

What a weird world we're living in right now. A little over a week ago, life as we knew it sputtered to a stop as the phrases "social distancing" and "self-quarantine" suddenly became shockingly relevant. Our kiddos are home from school indefinitely. Plans - all of them - have been cancelled for the foreseeable future. World leaders can't seem to agree on one right way to combat this silent, invisible enemy. Our social media feeds are flooded with information, articles, passive aggressive opinions, dismissive memes, terrifying firsthand accounts, updated news releases. Work has most likely been restricted to taking place behind a screen as you scramble to construct a makeshift home office, preferably one with a door and a lock #becausekids. You've had a week already to experience a life shrunk incredibly small, a life with reduced options, a life with your own habits, tendencies, and vulnerabilities illuminated against the backdrop of global uncertainty and crippling dread.

Somewhere in the midst of all this, you've got one more thing to worry about: **your marriage**. You've probably already seen the tweets of people joking (or maybe not?) about their marriage not being able to withstand a shelter-in-place order with no deadline. For some, it means a complete disruption of their natural rhythms, while others haven't had to change much. Most likely you've noticed in the past week how your relationship with your spouse is bearing extra weight, and how it's so much easier to bristle at annoyances, snap with frustration, or just simply ignore each other when your daily life is under pressure and you have nowhere to go to blow off steam.

One of the first things to remember is that most of us are still in shock from our sudden change in circumstances and perspective, and our brains and bodies are operating out of survival mode. Chances are, you are processing varying degrees of grief, anger, fear, and confusion. When we feel threatened, we shift out of the logical, reasoning prefrontal cortex of the brain into the fight, flight, or freeze responses. That's why we may "know" what is or isn't a

good way to communicate with our loved ones, yet when it's Day 11 of being cooped up together and tension is at an all-time high, you find yourself saying hurtful things or regressing into dysfunctional behavior (*Rom. 7:14-25*). While it's not okay, it's important to realize that it's natural.* You and your spouse are both humans, and it isn't easy for any of us to learn how to adapt to new and frightening circumstances. We often become the worst versions of ourselves when we're afraid and seemingly stripped of control.

Vulnerable Communication & Taking Emotional Inventories

You might be surprised by how effective it is if, next time you feel irrationally angry or accusatory, you take just enough time for a deep breath and a quick emotional inventory to ask yourself, "am I really upset about (whatever thing) or am I simply scared?" There's a big difference between an angry Me vs. You confrontation and a vulnerable Us vs. The Problem conversation. (We'll talk more about that in a minute.) While fear is no small thing to experience, it's not your spouse's fault, nor is it his/her responsibility to fix. Fearful times offer an opportunity to be **with** each other, "in sickness and in health," to find more strength in standing (or kneeling) together than you would on your own (*Eccl. 4:9-12*). Choose one night this week to sit with each other (maybe after bedtime, if you have kiddos) and patiently listen to each other take turns listing all the things you're concerned about in this season. The only rules are, 1. No interrupting, 2. No minimizing, shaming, or "solving," 3. Give yourselves a time limit of 30 minutes each, max, and 4. End your time in prayer for each other. This isn't about spiraling into a pity party or a black hole of despair - it's about making your marriage a safe space to process this unprecedented time in history, and bringing each other before God's throne to ask Him to fix and heal what humans can't (*Heb. 4:16*). He alone is our fortress, our place of refuge and safety "though the earth should change, and though the mountains slip into the heart of the sea..." (*Psa. 46:2*).

Boundaries & Self-Responsibility

As important as it is to communicate your needs and vulnerabilities clearly and to graciously listen when your spouse does the same, it is just as important to realize when you need some time and space apart. Even the closest, most intimate marriages recognize that a relationship is made up of two individuals, and each person is responsible for his or her own mental health, spiritual discipline, and daily tasks (*Phil. 2:12-13*). Sometimes in times of crisis, we feel powerless to carry our own stress and worry and so we dump it onto the nearest available person and compel them to bear the load for us; most times, that person is our spouse. The thing is, your spouse is not your Savior. Your spouse is your helper and teammate and friend, but not your own personal superhero. You both need to commit, now more than ever, to pursuing healthy habits that keep you centered in Christ and available to each other.

Make use of a daily family calendar, on which you can clearly block off times for work, exercise, and individual downtime. This will be tricky since you are sharing the same limited house space, but try to find chunks of time that work for each of you. If there is only one home office, take turns using it. If you have small children who require vigilant supervision, trade off who is working and who is with the kids. Get up early, if that's what it takes, to have some quiet time with your Bible and a cup of coffee. Go on a run around your neighborhood and listen to your favorite podcast or audiobook - or just soak up the silence, if the time at home has you on sensory overload. Sit on your back porch and practice meditative prayer. (If you need some guidance in this area, contact Andy Frizzell and he'll set you up with all the resources you'll need!) Schedule a Zoom appointment with your therapist. Write in a daily journal. Keep a gratitude list. Paint. Sing. Play your piano. Lift weights in your garage. Do what you need to do to defuse your stress and fill yourself with the Spirit. If you are constantly making withdrawals on every reserve your spouse has to give, you will both end up exhausted, resentful, and unsatisfied; but fortunately, we have an ever-present Source who never runs dry (*John 7:37-39*).

Fun, Laughs, & Adventure

While experts are recommending sticking to a schedule and finding new rhythms in the midst of the quarantine, it's also important to find times together to have fun and excavate some joy out from under all the worry. We often feel like it's heartless to smile or laugh when devastating tragedy is unfolding, but it's actually a demonstration of courage. "The joy of the Lord is your strength," says Nehemiah 8:10, even on a day (or month) of trouble and sadness. We reflect our trust in God when we take even a few minutes to let Him handle the world so that we can focus on all that is good and right and lovely (*James 1:17*). I'm not recommending sticking your head in the sand and turning a blind eye to the suffering of others. But joy and mourning can be held in both hands; they don't have to be mutually exclusive.

Find times throughout your week to do something together that you both enjoy, something that shifts your gaze from COVID-19 and onto beautiful things. Maybe you text each other memes that make you laugh. Bryan and I have been enjoying watching the Tonight Show with Jimmy Fallon: At Home edition episodes on YouTube, featuring his wife and kids. Take a hike together. Try out a new puzzle or recipe. Drive around town while listening to a curated playlist. Play hide and seek with your kids. Find a sitcom or reality show that you both like and watch an episode together before bed. Dance in your kitchen. Look up boredom busters or stay-at-home date ideas on Pinterest. Make eye contact and smile. Challenge each other to a card game or video game. Facetime or Zoom with friends. Make exciting plans for how you will celebrate together when the quarantine is lifted. Don't lose sight of hope.

Partnership & Fighting Back

At the end of the day, crises like these leave most of us feeling helpless, longing to make a difference even in some small way. Tragedies are known for being a testing ground, a place

where people either unite against a common enemy, or they see the enemy in each other. Marriage, at its very best, is a partnership. It's a joining together of resources, a combining of two different viewpoints, to make a greater impact than either individual could on their own. While there's so much we cannot do while we're sheltering-in-place, we can still do something. Don't discount your ability to shine your light in the darkness, even if it seems insignificant. Decide together, as a couple, what you can do with the resources you have. Use all that pent-up energy and point it in a direction that will make a difference. Can you donate to a local food bank? Can you make a tutorial video of a talent or skill you have? Can you write notes together to leave on your neighbor's porch? Can you pray for your church family at a certain time every day? (Several at Campbell Street have committed to praying for the COVID-19 crisis at 9am, 3pm, and 8pm every day.) Have a brainstorm session together, and commit to finding at least three ways to reach out and help others. I think you'll find that it helps your marriage, too.

I think we would all agree that these are trying times. As always, satan will use any opportunity to break up families and come between couples, and I think the current situation is no different. Recent research out of Xi'an, China this past week has shown a sharp increase in divorce filings as the quarantine is slowly being lifted. It's no understatement to say that our marriages are under attack. But with every challenge comes the opportunity to grow and mature. James 1:2-4 reminds us that even the hardest seasons can refine us and perfect us, if we are willing to invite the Spirit in. Research from other sudden tragedies, such as Hurricane Hugo in 2002, found a spike in divorce filings but also an increase in marriage license applications and birth rates. While we may not get to choose whether or not COVID-19 affects our health, we do get to choose whether or not it will get the best of our relationships. Hold tight to Galatians 6:9, a verse that has been our lifeline in many difficult seasons. *"So let's not get tired of doing what is good. At just the right time we will reap a harvest of blessing if we don't give up."*

Please reach out to us, any of our ministry staff or our shepherds if you are struggling right now. We are praying for you and want to help in any way we can. In Christ,

Bethany & Bryan Welborn

**We're talking here about a "normal" range of frustration, disagreement, and everyday conflict that all families encounter. If you are experiencing physical, emotional, or sexual abuse from a loved one during this time of federally-mandated quarantine, PLEASE contact any member of our ministry staff or shepherds at Campbell Street. We will do our best to help you find a solution that is safe for you and your family. You are not alone.*

Helpful Resources:

<https://www.vox.com/culture/2020/3/20/21187296/coronavirus-quarantine-husband-wife-roommate-family-couples-therapy-cope>

<https://relevantmagazine.com/current/covid-19-and-our-opportunity/>

<https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-03-21/how-to-stay-married-through-coronavirus/12073778>

<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/16/opinion/coronavirus-relationships.html>

<https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCanZUyabsUrhSF8wRz6ADtQ>

<https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLykgf464sU98lwxyHHBqnqx-roxtOMLjt>

<https://www.pinterest.com/pinterest/stay-safe-stay-inspired/>