



AUTHENTIC INTIMACY

MARRIAGE SURVIVAL GUIDE



DR JULI SLATTERY

That's too close!

Life in 2020 is filled with concerns about health, jobs, and the economy. Yet, your most worrisome problem right now might not be your 401k, but your marriage.

God created marriage to be the ultimate experience of human unity, two people becoming one. But surely there is a limit to how close two human beings should exist, right? With quarantines and “shelter from home” orders, you might have just hit that limit!

Even the closest of couples will experience stress and conflict during such an unprecedented season of anxiety and isolation. Whether it's an argument over dirty dishes in the sink or how to cut back on spending, almost every home likely has experienced some tension.

Here are some practical suggestions to help you weather the storm:

Pray Alone and Together

This may seem like a cliché coming from a Christian ministry, but how often do we stick in prayer as an afterthought? We spend hours talking and planning and then top it off with a nod to God—“Let's pray real quick.” While quick prayers can be effective, the underlying attitude is that the real work of life is done through our effort, and prayer is the spiritual “cherry on top.” In fact, the opposite is true.

Your marriage is a spiritual battleground. No amount of conversation, planning, and conflict management will be more effective than asking God for wisdom, strength, perspective, and divine help. As a spiritual weapon, prayer reminds us of what really matters, convicts us of attitudes that contribute to discord, and unites us as brother and sister in Christ. During this time of unusual pressure, I encourage you to make prayer the “main course” both in your thoughts and in your relationship.

Implement Healthy Structure

One of the challenges of our current situation is the absence of structure. The natural rhythms of work days, household duties, and times for fun have all gotten thrown into a huge barrel of chaos. Where do you take that important work call without interruption? What time should you go to bed if there is nothing to wake up for? Who monitors the kids online schooling? Thriving as a couple (and family) may require that you create the healthy structures that have likely been disrupted. Here are three areas where you can implement structure back into your lives.

Establish Routines

The first few days of a vacation can feel like a dream. You don't have to set your alarm, you can eat anytime you want and spend the day based on whatever suits you. After about a week without the normal structure of time, vacation can turn into depression. Science tells us that we generally function better with a set structure of when to go to bed, when to eat, when to exercise, when to work, and when to play.

As a couple, talk through what healthy rhythms of time look like during this season. As much as possible, try to stick to the routines you established before COVID-19 disrupted life. This also includes carving out time to be alone. Proactively managing your time is important to staying productive but is also critical to making sure you have time to talk, relax, and have fun. Maybe instead of a lunch break, you take an intimacy break:)

Establish Space

Right now, we have three of us working from home and two doing classes online (plus a new puppy!). Just a few minutes ago, I was trying to write with two of my sons (age 21 and 17) laying on my office floor playing with the dogs. I didn't want to kick them out because these moments are rare. Yet I have work to get done!

Over the past few days, we've found each other tripping over one another in the kitchen, someone loudly watching TV while one of us is hosting a webinar, :)

and all of us trying to find little corners of the house to keep our lives and work organized.

Even if it is just a “corner,” it’s important to talk through what space is used for what purposes. Setting physical boundaries can not only help to eliminate conflict but also gives everyone in your home a new sense of normal in cramped quarters.

Establish Domains

I’m really not a messy person (I promise!) but compared to my husband, I’m a slob. Mike loves organization. When he cleans the kitchen, it sparkles. When he folds laundry, it looks like the work of a machine. This is a great blessing, but can be frustrating when we are in close quarters. He’s not always thrilled when I don’t line up the spoons in the drawer or if he can’t find something buried in the fridge. And I get irritated when he moves my stuff because he has found “a better spot for it.” I’ve had to remind him this week, “The kitchen is my domain!”

Think of our current situation like an inkblot test. Everyone will respond to extra time, boredom, and being quarantined differently. Some will enjoy the quiet while others will use the opportunity to tackle household projects. Perhaps you want to order takeout and your spouse wants to save money by making rice and beans. Neither of you are wrong.

Handling these types of inevitable conflict may require some clear division of labor. For example, you take care of dinner Monday, Wednesday, and Saturday, and your spouse tackles it the other nights. This is particularly important if you have children who are now with you 24/7. Take shifts giving each other permission to be “off duty” to relax or to focus on work projects.

Over the course of your marriage, you have learned to navigate challenges like who does what chores and who organizes what space. All of those “normals” have likely been disrupted. Thriving through COVID-19 will require intentionally settling on a new normal.

Talk About the Worst Case Scenario ... Once

You have probably never heard this advice before. Conventional wisdom tells us to push off our fears and weather a crisis through optimism. As Ecclesiastes says, there is a time for every season under heaven. While we don't want to live in fear, we also must deal with the potential realities of what we and others are facing.

We are driven by our fears when we obsess about them or suppress them. Now is a season to embrace and even anticipate the realities of significant loss.

Peter told the early Christians to "cast your cares upon the Lord because He cares for you." We can't cast our cares until we name them. It is entirely healthy to talk and pray about the what ifs ... and to even plan for potential loss of income or loved ones.

As believers, our worst case scenarios don't need to lead to obsessive worry but can challenge us to put our faith into practice. "I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothes? Look at the birds of the air: They do not sow or reap or gather into barns—and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they?" This is not meant to be glib encouragement but to focus our spiritual sight on the hope that we have a God who has promised to be with us even if the worst happens.

Serve Together

When Mike and I got married, my father spoke briefly during our wedding. He read a verse from I Peter and charged us, "Be a blessing." It's something that I've always remembered. In good times and bad, how can we as a couple be a blessing to others? Serving together invites a unique form of unity. It helps us take our mind off of our challenges when we see others that are in need.

How can you be a blessing during this unique time in our history? I talked with one couple who ordered pizza for their neighborhood just as a way to show them love. Offer to run errands for friends or neighbors that are older or immunocompromised. Put together a virtual party with a group of friends. Support a friend or ministry that is hurting financially during these trying times.

The other day, my youngest son said, “Someday I’ll be telling my kids about living through this time in history.” His comment made me think of the stories my grandparents told me about the country during World War II. The “greatest generation” was forged through hardship that required selflessness and sacrifice. On a miniature scale, what your marriage is currently facing can also forge character and solidarity that you one day tell your children and grandchildren about. It’s the small choices we make every day that will determine whether or not we emerge stronger from the trials we face.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

DR. JULI SLATTERY is a recognized expert in the integration of biblical truth and



sexuality. She is a clinical psychologist, author, and speaker, with over twenty-five years of experience counseling, discipling, and teaching women. Juli holds degrees in psychology from Wheaton College (BA), Biola University (MA), and Florida Institute of Technology (MS and PsyD).

From 2008 to 2012, Juli worked at Focus on the Family where she was a co-host on the Daily Broadcast. In 2012, she co-founded Authentic Intimacy with Linda Dillow. She hosts a weekly podcast (Java with Juli), blogs, speaks, and writes about the intersection of sexuality and the Christian life.

Juli and her husband, Mike, have been married since 1994 and have three sons. Juli is a member of the board of Trustees at Moody Bible Institute. She has contributed to the New York Times, USA Today, Today's Christian Woman, Thriving Family magazine, Focus on the Family, Family Life Today, and many other secular and Christian media outlets.

We have many more resources around this topic at authenticintimacy.com