

**Family Relationships and The New Normal**

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| ***Article history:*** |  | **Abstract** |
| *Submitted:* 30.11.2021*Revised:* 15.01.2022*Accepted:* 15.02.2022 |  | The COVID-19 pandemic has taken a toll on all individuals and their families around the world. At the macro level, every single country witnessed their healthcare systems collapse under the stress of the epidemic. The education, healthcare and governance sectors, three pillars of any civilization, were forced to reevaluate and drastically change their functioning and operations. In the field of work, almost all sectors came to a halt during the first wave of the pandemic. Once the first wave was overcome, the new norms started forming. These new norms included working from home, flexible work-hours and changes in stereotypical gender roles. Usage and dependency on technology and communication devices sky-rocketed. Only the Information Technology sector did not have to change as drastically; all the other sectors had to go through mass layoffs and salary deductions. At the micro level, a shift in the family structure was also witnessed. On one hand, where earlier families did not have the time to even share meals together, during the pandemic, it became a challenge to find solitude or a place without distractions and disturbances to work. On the other hand, due to the travel restrictions, families that were stranded apart from each other became extremely concerned about the well-being of each other. Even with all of these struggles and challenges, most people have persevered and survived through the pandemic. They have found ways to manage their lives around the pandemic and they have adjusted to the new norm. With all the new changes in lives of people, Nurture-Encourage-Wish is a possible way forward.  |
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**1 Introduction**

The COVID-19 pandemic has taken a toll on all individuals and their families around the world. There have been challenges that have surfaced in all walks of life and they might have a long-lasting impact on countless families and the dynamics between them. We have heard stories of fallen houses and that of great resilience and strength all throughout the last two years.

We have heard about both sides of the coin - positive changes that the pandemic brought into the family, as well as the negative. In the initial days, the positive effects were more pronounced. Families spent a lot of time together, married couples with their partners, children with their parents, which hadn’t been possible before. There have also been reports about the changing gender roles. Females increasingly took up more financial responsibility and males helped with cleaning, cooking, and other stereotypically feminine chores. With these positive changes, the pandemic brought in newer issues as things settled in.

A lack of physical space in the house was probably not as difficult to manage before the pandemic hit, as it is now (Voghel, 2021). Most family members would be out working and would meet each other only after the evening. During the times when the lockdown situation seemed temporary and short-lived, families looked at it as an opportunity to spend time together. Later, when work and schooling began online, the requirements of physical space at home increased. Nuclear families/couples had to use their house also as a co-working space. In families with children attending school, their need for devices also increased (Voghel, 2021).

Individuals working in specific sectors such as the IT Industry remained relatively unaffected due to the pandemic. Such professionals also received perks from their workplaces, like access and reimbursement of internet, laptops, headphones, etc. Other professionals however were badly hit as layoffs, salary deductions became common. There have been so many examples of people changing their career paths, from something as diverse as journalism to the food industry.

The availability of devices, internet, and technology in general, comes very easily to the privileged. There is also a section of society though, which has to accommodate within small boundaries of their house, provide the ‘technological needs’ of their family, and in worse scenarios give up jobs and education for the same reasons.

Parent - child relationships are getting shaped in more ways than one, depending on children’s stage of development. Parents of really young children have had to sit through their classes or end up home-schooling their children (Voghel, 2021). For slightly older children, parents’ worries have shifted from children getting carried away into unhealthy habits to them not being able to socialize or make friends at all. A well - known psychiatrist mentioned an instance of an adolescent having to give up his newly acquired habit of smoking due to the pandemic, because he was unable to sneak out of the house.

On the other hand, the youth whose careers have just begun or are about to, have found it difficult to take responsibility of the family from their parents. Surveys have highlighted hesitation of the youth to get married during the pandemic due to lack of confidence in handling the additional role.

One of the things that has changed and evolved immensely during the pandemic is the parenting style in families. Where earlier, parents of teenagers were concerned about their children falling in with the wrong crowd and partying too much, now their concern is the children not being able to socialize, and therefore, not having enough exposure to relevant experiences or gaining independence (Voghel, 2021). On top of that, the spill-over of family life into work-life, and vice versa is worse than ever. Parents reportedly “don’t ever get to just work, and on the flip side of that, I don’t ever get to just be a parent.”

Another challenge that parents have faced due to the pandemic is being forced to leave their jobs in order to look after their young children. In Northampton, a mother of two children, 6 and 11 years of age, had to give up her job to help and guide her children through the remote learning process (Voghel, 2021). With remote learning becoming the new norm and limited access to childcare, for many people resigning from their work was the only option left.

An idea that would have encouraged family bonds, but has backfired during the pandemic, is that of *open-concept houses*. With wide open spaces and accessible rooms, under normal circumstances such a house would help a family remain close and encourage family time (Voghel, 2021). However, during the pandemic, the same boon has become a nightmare for many. With the parents trying to get their work done and the children attending school from home, voices carry over in such living spaces, creating distractions for everyone. This disturbance is even more pronounced when families have pets. When pet dogs see something or someone interesting passing by the house, they start barking loudly which creates chaos for adults who are in meetings, or children who are attending lessons (Voghel, 2021).

The pandemic nesters and their adult children are also facing various challenges. Adults who have managed to reach their elderly parents during the pandemic have to relearn how to communicate. As Mumbai Mirror reported in August 2020, initially when nobody expected this pandemic to last so long, it was easier to overlook expectations from family members that were not fulfilled (Gupta, 2020). However, as the duration of this pandemic becomes more and more prolonged, there is a constant struggle to communicate parents’ expectations of their adult children, and the grown-up child’s expectations of their parents. Fear of losing their elderly parents has made many adult children become more restrictive of their parents’ movements. This, in turn, is creating resentment amongst the parents. There are arguments about who is responsible for which chores, financial responsibilities, safety precautions and hygiene-related concerns. The only way forward now is to share fears and concerns with each other and be open to communicating (Gupta, 2020).

In December 2020, BBC reported that the number of couples seeking counselling during the pandemic has surged (Ailes, 2020). Many couples who were previously happy are now splitting up and even divorcing. Sharing everyday responsibilities like childcare, chores and work as well as the stress of concerns about health and finances has taken a toll on many households. Being cooped up in the house has become a major strain in relationships. It was found in a survey conducted by a UK charity called ‘Relate’ that the pandemic lockdown created a make-or-break situation for couples (Ailes, 2020). The survey reported that 8% of the responders felt that the lockdown helped them realize that the relationship needed to end, however, 43% felt that they were closer because of the pandemic. The relationships that were strong before the pandemic have become stronger, whereas those that had problems beforehand are now breaking up (Ailes, 2020).

There is another major fear amongst UNICEF workers that due to the financial pressures on poverty-stricken households, there may be a rise in the child marriages of vulnerable girls (UNICEF, 2021). They fear that as many as 10 million additional child marriages might occur before the end of the decade. UNICEF Executive Director Henrietta Fore has said, “COVID-19 has made an already difficult situation for millions of girls even worse. Shuttered schools, isolation from friends and support networks, and rising poverty have added fuel to a fire the world was already struggling to put out.” (UNICEF, 2021).

A relationship that has come out as a paradox during the pandemic was that of siblings. During the lockdown, many parents reported witnessing sibling rivalry amongst their children reach new heights (Jazynka, 2021). Siblings have an instinctive knowledge about what makes their counterpart tick. However, under normal circumstances, children have various outlets for getting a break from their siblings when things become too much, for example visiting friends and participating in sports and extra-curricular activities. Due to the pandemic, these outlets were not available to the children. This led to an increase in both the frequency and intensity of the fights between siblings (Jazynka, 2021).

Counsellors and psychologists have unanimously reported that building strong sibling connections are a source of support throughout an individual’s life (Caspi, 2020). This has been reflected by many adolescent and young adult siblings as well. Many young adults have reported that before the pandemic they could probably count the number of hours they spent with their families. They were involved with their schools, sports, extra-curricular activities and friends. When the pandemic started, they were initially disappointed at not being able to attend college and have the “college experience”. However, they unexpectedly found an upside to the pandemic (Bandi, 2021). They got to spend more time with their siblings, and bonds became stronger. These healthy sibling relationships helped them navigate the stresses of the pandemic, lockdown and it helped them adjust more easily to the new norm of life (Bandi, 2021).

The world has become very accessible in the last three decades. Education and job-related opportunities are not unheard of and people have shown willingness to take up these opportunities. A good number of these people come back to find careers back in their homeland and many others decide to stay on. A very acceptable idea of independence has thus been forged in the society where a member of the family visits the homeland for a month-long vacation to spend time with the family. In the face of the pandemic and the ongoing restrictions there have also been travel bans across the world. Students, working professionals have been stuck abroad for extended periods. This has led to growing concerns in the families regarding their wellbeing. There have been quite a few instances where students have had to undertake education online and not get enough access to the infrastructure that is usually available in world renowned universities. Mandatory institutional quarantines have also been a major roadblock in planning of travels back home. Major life events for various families have been witnessed on video calls.

In April 2020, The Hindu reported that due to the difficult situation in Odisha’s Berhampur a 70-year-old man died of a heart attack at his residence. His only son, a software engineer, working in the U.S. for the past one year had planned to visit home in April, but COVID-19 had shattered his plans. As the only resort left, the son witnessed the last rights of his father be carried out on a video call.

Various voices were raised in the UAE to lift its prevailing ban on internet calling platforms like WhatsApp and Facetime in a bid for stranded personnel to connect with their families. As a result, UAE announced in March 2020 that it was lifting its ban on two VoIP (Voice Over Internet Protocol) platforms including that on Microsoft’s Skype for Business and Google Hangouts. It also made video calling platform Zoom available. The last two years have also marked a significantly increasing rise of platforms like WhatsApp, zoom, google, and skype not just for professional use but also for a medium for families to connect to one another and share some important events.

The Pandemic has brought various Healthcare systems across the world under great stress. Hospitals and entire systems have been crunched for infrastructure, technology, tools, space and personnel all alike. The nature of the crisis was such that it had never been experienced before in a hundred long years. Professionals of all ages have been brought down under tremendous pressure to step up and deliver in the face of great uncertainty whilst putting their own lives in the way of harm. To state a struggle that has been common throughout the pandemic has been to carry out responsibilities of varying nature in PPE kits where mobility, food and other access is compromised which can further dampen motivation and make rational thinking a difficult task.

No professional serving today has received formal training to combat a Pandemic and with the ever-changing nature of the virus, planning treatments and ensuring the wellbeing of all patients was proving to be an extremely difficult job for all Healthcare professionals. Knowledge, research, protective gear was all hard to come by due to the sudden rise in the demand and that just escalated the challenges for a lot of professionals. The complexities of the pandemic crossed professional doors and happened to affect the personal lives of the Frontline workers. Long shifts, compulsory institutional quarantines, PPE kits and the fear of infection kept Frontline workers apart from their families for extended periods and at times for months together. This further resulted in reduced time with families, increasing anxieties due to the rampant infection and the restricted contact in case the Frontline workers contracted the virus. Unfortunately, the death toll of the pandemic has also accounted for the Frontline workers, who, despite ensuring all safety protocols have succumbed to the virus. There have been increasing adjustment issues among the masses and sudden loss of a loved one can be a major contributing factor for the same. Experiencing death and witnessing struggles can work as triggers for multiple people and a sense of hopelessness can creep in. The number of cases mounting constantly can also take away from the sense of achievement. Both of which can be extremely distressing.

The result of this can be increasing anxiety and depression among our frontline workers and a workforce that is depleted. It can also have an effect on young children who are looking at these professions as career prospects. It is vital in times like these that conversations are facilitated in the families, children are oriented, older people in the house are listened to and that there is a sense of care and belongingness in the family.

**2 Results and Discussions**

The pandemic has accounted for thousands of lives all over the world and it has put thousands of families in a state of loss and bereavement among the prevailing uncertainty. Processing loss and death has been a great hurdle to overcome due to the major losses. With the additional pressure of being confined to houses there has been increasing rumination without any other engagements to act as a distraction. Acceptance is one of the most important steps towards grieving. The entire cycle and process of grieving is initiated at this stage.

The emotions that are processed during this stage may include sadness, anxiety, loneliness, regret, anger, and guilt. Unresolved emotions during these junctures might lead to various conditions in the future. The uncertainty in the given situations can also lead to serious conditions. Bereavement is the period of time that is spent adjusting to loss. During this time, bereaved individuals will generally experience varying levels of grief that may manifest in feelings of shock, numbness, sadness and/or yearning for the person who has passed. It’s typical to experience a mix of emotions, as well as fatigue, disturbed dreams, distress, agitation and even guilt during the bereavement process, before acceptance sets in. If this condition persists it may lead to the development of pathology in individuals.It becomes increasingly important during grieving to connect more with people however due to the current scenario that method of coping doesn't seem to be available for most people. Coping from the loss of a loved one has been punishing for people from all age groups. Children are found to internalize grief and behaviours like not showing interest in daily activities, changes in eating and sleeping habits, and persistent anxiety can be some prominent factors.Teenagers might become irritable, isolate themselves or develop problems with anxiety. On the other hand older people might experience shock and develop physiological symptoms along with depression and anxiety. Loss has been a theme during the pandemic and it has manifested in ways of unemployment, financial losses and layoffs. This has further fueled the anxiety that bereving people have experienced and the resilience has been shaken due to the lack of social, financial and emotional resources.

**3 Conclusion**

The nature of the virus has made Bereavement even more difficult, with individuals unable to see their family members one last time. The process of accepting loss becomes difficult with the uncertainty and helplessness caused by the protocols in the pandemic. Mental health professionals through webinars and other means of social media discussed the impact of individuals getting infected by the virus on the rest of the family. The initial process implied that an individual who tested positive for the virus would be taken away from their homes by the police department, who would then quarantine the individual in a hospital, and declare the house sealed. While family members usually would be involved in taking care of their loved one when they’re ill, they have had to deal with isolation and not help the person recover.

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