies have found no differences (Williamson, 2020). In addition to differences in stress and enduring vulnerabilities determining relative levels of risk versus resilience, most of the available evidence involves examining changes in relationships within the early stages of the pandemic. Risk of declines in relationship functioning may not be fully evident early in the pandemic as most couple are able to meet the challenge of a novel external threat, but they may more clearly emerge as couples endure pandemic-related difficulties across time. Providing supporting evidence for this idea, the first examination of changes in couple and family functioning over the first 1.5 years of the pandemic found that the pandemic had been accompanied by average declines in relationship functioning, such as greater relationship problems and poorer family cohesion (Overall, Low, et al., 2022). These findings underscore the importance of examining relationship processes over the course of the pandemic, including tracking relationship functioning as well as breakup and divorce rates after the recovery period.

Our review revealed that the majority of studies examining the impact of the pandemic on relationships have focused on established couples, and that there is a major gap in understanding the extent to which the pandemic has impacted relationship initiation, including what people value in a long-term partner. How will the experience of the pandemic impact the development of new romantic relationships? During the pandemic, the use of online dating apps (e.g., Tinder, OKCupid, Bumble) rose sharply (Gibson, 2021), and this trend may continue even after the pandemic comes to an end (Wiederhold, 2021). Furthermore, the COVID-19 pandemic has amplified individuals' perceptions of health risks such that any sexual encounter may seem risky (Bowling et al., 2021), and therefore interfere with the development of both emotional and sexual intimacy in new relationships. Important research directions will be to understand whether pandemic-related shifts such as this one will change how people get to know and select partners, how they establish and negotiate intimacy, how they balance the development of intimacy with concerns about health risks and contagion (Gibson, 2021), and whether and how such shifts may influence longer-term relationship outcomes.

The conceptual framework in Figure 13.1 points to the importance of life context during the pandemic and this context is not independent from pre-existing contextual stressors such as economic adversity and discrimination. Recent work examining same-gender couples indicates that adverse effects

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of the pandemic on relationship satisfaction are amplified for individuals from racial/ethnic groups likely to experience discrimination as well as among those with greater internalized homophobia (Li & Samp, 2021). There is a pressing need for research on the connection between pandemic-related stress and relationship processes that includes diverse samples that vary along a range of dimensions, including in race/ethnicity, sexual orientation, age, socioeconomic status, country, and culture. The COVID-19 pandemic has amplified inequality worldwide, including exacerbating the effects of poverty, health conditions and mortality, and violence against women (Sidik, 2022), pointing to the importance of examining relationship processes and outcomes across contexts that are not well-represented in the current literature. Doing so will advance an understanding of how the COVID-19 crisis may create different trajectories for couples who enter the pandemic with different contexts, personal vulnerabilities, and relationship strengths and weaknesses.

A key insight is that the pandemic has affected not only couples' relationships but spills over to the family (Browne et al., 2021; McRae et al., 2021; Overall, Chang, et al., 2022; Prime et al., 2020). Spillover can occur from the couples' relationship to other family members (e.g., children) but stress manifested in children or other family members also can reciprocally spill over to the couple (Overall, Pietromonaco, et al., 2022). Researchers can capitalize on datasets including assessments before, during, and after the pandemic to better understand how stress generated by the pandemic may reverberate through the family, affecting the interplay among couples' relationships, parenting, and children's behavior.

CONCLUSIONS

The COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in myriad challenges for established relationships as well as initiating and developing new relationships. Consistent with the VSA model, research examining the effects of the pandemic indicate that the quality of relationship functioning will depend on individuals' and couples' life contexts, enduring personal vulnerabilities, and the extent to which they already engaged in adaptive relationship processes prior to the pandemic. As a result, relationship trajectories across the pandemic and into pandemic recovery will vary considerably depending on the conditions that people were experiencing at the start of the pandemic. Research within the context of the pandemic offers the opportunity for strong tests of the value of relationship science theories for understanding relationship risk and resilience during real-world crises. Relationship science theories also highlight important further research directions to fully understand how social relationships have been altered by the pandemic along with the ramifications for health and well-being.

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