

Isolation could improve how we think about and navigate sex and relationships

April 14 2020, by Victoria Brooks



Credit: Ava Sol/Unsplash, FAL

The coronavirus pandemic has already profoundly changed many of our lives. And it is certain that the virus will change some things forever. Some industries will fail, others will prosper. We will learn new ways of working and new ways of understanding the impact of capitalism. We will reconsider who the most vulnerable people are in our global society.

Other things may change too—things not so well documented. I study

sex—and I'm sure that this crisis will have some significant effects in terms of the way society sees it. This is because requirements to practice social distancing and isolation have meant that the way we think about sex has been turned upside down.

[A third of the global population](#) is on lockdown and we must stay apart from each other not for ambiguous or contested moral reasons, but to save lives. As such, many ways in which we navigate, understand and talk about sex and relationships is likely to change as a result.

1. Masturbation, sex tech and porn

Some [sex toy companies](#) are reporting that their sales [have surged](#) since the requirement to isolate, with some companies offering isolation [giveaways](#). Access to pornography is on the rise too, with companies capitalising on the opportunity isolation brings to [encourage us to watch more porn](#).

Before the crisis, these industries would hardly have been thought of as essential. Conversation around porn, sex toys and masturbation is conventionally seen as taboo, but an inadvertent consequence of the pandemic is that masturbation is not only being more freely discussed, but might be considered an important part of our wellbeing—even [life saving](#).

So the conversation has begun to shift in interesting ways since isolation was imposed, but also by virtue of the willingness by normally prudish governments and officials to talk explicitly and in a [detailed way about sex](#). The pandemic has seen the NYC Department of Health and Mental Hygiene [stating](#) that "you are your safest sex partner" and [warning](#) against kissing and poorly cleaned sex toys.

2. New understandings

Social distancing means that we have been forced apart, yet [sexual desire](#) and our desire to touch, and be touched, continues. Cohabiting couples might find themselves divided due to advice to be three steps apart even within the same home [if they become ill](#). And single people have inevitably been shut off from opportunities to connect sexually, which has caused a surge in (virtual) [online dating](#).

Expert in sex and public health [Carlos Rodríguez-Díaz](#) has suggested that it is necessary to consider and recognise forms of virtual sexual contact as ways of expressing erotic desire, such as sexting, video calls, and reading erotica. This move away from physical touch as the centre of sex shifts conventional understandings of sex as only physical penetration.

It will be necessary to experiment with ways of not only connecting sexually, but also of appreciating these forms of sex as being meaningful.

3. Non-monogamous relationships

Under these unique conditions, we will be pushed to reconsider enduring questions around fidelity and non-monogamous relationships. Consider a situation where a partner within a long-term cohabiting [relationship](#) has an additional partner whom they do not live with, perhaps it is through an affair, or perhaps the relationship is polyamorous. The impact of isolation may provoke the possibility of break ups of some affairs, through [a new understanding of risk](#) in light of the pandemic.

Covert affairs and polyamorous relationships are already more emotionally complex than monogamous relationships, given the inherent challenge they bring to accepted and [conventional ways of loving](#), as well as their unusual hierarchical structures. Physical presence is important, since it can often be the only way of communicating (particularly in covert affairs), and maintaining intimacy and equality among partners.

Isolation and this global crisis will trigger new conversations based on people's lived experiences of the challenges and possibilities of such relationships.

4. Home as a dangerous space

While people must remain at home to preserve themselves and others, many governments have [recognised](#) that some may find their wellbeing jeopardised if they are isolating while in an abusive relationship. The risks to people in these situations can be physical, but they are also psychological and emotional. Shelters and hotels are being made available but access to [these options will not be easy for all](#), since leaving the home at all will be difficult when under the control of an abusive partner.

Questions about the ethics of remaining in the space of such a relationship are now different. Outsiders might suggest that the person should now stay in the relationship, rather than criticise them for not leaving. COVID-19 [should open up discussions](#), and bring focus back onto what causes harm in these relationships, rather than blaming the actions of the survivor.

5. Thinking about consent

To understand more about consent, it is important to understand more about the impact of touch. COVID-19 has made everyone more conscious of how their body might affect others, while also recognising our capacity for kindness towards one another through [mutual aid groups](#) compiled of volunteers, who in turn also need to be conscious of how they deliver aid with minimal touch.

COVID-19 forces the debate to focus on the impact of our actions on other people and those connected with our partners—parents, family

members, friends. Isolation makes the consequences of breaches of consent visible and clear. The world therefore is presented with a unique opportunity to understand the impact of touch to have unintended consequences and chain reactions.

We are also forced into awareness of our capacity to be kind and put others first: a cornerstone of navigating good sex.

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