

RESEARCH

Changes in marital relationships over the course of the COVID-19 pandemic

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ABSTRACT

Objective: The aim of this study was to document changes in marital relationships over the course of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Background: Research has suggested both positive and negative effects of the pandemic on marital relationships, but few studies have explored changes in relationship quality at different phases of the pandemic.

Method: Online survey data were collected from married individuals ($n = 3,221$, mean age 39.5 years, $SD = 5.61$) living in the United States at three time points during the pandemic: April 2020, December 2020–January 2021, and August–September, 2021. We report the findings on responses to an open-ended question: “Please explain how your relationship has changed over the course of the coronavirus.” Inductive qualitative content analysis was conducted.

Results: Most participants reported some changes in their relationships; positive changes were more prevalent than negative changes across the three time periods.

Discussion: Our findings are consistent with previous literature but also provide new insights into how marriages may have been differentially affected at early versus later stages of the pandemic.

Implications: Clinical implications of the findings are discussed, including specific recommendations for therapists working with couples.

Author note: The data supporting this study’s findings are available on request from the corresponding author.

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KEYWORDS

COVID-19, marriage, pandemic, qualitative, relationships

Mid-adulthood is characterized by the competing demands of work and family, with many balancing careers, marriage, raising children, and caring for aging parents amid financial and other stressors (Infurna et al., 2020). All this occurs against a backdrop of potential changes in their own physical and cognitive health and, for married people, challenges associated with maintaining a satisfying, long-term relationship. The COVID-19 pandemic and the related restrictions significantly influenced all aspects of life in the United States and worldwide, adding further stress and strain to an already demanding stage of life for midlife adults. Health concerns, financial difficulties, relational challenges, and increased family responsibilities created heightened stress and strain for married couples (Neff et al., 2022). Marriages may naturally experience difficulties; however, many traditional marital difficulties were exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic (Barroso & Horowitz, 2021).

Being confined at home with family members or isolating to prevent the spread of COVID-19 intensified symptoms of depression and anxiety and increased relational conflict for many (Luetke et al., 2020). Coronavirus-related conflict was associated with reduced frequency of sexual activity in a sample of 1,010 American adults (Luetke et al., 2020). Marital quality before the pandemic could provide a buffer against pandemic stressors or lead to increased vulnerabilities (Pietromonaco & Overall, 2021). For example, relationship quality was shown to be protective of mental health during the pandemic (Pieh et al., 2020). Additionally, marital length and spouses' age have been related to a person's reported quality of life under COVID-19 (Purba et al., 2021).

The vulnerability–stress–adaptation (VSA) model (Karney & Bradbury, 1995) posits that stressful events, adaptive processes (e.g., communication, support), and enduring vulnerabilities (e.g., individual characteristics and experiences) govern the outcomes of relationships. The VSA model has been used to explain why some relationships remain stable through significant life events while the quality and stability of others may temporarily falter or permanently diminish. Specifically, the VSA model has been adopted to predict and explain relationship outcomes during crises or disasters such as the COVID-19 pandemic (Karantzas et al., 2022, 2024; Pietromonaco & Overall, 2022). In one study of Australian parents, individuals with low vulnerabilities and high adaptations had the best relationship outcomes throughout changes associated with the COVID-19 lockdowns (Karantzas et al., 2024). Indeed, research has suggested both positive and negative pandemic-related effects on marital relationships. Some studies have reported positive changes, including heightened appreciation for partners and improved communication (Holmberg et al., 2022; Williamson, 2020), improved relationship quality (Jace & Makridis, 2021), and lower divorce rates (Manning & Payne, 2021). However, other research suggested that pandemic-related stress increased relationship difficulties and decreased relationship satisfaction (Balzarini et al., 2023; Luetke et al., 2020). Individual and couple-specific vulnerabilities and adaptive processes may explain some of these differences.

Most studies to date have focused on relationship changes reported in the early phase of the pandemic. For example, one study determined that in the first wave of the pandemic (mid-April to late May 2020), positive effects outweighed negative ones among partnered American adults (Holmberg et al., 2022). Almost all participants (88%) mentioned at least one positive change, including increased appreciation for time together, improved communication, and the opportunity to work on problematic aspects of their relationship. More than one third (39%) indicated that there had been no negative effects. In a study of married adults from the United Kingdom in the first 5 weeks of lockdown, participants reported positive, negative, and mixed relational changes (Vowels et al., 2021). For some, communication improved relationship quality by allowing for increased “check-ins” and demonstrations of patience and understanding. For others,

communication negatively impacted their relationship because of stresses related to increased time and space together, culminating in frustration, impatience, and hostility (Vowels et al., 2021).

However, limited research to date has explored perceived relational changes both early and later in the pandemic. This research is particularly important to conduct among midlife adults, given the already significant demands associated with this life stage and the impact reduced relationship quality can have on individuals and their families. Thus, the purpose of this study was to perform a qualitative investigation of married adults' perceptions of the impact of the pandemic on their relationships using data collected at three time points during the pandemic. By collecting data at multiple time points, we hoped to better understand the potential impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on marital relationships at different stages of the pandemic. Analyses were guided by two research questions:

1. Did participants perceive a change in their relationships over the course of the COVID-19 pandemic, and if so, what was the nature of the changes?
2. Were pandemic relationship changes described differently at early, mid-, and later pandemic time points?

METHODS

Participants

Eligibility requirements were (a) residents of the United States, (b) married, and (c) aged 30 to 50 years. We did not recruit couples but rather individuals who met our eligibility criteria, including being married. The Qualtrics analytics panel service was used to recruit participants. Characteristics of the sample were predetermined, and quota sampling ensured that demographics, including gender, region, education level, and race, were diverse (see Table 1).

We collected data at three time points from separate groups of participants to study how marriages changed during various phases of the COVID-19 pandemic. Given Qualtrics panels were used for recruitment, we were not able to recontact the same participants across survey administrations. We strategically initiated each survey to coincide with changes in the pandemic. At T1 (mid- to late April 2020, after nearly 100,000 people had reportedly died from COVID-19; Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], n.d.), the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, the U.S. government issued a mask mandate and "stay-at-home" order ($n = 1,146$). At T2 (December 2020–January 2021, nearly 500,000 people had died from COVID-19; CDC, n.d.), roughly 9 months into the pandemic and "stay-at-home" orders, participants had lived with COVID-19 and restrictions for almost a year ($n = 1,048$). At T3 (August–September 2021, nearly 5 million deaths had occurred due to COVID-19; CDC, 2024), COVID-19 vaccines were publicly available ($n = 1,027$).

The total analytic sample included 3,221 adults who were currently married, aged 30 to 50 years, living in the United States.

Measures

Using multiple-choice and open-ended questions developed for this study, the survey assessed the changes in marital relationships during the COVID-19 pandemic and the precautions to slow its spread on marriage and family, sexual health and behavior, and well-being and concerns about COVID-19. This article focuses on qualitative analyses of responses at T1, T2, and T3 to the question "Please explain how your relationship has changed over the course of the coronavirus." Findings from other analyses of this set of surveys will be reported elsewhere.

Procedure

Eligible participants identified by Qualtrics panels were provided with a link to the survey hosted on Qualtrics with the study information sheet outlining the study purpose, potential risks and benefits, confidentiality, and researchers' contact information should any concerns arise. Potential participants were invited to complete the 20-minute online anonymous survey about the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on participants' marital relationships, family, and sexual behaviors. Responses were typed into an open text box without a limit on characters or word count.

Qualtrics, not the research team, determined participants' compensation and included options such as frequent flyer miles and gift cards agreed on by participants before survey completion. All collected data were stored in a secure database accessible only to the study team. The Indiana University Institutional Review Board reviewed and approved all measures and protocols.

Data analysis

Responses were analyzed thematically using inductive qualitative content analysis, which involves collecting and analyzing data without preconceived categories or theories. The goal was to identify emerging patterns, themes, and concepts (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008). An initial codebook was developed inductively by iteratively reviewing and open-coding 200 to 300 responses from each time point. We inductively developed codes at two levels through an iterative process: (a) codes identifying descriptive changes across various aspects of marital relationships (e.g., physical intimacy, finances, time spent together, gratitude) and (b) codes identifying categories of the descriptive changes (e.g., enhanced relationship, inhibited relationship) over the course of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The team resolved coding discrepancies through discussion and iteratively refined codebook definitions until reaching thematic saturation. Coders achieved an interrater reliability kappa >0.8 before independent coding. Four independent coders, all authors on this manuscript (H.F., K.M.G., Z.M., K.B.V.), used NVivo (Version 20, Lumivero; <https://lumivero.com>) to perform thematic coding. The study team reviewed the responses to identify patterns across codes in the data and developed subthemes, which were categorized into main thematic categories. Individual responses could be coded in multiple subthemes and main themes. The relative prevalences of each main theme were compared across time periods using percentages with 95% confidence intervals.

RESULTS

Demographics

Table 1 presents demographic information for participants in the three data collection time periods and the total analytic sample. The analytic sample consisted of 1,146 (36%) participants at T1 (April 2020), 1,048 (32%) at T2 (December 2020–January 2021), and 1,027 (32%) at T3 (August–September 2021). Most participants were women (52.1%), heterosexual (92.6%), White (74.8%), residing in a city (49.8%), with middle income (41.4%), a mean age of 39.5 years, and a mean duration of marriage of 12.41 years.

Themes and subthemes

Three overarching themes were identified: (a) positive changes in relationships, (b) negative changes in relationships, and (c) no changes.

TABLE 1 Demographics.

	Time 1	Time 2	Time 3	Total
<i>N</i>	1,146	1,048	1,027	3,221
Age, <i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)	38.54 (5.61)	39.30 (5.65)	39.41 (5.78)	39.54 (5.61)
Length of marriage (years), <i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)	11.51 (6.90)	13.07 (6.78)	12.74 (6.68)	12.41 (6.82)
Children living at home, <i>n</i> (%)	873 (76.2)	854 (81.5)	828 (80.6)	2,555 (79.3)
Gender identity, <i>n</i> (%)				
Women	579 (50.5)	591 (56.4)	509 (50.1)	1,679 (52.1)
Men	563 (49.1)	456 (43.6)	515 (49.6)	1,534 (47.6)
Nonbinary or transgender	2 (0.2)	1 (0.1)	2 (0.2)	5 (0.1)
Sexual orientation, <i>n</i> (%)				
Heterosexual	1,031 (90.0)	964 (92.0)	951 (92.6)	2,946 (92.6)
Bisexual	78 (6.8)	36 (3.4)	45 (4.4)	159 (4.9)
Gay	11 (1)	9 (.9)	5 (0.5)	25 (0.7)
Lesbian	7 (0.6)	12 (1.1)	11 (1.1)	30 (0.9)
Pansexual	7 (0.6)	5 (0.5)	1 (0.1)	13 (0.4)
Asexual/Ace Spectrum	1 (0.1)	1 (0.2)	1 (0.1)	4 (0.1)
Questioning	1 (0.3)	1 (0.1)	—	4 (0.1)
Race, <i>n</i> (%)				
White	864 (75.4)	794 (75.8)	777 (75.7)	2,435 (74.8)
Black or African American	169 (14.7)	146 (13.9)	165 (16.1)	480 (14.7)
Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander	10 (0.9)	1 (0.1)	2 (0.2)	13 (0.3)
American Indian/Alaska Native	19 (1.7)	24 (2.3)	21 (2.0)	64 (1.9)
Asian	62 (5.4)	61 (5.8)	55 (5.4)	178 (5.4)
Multiracial	35 (3.1)	27 (2.6)	21 (2)	83 (2.5)
Hispanic ethnicity, <i>n</i> (%)	195 (17.0)	182 (17.4)	182 (17.7)	559 (17.4)
Education completed, <i>n</i> (%)				
Some high school	24 (2.1)	15 (1.4)	16 (1.6)	55 (1.7)
Graduated high school	166 (14.5)	105 (10)	143 (13.9)	414 (13.4)
Technical or vocational college	50 (4.4)	35 (3.3)	34 (3.3)	119 (3.8)
Some college	206 (18)	133 (12.7)	57 (5.6)	396 (12.8)
Graduated college	362 (31.6)	309 (29.5)	165 (16.1)	836 (27.1)
Some graduate school	17 (1.5)	25 (2.4)	358 (34.9)	399 (12.9)
Master's degree	211 (18.4)	292 (27.9)	196 (19.1)	699 (22.7)
Doctoral degree	45 (3.9)	83 (7.9)	38 (3.7)	166 (5.3)
Residence, <i>n</i> (%)				
City	509 (44.4)	552 (52.7)	545 (53.1)	1,606 (49.8)
Metropolitan or suburban area	380 (33.2)	311 (29.7)	302 (29.4)	993 (30.8)
Small town or rural area	257 (22.4)	185 (17.7)	180 (17.5)	622 (19.3)
Income level, <i>n</i> (%)				
Poverty level	48 (4.2)	53 (5.1)	34 (3.3)	135 (4.4)
Lower income	123 (10.7)	84 (8.0)	75 (7.3)	282 (8.8)
Lower middle income	211 (18.4)	124 (11.8)	168 (16.4)	503 (15.7)
Middle income	460 (40.1)	433 (41.3)	428 (41.7)	1,321 (41.4)
Upper middle income	253 (22.1)	263 (25.1)	249 (24.2)	765 (23.9)
Upper income	40 (3.5)	78 (7.4)	66 (6.4)	184 (5.7)

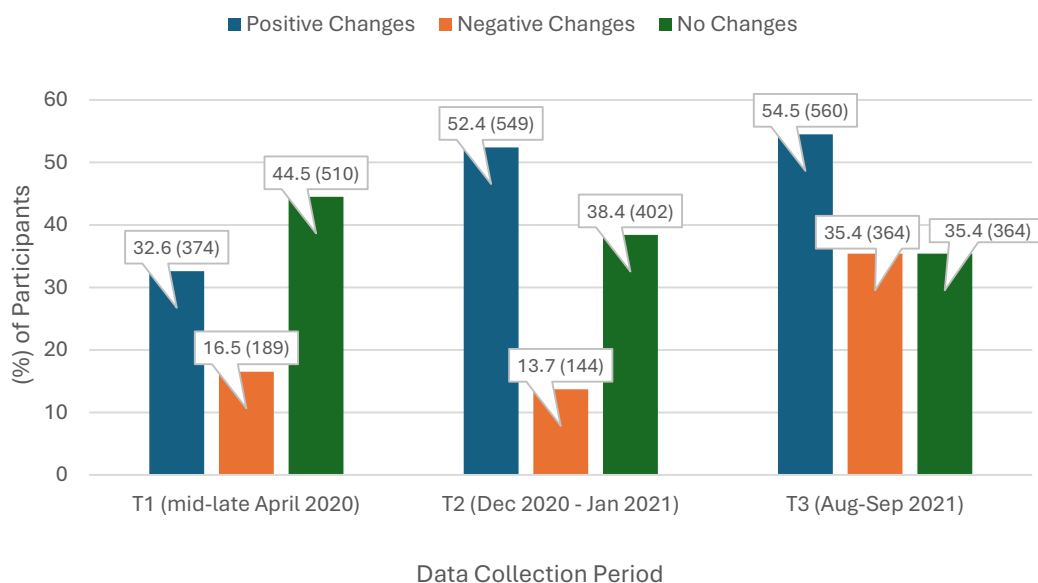


FIGURE 1 Percentage (*N*) of participants reporting positive, negative, and no changes by time period. [Color figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

Positive changes

Positive changes were defined as participants discussing improvements in their relationship, such as enjoying and appreciating the relationship more during the pandemic. At T1, 374 (32.6%) participants reported positive changes; at T2, 549 (52.4%); and at T3, 560 (54.5%). As can be seen in Figure 1, more than half of the participants in T2 and T3 reported positive changes, and this was significantly higher than the one third at T1. Subthemes identified for positive changes were (a) value of spending more time together, (b) creating new routines, (c) improved communication, and (d) increased appreciation of spouses (see Figure 2).

Value of spending more time together

Many participants indicated that increased time together enhanced their relationship during the pandemic. At T1, 116 (31%) participants reported an increase in time spent together; at T2, 119 (21.6%); and at T3, 163 (29.1%). The opportunity to spend more time together was vital in strengthening relationships. For example, participants shared the following: “My spouse and I have been able to spend more time together and have gotten to really know each other again” (female, 30 years old, White, 14 years married, kids living at home, P1052,¹ T1) and “My spouse and I have gotten to spend more time together, which has made our relationship stronger” (male, 44 years old, White, 7 years married, kids living at home, P1008, T3). Several participants reported feeling “more connected” or “closer” than they had ever been to their spouse; for example: “We have become closer than we have ever been because we are spending more time together” (male, 30 years old, Black, 2 years married, kids living at home, P442, T1) and “We feel way more connected than we ever did before. We learned to be patient with each other and also realize tomorrow is never promised to you” (female, 39 years old, White, 8 years

¹The numbers preceded by “P” in parentheses indicate participant IDs.

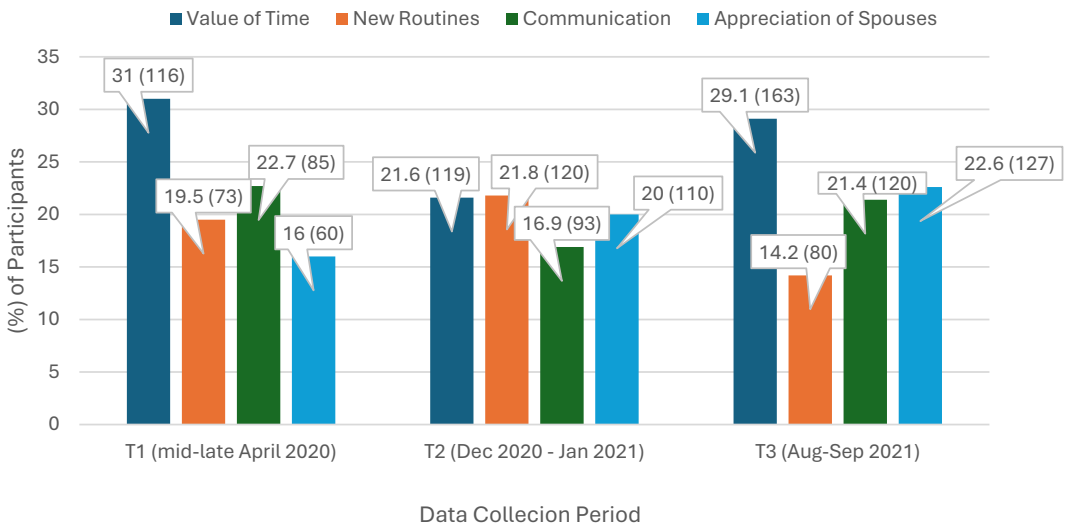


FIGURE 2 Percentage (*N*) of participants reporting positive changes by time period. [Color figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/famc.13143)]

married, kids living at home, P768, T1). Some participants whose relationships were struggling before the pandemic started reported improvement in their relationships: “My husband wanted a divorce before the pandemic, and he actually filed and served me with papers at the beginning of the pandemic. Since then, we have gotten so much better in our marriage and actually just welcomed a new baby girl in June 2021” (female, 34 years old, White, 6 years married, kids living at home, P774, T3).

The pandemic provided time for some couples to start reengaging in activities they participated in during previous stages of their relationship when they had more time: “We used to watch movies all the time and stopped over the years after having a kid. However, we found more time to spend together watching movies than we had in the past probably 10 years or so” (male, 44 years old, White, 18 years married, kids living at home, P907, T3).

Creating new routines

Participants indicated that they were able to improve their relationships via the introduction of new activities and the reassigning of household responsibilities during the pandemic. At T1, 73 (19.5%) participants reported creating new routines; at T2, 120 (21.8%); and at T3, 80 (14.2%). Overall, these changes spoke to creating new routines that afforded relational benefits. Some indicated this allowed them to create “new memories.” For example, participants shared, “We create activities to do together, go on hikes together more frequently” (female, 46 years old, Black, 18 years married, kids living at home, P902, T2) and “We got a dog, so we take him for walks together and have more time to talk” (female, 45 years old, White, 23 years married, kids living at home, P678, T3). Others reported changes related to sharing household responsibilities and tasks more equally: “We are spending a lot more time together. We are more engaged in overall house chores and sharing responsibility” (female, 35 years old, White, 3 years married, no kids living at home, P46, T1). One participant described a change related to pet care: “He also walks the dog with me, which he never did” (female, 39 years old, Black, 5 years married, kids living at home, P420, T1). Another participant noted that time was a factor in shifting their usual activities: “We talk more. We kiss

more. We spend more time together doing projects together” (female, 40 years old, White, 6 years married, kids living at home, P452, T1).

Improved communication

Many participants described changes in verbal and nonverbal communication patterns during the pandemic enhanced their relationship; taken together, these quotes form the improved communication theme. At T1, 85 (22.7%) participants reported improved communication; at T2, 93 (16.9%); and at T3, 120 (21.4%). Examples include the following: “We talk more and communicate better with me being at home more” (male, 31 years old, White, 4 years married, kids living at home, P603, T1); “We have started to communicate much more often through phone calls and texts for no other reason than just to have contact with each other” (female, 41 years old, White, 16 years married, kids living at home, P1021, T1); and “My husband and I have enough free time to understand each other better. We communicate more about our likes, dislikes, and expectations” (female, 35 years old, Black, 12 years married, kids living at home, P221, T3). Improvements in communication were also seen in the overall family dynamics: “We spend more time talking and sharing as a couple and family, and this has tremendously improved our overall family and relationship health” (female, 46 years old, Black, 18 years married, kids living at home, P926, T2).

Increased appreciation of spouses

Increased appreciation of spouses was reflected in quotes that communicated feelings and expressions of gratitude for one’s spouse during the pandemic. At T1, 60 (16%) participants reported increased appreciation of their spouses; at T2, 110 (20%); and at T3, 127 (22.6%). Examples include the following: “I appreciate being married more now” (male, 34 years old, White, 5 years married, kids living at home, P1020, T2) and “Before the epidemic, we had lost our sense of the value of married life because of the routine, and when the epidemic came, we began to feel the value of each other” (male, 44 years old, White, 18 years married, kids living at home, P526, T3). Other participants indicated an increase in appreciation specifically for their spouse: “I just appreciate her more, want to be around her more” (female, 30 years old, Black, 4 years married, no kids at living home, P99, T1) and “I feel like the pandemic has helped me realize what is really important in life and to be grateful of how much I have in my life. I definitely appreciate my spouse much more” (female, 45 years old, Asian and White, 4 years married, no kids living at home, P232, T3). Others specifically noted that the pandemic provided a newfound appreciation for their spouse and their role in the household: “We also appreciate what the other partner did for the family before the pandemic more” (female, 44 years old, Asian, 23 years married, kids at home, P297, T2) and “He appreciates me more now since I worked during the day because he had to take on the responsibility of the household until I got home” (female, 37 years old, Black, 11 years old, kids at home, P886, T2). Participants mentioned the significant loss of life and changes that occurred during the early days of the pandemic led to having a sense of appreciation for the role of their spouses in their lives: “I value my spouse and family more now, realize how quickly people can lose their lives from this virus, so it makes me more appreciative” (female, 39 years old, White, 16 years married, kids living at home, P70, T1); “Appreciate each other more because we learned how quickly things can change” (female, 36 years old, White, 9 years married, kids living at home, P250, T1); and “But with people losing their lives to the virus we thank God every day for each other” (female, 45 years old, Black, 11 years married, kids living at home, P781, T2).

Negative changes

Some participants described “negative changes,” specifically decreased relationship quality, less enjoyment, or less appreciation for their partner during the pandemic. At T1, 189 (16.5%) reported negative changes; at T2, 144 (13.7%); and at T3, 364 (35.4%). For each time period, significantly fewer participants reported negative, compared with positive, changes. All three time periods were statistically significantly different from one another in terms of percentages. The percentage at T2 was only marginally lower than T1. Negative changes were reported by approximately one third of participants at T3. Subthemes related to the negative impact of the pandemic on marital relationships were (a) increased stress, (b) stress related to time spent together, (c) financial stress, and (d) family stress (see Figure 3).

Increased stress

Increased stress was conceptualized as both general and COVID-19-related. Participants described that stress had strained and hindered their relationships. At T1, 71 (37.5%), participants reported an increase in stress; at T2, 60 (41.6%); and at T3, 89 (24.4%). For example, some participants expressed fear of contracting COVID-19, health concerns, or stress from a partner’s COVID-19-related job. Participants reported that general stressors and COVID-related stress had caused strain on the marital relationship: “We are more stressed and try to avoid each other” (female, 39 years old, White, 19 years married, kids living at home, P954, T2) and “We didn’t agree on vaccination and how serious COVID-19 is, so we are drifting apart more than ever” (female, 38 years old, White, 15 years married, kids living at home, P867, T3). Others reported increased stress due to problems already present within their marriages but were highlighted due to COVID-19: “It has gotten stressful having to depend on him more, and him not being very reliable” (female, 34 years old, Black, 9 years married, kids living at home, P754, T2).

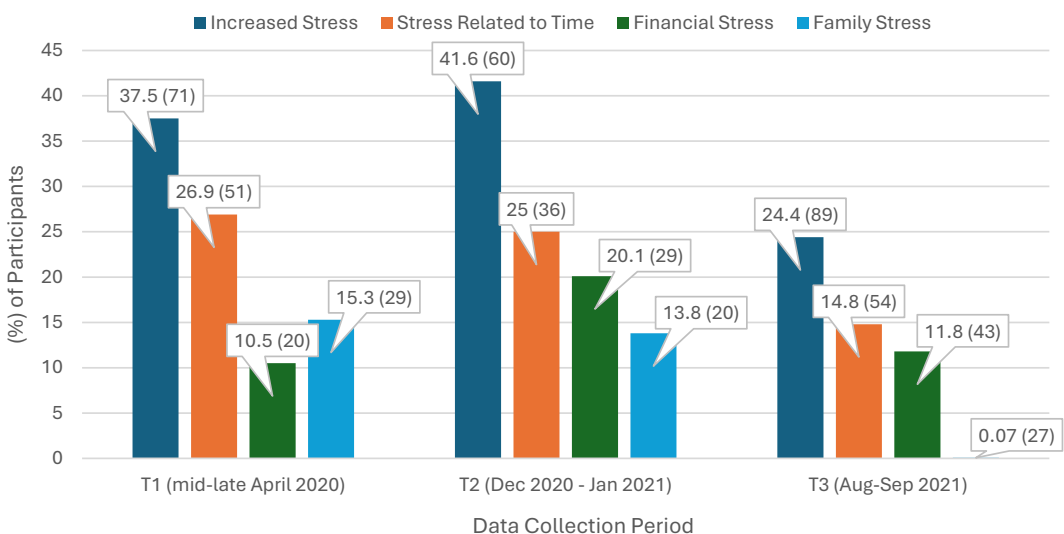


FIGURE 3 Percentage (N) of participants reporting negative changes by time period. [Color figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com)]

Finally, others mentioned that stress impacted their ability to relax and be close and intimate with their partner: “My sex life and marriage is dying from the pandemic” (male, 42 years old, Black, 14 years married, kids living at home, P901, T2). Participants mentioned intimacy concerns they had before the pandemic, which had worsened due to the COVID-19 pandemic: “We were already having issues by not having sex very often, but now it seems like we are even worse living like roommates” (female, 36 years old, White, 3 years married, no living kids at home, P634, T2). Additionally, other factors, such as feeling unappreciated, were reported to impact physical intimacy, “I feel underappreciated and taken for granted being a homemaker. There is not physical attraction for m[y] spouse” (female, 40 years old, Asian, 11 years married, kids living at home, P512, T2).

Stress related to time spent together

Stress related to time spent together reflected either an increase or a decrease in the amount of time together, contributing to a decrease in relationship quality or creating strain on the relationship during the pandemic. At T1, 51 (26.9%) participants reported stress related to time spent together; at T2, 36 (25%); and at T3, 54 (14.8%). Spending more time together reduced the quality of their relationship for some, leading to increased strain. For instance, one participant said, “We get more aggravated because we are around each other more” (female, 30 years old, White, 10 years married, kids living at home, P1034, T1). Others expressed the need for “alone time,” or time away from their spouse, because they were spending too much time together: “Normally he is in and out of town” (P689, T2) and “We don’t spend time alone” (female, 34 years old, Black, 9 years married, kids living at home, P523, T2); another mentioned their lack of privacy (female, 38 years old, White, 17 years married, kids living at home, P857, T2). The increased time spent together gave some individuals a fresh perspective on how their partner used their time at home. For instance, one participant expressed frustration with their spouse for not helping enough around the house (female, 32 years old, White, 2 years married, no kids living at home, P589, T1). However, some participants stated that decreased time spent together negatively impacted their relationships. One participant said, “Sometimes I think it makes us more irritated with each other since we don’t have time anymore like we used to” (female, 34 years old, White, 7 years married, kids living at home, P734, T1).

Financial stress

Financial stress incorporated the struggles related to finances, such as job loss or difficulty in paying bills (which may have been caused by pandemic-related circumstances), that put a strain on relationships or decreased the previous quality of relationships during the pandemic. At T1, 20 (10.5%), participants reported financial stress; at T2, 29 (20.1%); and at T3, 43 (11.8%). Changes in employment status and financial security hurt relationships. Some participants expressed that their marriage was struggling even before the pandemic, but COVID-19 and financial stress had worsened the situation. For instance, one participant said, “Our marriage was not 100 percent before COVID, let alone during. I think COVID, financial stress, and just all around has led to the decline in our marriage” (female, 44 years old, White, 20 years married, kids living at home, P78, T3). Others reported that changes in finances had directly affected their relationship. For example, “We are stressed about money, so we avoid each other” (female, 47 years old, White, 10 years married, no kids living at home, P712, T2); “It has gotten rougher due to the lack of income” (female, 32 years old, White, 11 years married, kids living at home, P457, T3); and “fighting over finances and being home so much” (female, 36 years old, White, 10 years married, kids living at home, P952, T3).

Family stress

Family stress included challenges with childrearing, having children at home instead of school, and dealing with other family members moving in, all of which have had a negative impact on marital relationships during the pandemic. At T1, 29 (15.3%) participants reported family stress; at T2, 20 (13.8%); and at T3, 27 (0.07%). For instance, one participant said, “Living with family has put a strain on our intimate time together” (male, 37 years old, White, 3 years married, kids at home, P612, T3). Participants cited time spent with family members (such as kids or parents), changes in family routine, or childcare responsibilities caused additional stress on their marriage. Examples include the following: “An increase in stress with homeschooling, being cooped up, lack of privacy, and spouses stress with work. There has been an increase in irritability and bickering” (female, 32 years old, White, 14 years married, kids living at home, P134, T1); “More stress on me to work from home entertain a teenager and keep up with cleaning and cooking and bills” (Female, 37 years old, White, 20 years married, kids living at home, P903, T1); and “More time dedicated to childcare leaves less time to focus on other things” (male, 45 years old, Black, 16 years married, kids living at home, P483, T2).

No changes

Some participants indicated that their relationship remained the same over the course of the pandemic. At T1, 510 (44.5%) reported no changes; at T2, 402 (38.4%); and at T3, 364 (35.4%). Reporting no change was significantly higher during T1 than at T2 and T3. No change related to COVID-19 was reported by both those who characterized their pre-pandemic marital relationships as good/happy and bad/unhappy. For example: “Hasn’t changed. We already hated each other even before the virus” (female, 31 years old, White, 12 years married, kids living at home, P910, T1), “My relationship hasn’t changed at all ... it hasn’t gotten better or worse ... still miserable” (female, 40 years old, multiracial, 8 years married, kids living at home, P951, T2), “My relationship haven’t changed since the virus. We have remained steady as we were.” (female, 31 years old, Black, 9 years married, kids living at home, P76, T1) and “My spouse and I had a *very* close marriage prior to the pandemic, and it has not changed since” (male, 50 years, White, 34 years married, no kids living at home, P49, T3). “Work has been more stressful, but I don’t think it has had an effect on our relationship. We still work on our relationship in the same manner regardless of work” (female, 35 years old, White, 8 years married, kids living at home, P697, T2).

DISCUSSION

We explored changes in married individuals’ romantic relationships at three unique time points during the COVID-19 pandemic. Most participants reported changes in their relationship in response to the pandemic; T2 and T3 participants were more likely to report changes than T1 participants. Many participants reported positive relational changes; more than half of the participants at T1 and T2 reported positive changes (significantly higher than the one third at T1). The greatest proportion of participants, almost one third, reporting negative changes were those at T3. Findings from T1 (collected between 4 and 6 weeks after shutdowns in the United States) were similar to those of Vowels et al. (2021), who collected data in the first 5 weeks of the pandemic in the United Kingdom. Most similar were the proportions reporting positive changes (about one third in the present study (32.6%) and 28.6% in Vowels et al.’s study). However, in Vowels et al.’s study, about the same number of participants reported their relationships had gotten worse (28.6%) or had stayed the same (29.9%), in contrast to the present study in which

almost one-half reported no change early in the pandemic (44.5%) and 16.5% reported negative changes. Differences between our findings compared to Vowels et al.'s sample could be due to the fact that their sample included cohabiting as well as married participants.

Positive changes

Positive changes, including increased gratitude, closeness, and improved communication, were reported by many participants who said that their relationship changed for the better during the pandemic. Spending more time together and partner support were the primary reasons cited for these changes. Some participants had previously wanted more time together and the stay-at-home and work-from-home orders finally made more time together as a couple possible. Literature suggesting that quality time is crucial for fostering and promoting healthy romantic relationships supports our findings of relationship growth due to increased time together (Baxter & Pittman, 2001; Treter et al., 2021).

During the COVID-19 pandemic, some participants noted that spending more time together created new routines that enhanced their relationships. This was attributed to dividing household responsibilities, completing projects, and starting new activities. Some participants could also return to old routines they had in the past, such as watching movies together or going on walks together. In contrast to our findings, other research reported that changes in routines created increased conflict in romantic relationships because of pandemic-related restrictions (Luetke et al., 2020). The present study is one of the first to indicate that developing new routines together during the pandemic had positive effects for married people. Previous research has demonstrated that communication between married individuals can impact relationship satisfaction (Holman & Jarvis, 2003) and emotional stress (Barnes et al., 2007).

Some participants in our study reported improved communication with their spouses, which they attributed to increased time together. This finding is consistent with prior research revealing that some young adult couples experienced improved communication during the pandemic (Yarger et al., 2021). In contrast, however, other studies suggested that the pandemic led to reduced communication between romantic partners, which contributed to frustration and lack of patience with partners (Jones et al., 2021). Thus, increased time together does not inherently result in improved communication within relationships.

Some participants described an increased appreciation for partners during the pandemic—for example, feeling lucky to have their partner during a challenging time and valuing their partner's role in the relationship. This is consistent with previous research that partner appreciation increased among couples during the pandemic (Holmberg et al., 2022). Our findings indicate that challenges or stressors are not fundamentally harmful to relationships and may promote partner appreciation in some relationships. Similarly, Balzarini et al.'s (2023) research suggested that perceived partner support during the COVID-19 pandemic could mitigate against declines in relationship quality.

Negative changes

During the COVID-19 pandemic, some individuals experienced a deterioration in the quality of their relationships. Many participants reported that their relationship had become “bad,” and some even considered divorce. Factors that contributed to negative changes included increased stress, time spent together, reduced sexual activity and physical affection, and financial and family stress. Previous research indicated that increased stress and emotional difficulties during the pandemic (e.g., frustration, loneliness, and anger) predicted a decrease in couples' relationship quality, including reduced respect, support, and attachment (Kozakiewicz et al., 2023).

Some participants reported that increased time together led to more frustration and conflicts in their relationship. This might be attributed, in part, to communication patterns within the relationship. For instance, during challenging times, some couples experience improved communication, while other couples' communication declines. Indeed, coping mechanisms adopted by individuals in stressful times and conflict management tactics practiced within relationships vary. However, couples can improve their communication skills and decrease maladaptive coping strategies if they are motivated to do so and have opportunities to learn and practice new approaches. Thus, individuals and couples can focus on improving their relationships by promoting communication during challenging times (Bodenmann, 2008). Other studies reported that relationship conflicts during COVID-19 may have been especially prominent for couples balancing childcare responsibilities while working from home (Luetke et al., 2020). Role strain, conflict, and relationship dissatisfaction before COVID-19 may have created vulnerabilities for some couples in the face of pandemic challenges. In the current study, participants who reported relationship difficulties that predated the pandemic experienced greater relationship challenges. This is consistent with previous findings that negative effects of the pandemic were particularly common among those who had preexisting relational stress (Luetke et al., 2020). Nonetheless, findings suggest that perspectives presented in the media about the impact of the pandemic on marriages were disproportionately focused on negative aspects (i.e., "In sickness and health: How to help your relationships survive COVID-19 quarantine" (Nathoo, 2020); "Is COVID-19 changing our relationships?" (Liu, 2020); "Arguing with your partner over Covid? You're not alone, with the pandemic straining many relationships" (Ellyatt, 2022). Although divorce rates initially decreased in 2020, in 2020–2021, they still had not returned to pre-pandemic levels (CDC, 2024). Further, the present study and others document numerous relational benefits and improvements that individuals attribute to pandemic changes.

Strengths and limitations

The present study had both strengths and limitations. The exploratory methodology was a strength because it allowed for a broad range of relationship changes to be identified. Additionally, data were collected at three times during the pandemic when restrictions and lockdown rules varied, providing insight into how various pandemic stages may have differentially influenced relationship changes reported by participants.

Data were not analyzed taking into account demographic information of participants. Future research should consider the nature of pandemic changes by gender, sexual orientation, and race/ethnicity.

One limitation was the use of just one open-ended question asking participants how their relationships had changed over the course of the pandemic. Another shortcoming was that different participants completed the study at each of the three time points; a longitudinal design following up the same couples would provide valuable insights into long-term trends and support causal inferences. Data were collected via an anonymous survey question; therefore, clarification of responses or member checks could not be done.

Implications

The findings have clinical implications for clinicians working with married individuals. Clinicians should be aware that the pandemic impacted marital relationships in various ways. Focusing on couples' specific relationship characteristics and circumstances can aid in providing appropriate supports to foster resiliency and promote positive relationship outcomes (Feeney & Fitzgerald, 2022). Thus, the following implications should be considered in the context of future

stressful events inclusive of global health crises and natural disasters. It is critical that researchers and clinicians consider the preexisting stressors and vulnerabilities that exacerbate the impact of such events. It has been well documented that the impact of the pandemic was not uniform. Individuals and families with lower incomes; precarious employment; limited access to health care or preexisting health conditions; and those experiencing racism, sexism, homophobia, transphobia, and other forms of stigma and discrimination were disproportionately impacted (Chakrabarti et al., 2021; Khazanchi et al., 2020). These structural challenges, layered onto individual vulnerabilities due to mental health concerns or preexisting relationship conflicts, help explain why some relationships faltered in the pandemic, while others fared better.

An overarching theme across our data was the importance of time spent together, building new or reinvigorating old routines. The lifting of COVID-19–related restrictions may have made it difficult for couples to spend as much quality time together as they did during the pandemic. In Holmberg et al.'s (2022) study, increased time spent together was highlighted by participants as one of the most positive changes during the early stages of the pandemic. Feeney and Fitzgerald (2022) suggested that couples should try to spend quality time together even if they have limited time available. Couples who want to foster positive relationship outcomes might prioritize ways to spend more quality time together, such as having prescheduled routines. Further, therapists could provide more ethical and compassionate care for their clients if they adopted a sociocultural attunement approach, considering each person and family's unique context and aspects of their identities (e.g., age, gender, sexual orientation, income, culture, ethnicity; Pandit et al., 2014). This would allow their strengths and vulnerabilities to inform support strategies and interventions, as would be recommended by the VSA model (Karney & Bradbury, 1995). A blanket prescription of more quality time may be frustrating and unhelpful for individuals in relationships characterized by conflict or those who experience financial barriers to leisure time.

Although the COVID-19 pandemic may have brought issues to the surface for many in relationships, our findings suggest these problems may have been exacerbated due to COVID-19-related changes such as stay-at-home orders, and preexisting vulnerabilities of individuals and relationships. Clinicians could assess the couple's relationship history and structural and other contextual factors, then openly brainstorm with couples why the COVID-19 pandemic may have exacerbated the presenting problems and suggest alternative ways to move forward as a couple.

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