

Rhiane Kirkby meets the couples whose relationships have blossomed during lockdown, despite the pressures of the COVID-19 pandemic.

“I don’t want to live every day like it’s my last, [drinking champagne](https://www.readersdigest.co.uk/food-drink/drinks/keeping-the-fizz-in-champagne) (<https://www.readersdigest.co.uk/food-drink/drinks/keeping-the-fizz-in-champagne>) and [eating oysters](https://www.readersdigest.co.uk/food-drink/recipes/preparing-oysters-at-home-how-to-get-it-right) (<https://www.readersdigest.co.uk/food-drink/recipes/preparing-oysters-at-home-how-to-get-it-right>), but I do want every day to matter and to look back and see I didn’t just fritter my time away.” Mary Flavelle’s positive attitude to life has certainly helped her through lockdown, but so too has Harry, her husband of 46 years.

“We’ve been having a great time. We got out our grandson’s Nintendo Wii, had [Spanish nights](https://www.readersdigest.co.uk/lifestyle/travel/the-ultimate-madrid-weekend-guide) (<https://www.readersdigest.co.uk/lifestyle/travel/the-ultimate-madrid-weekend-guide>) in the Costa Del Conservatory and whiled away rainy days with Netflix binges in the Playa Lounge. We’ve kept things fun and interesting, rekindling our relationship and finding each other again.”



Mary and Harry hadn't lost each other, but they had been living life in their own bubbles pre-coronavirus, each focused on their own hobbies, interests and friends. "Lockdown changed things (<https://www.readersdigest.co.uk/health/wellbeing/how-to-find-lockdown-mental-health-help>), it forced us together, showed us how fragile life is and how easy it is to take things for granted. We thought, if it's sink or swim, then we're jolly well going to do this together."

The headlines may have us believe that Mary and Harry are exceptions, rather than the rule and with bumper divorce rates (<https://www.bbc.com/worklife/article/20201203-why-the-pandemic-is-causing-spikes-in-break-ups-and-divorces>) anticipated this year and fewer nuptials than ever before it's easy to jump to that conclusion. But those statistics only show one side of the story. Research carried out by the Open University* in July last year found one in four people felt their relationship had strengthened over lockdown, compared with one in 10 who said things had got worse.

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"I was so nervous about moving in with my boyfriend," admits Gracie Tyrrell, co-founder of Squirrel Sisters. "It was something I'd really struggled to get my head around. I'd had a bad experience in the past and although we'd talked about getting a flat, it's not something we seriously considered. Then lockdown happened and we didn't really have a choice. It was a great opportunity to test whether it works, and I can honestly say it's been absolutely amazing."

Gracie credits communication and openness for this "really easy" transition and says both she and her partner, Aaron have made a real effort to be aware of each other's feelings. "I think we've been more cautious than we might have otherwise been. We talk about issues straight away and don't let things build up. You just can't let that happen if you're stuck together 24/7 in a small space."



“By spending much more time together, couples have been able to connect and really get to know each other,” explains relationship coach and counsellor Juliette Smith (<https://www.juliettesmith.co.uk>) (above), who has just launched the UK’s first online DIY relationship coaching course “without the distractions of ‘normal life’ getting in the way. This intense period of time has given people the chance to focus on their relationship and build it, often dealing with issues they haven’t had the time or energy to work on before.”

Ria Jones describes this past year as an awakening. “Since having children, we’d become a really strong family unit, but our relationship had suffered as a result. We were fine with this—or so we thought—but the last few months have really forced us to reassess and make sure we spend time as husband and wife, as well as Mummy and Daddy.”

Whilst COVID has had a truly positive impact on some relationships, it's been catastrophic for others. "When we're under intense stress our body's systems are programmed to prioritise survival, so we disconnect emotionally from others and our tolerance is reduced. This isn't the only reason relationships have been put under strain, but it's a huge contributing factor," explains Juliette. "COVID hasn't necessarily caused cracks to appear, in all likelihood they were there already, but it has exacerbated them."



So, as we start to take tentative steps back to some sort of normality how do we begin to repair the damage that's been done? "If you're struggling, focus on reconnecting," advises Juliette. "You can't deal with issues unless you're a team, working together. Support each other and apologise if you made a bad choice. Talk about how you're feeling, ask for what you need and really, really listen. But above all, make an effort. You really need to nourish a relationship to make it flourish, whether it's in a good place or not."

For Juliette, this doesn't mean grand gestures like trips to Paris and eye-wateringly expensive dinner dates, which is perhaps as well as both are off the menu right now. Instead, it's about showing your partner every day that you love

and appreciate them.

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"We've realised we don't need to do or spend a lot to have fun and be happy," says Gracie. "We've made a real effort to do things together, like going for a walk every morning and we show interest in each other's passions. We've turned small occasions into bigger ones—dressed up for date nights, cooked lovely dinners and learnt that these simple things really are enough."

"Harry has been my rock through all of this," says Mary, "and I tell him that. We've faced something that could kill us—together. I'm not taking him or anything else for granted, now or ever."

*Research commissioned by the relationship app, Paired.

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