

# LOVE IN THE TIME OF COVID

Joanne Davila, PhD  
Stony Brook University

Harvard School of Public Health, COVID Forum  
May 20, 2020

1

## CHALLENGES

- Balancing intimacy and autonomy
- Adaptively communicating and supporting one another
- Managing our own feelings

2

## ROMANTIC COMPETENCE

- The capacity for people to function adaptively in their romantic lives
  - All stages of the relationship process
  - Regardless of relationship status
  - Regardless of relationship type
- **Three skills:**
  - Insight
  - Mutuality
  - Emotion regulation

3



## INSIGHT

- *Awareness, understanding and learning*
- With insight, you'll be able to:
  - Know yourself better – who you are, what you need, why you do the things you do...
  - Know the same things about your partner
  - Anticipate what the positive and negative consequences of your actions will be
  - Learn from your mistakes in ways that allow you to make better choices in the future

4



## MUTUALITY

- *Both people have needs and both are important*
- With mutuality, you'll be able to:
  - Communicate your needs in a clear, direct way that optimizes your chances of getting them met
  - Be willing and able to meet your partner's needs
  - Factor both sets of needs into decisions that you make about your relationship

5



## EMOTION REGULATION

- *Regulate your feelings in response to things that happen in your relationship life*
- If you're practicing emotion regulation you'll be able to:
  - Keep your emotions calm when you're upset about things and keep things that happen in your relationship in perspective
  - Tolerate uncomfortable feelings rather than acting impulsively on them and think more clearly about your decisions and actions
  - Maintain self-respect and commitment to your needs even when difficult things happen in your relationship

6

## GREATER ROMANTIC COMPETENCE IS ASSOCIATED WITH...

- Greater security in relationships
- Healthier relationship decision making
- Greater relationship satisfaction
- More adaptive social support in relationships
- The ability to express positive feelings to your partner
- Better conflict resolution
- Fewer symptoms of depression and anxiety

7

## RE WORKSHOP

- Introduction of the skills
  - Description and discussion of how they can help people
- Application of the skills
  - Discussion of how to use them to navigate key issues

8

## RE WORKSHOP: RCT RESULTS

- Compared to the WL, RE participants reported...
  - Greater confidence in their knowledge about what a healthy relationship is and their ability to manage relationships
  - Greater confidence in their knowledge about and ability to cope with relationship problems
  - Reduced beliefs that any relationship can work if you love someone enough or work hard enough
  - Significant increases in perspective taking and adaptive relationship decision making

9

## RE WORKSHOP: QUALITATIVE RESULTS

- 75% of RE participants reported workshop-relevant changes:
  - “This workshop has made me more mindful about myself and my relationship, especially with what my wants and needs are and how to address issues that may arise in the future.” (Insight)
  - “I learned that both people in a relationship have needs that need to be met. I also learned that compromises should take place.” (Mutuality)
  - “I can think about how my reactions and choices affect my partner and will take a calmer, more cooperative approach to our arguments.” (Emotion Regulation)

10

## RE WORKSHOP: QUALITATIVE RESULTS

- 97% of RE participants reported behaviors in line with workshop-relevant content:
  - “I work to understand my feelings about someone better; I think more critically about the decisions I make, like who to talk to, what to say, etc.” (Insight)
  - “Ever since the workshop, I had a talk about my relationship with my boyfriend and I told him that I think we have an unhealthy relationship. Ever since then we talked about what makes our relationship unhealthy and solutions to make the relationship comfortable and engaging. Compared to before, our relationship is so much better and both of our needs and wants get met.” (Mutuality)
  - “I have been able to resolve conflicts between me and my partner in a calm and collected manner.” (Emotion regulation)

11

## NEGOTIATING CHALLENGES

- Insight → Understand
- Mutuality → Communicate
- Emotion regulation → Regulate

12

## NEGOTIATING CHALLENGES

- Insight = Awareness, understanding and learning
- Insight Goal = Identify your needs, wants, values, and style for trying to meet them; identify the same for your partner

13

## NEGOTIATING CHALLENGES

- **Insight steps:**
  - Identify the problem
  - Identify your needs, etc.
  - Identify your partner's needs, etc.
  - Identify the consequences of each person's behavior

14

## NEGOTIATING CHALLENGES

- **Mutuality = Both people have needs and both are important**
- **Mutuality Goal = Develop empathy and come to a workable way for both people to get their needs met**

15

## NEGOTIATING CHALLENGES

- **Mutuality Steps:**
  - Remember that both people in relationships have needs that they deserve to have met
  - Take your partner's perspective
  - Unify with your partner against the problem
  - Communicate your needs clearly, directly, and calmly (use "I" statements, be specific, use soft emotions)
  - Listen to what your partner has to say in response and about his/her needs
  - Engage in mutual problem solving

16



## NEGOTIATING CHALLENGES

- Emotion Regulation = Regulate your feelings in response to things that happen in your relationship life
- Emotion Regulation Goal: Help your emotions and let them help you

17

## NEGOTIATING CHALLENGES

- Emotion Regulation Steps:
  - Observe
  - Reflect
  - Relate
  - Soothe
  - Select
  - Convey

18

## NEGOTIATING CHALLENGES

Use the skills to...

- Understand (Insight)
- Communicate (Mutuality)
- Regulate (Emotion Regulation)



Better navigate relationship challenges

19

## CONCLUSIONS

- You've got to be skillful to navigate relationships
- Use insight, mutuality, and emotion regulation to help you

20

THANK YOU!

- Thanks to...
- The Relationship Development Center
  - Jiaqi Zhou, Ellora Vilkin, Howard Huang, TJ Sullivan, Briana Rosenberg, Thomas Tong
  - Kaycee Lashman
- Stony Brook University

21

QUESTIONS?

22