

Love in Lockdown

How the Pandemic Affects Dating and Relationships for
Emerging Adults

Emily Fego

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ABSTRACT

The longform feature article documents how young people navigate dating and relationships during the COVID-19 pandemic. During this time in their lives, young adults are meant to explore their identity and find out who they are and who they want to surround themselves with. They can meet lifelong friends at college and even find their lifelong partner. But, for the most part, socialization has been put on hold this past year due to COVID-19. Finding a new romantic partner seemed especially difficult with strictly online dating platforms. Social distancing guidelines made the prospect of safely going on dates nearly impossible. Those already in relationships faced the challenges of maintaining a long-distance connection when they might have only lived a block away from each other. Others felt trapped with only the company of their partners during stay-at-home orders. The article addresses these challenges with expert insight from psychologists who provide advice and hope for the future of young love.

KEY WORDS:

Journalism, Emerging Adults, Love, Dating, Relationships, COVID-19, Pandemic, Isolation, Psychologists, Human Connection, Mental Health.

Emma Reifschneider focused her eyes on the window and willed the sun to rise in the sky. She and her boyfriend Ryan¹ were having a weekend getaway at his apartment in New Paltz, New York. Ryan's apartment didn't have air conditioning, and the two fans pointed toward the bed merely recirculated the stale August air around the room. The only relief Emma had, however fleeting, was the cool breeze she felt on her legs when she thrashed beneath the sheets. Unfortunately, her moving legs caused the bed to shift, waking Ryan and prompting him to groggily drape his arm, slick with sweat, over her body. She was suffocating.

Emma could feel the walls of the room closing in on her. She knew her relationship of six months was over. Emma was 20 years old, but she had never had a boyfriend before. She jumped at the opportunity to enter the world of dating with Ryan, a fellow theater major. Emma was glad that her first experience in a relationship would be something she would ease into with a friend. But Ryan, a seasoned dater, had other plans. He told her he loved her just a month into dating. *Was that normal?*

Another fear lingered just beyond the four walls of his bedroom, something even more horrifying than the dishes piled high in his kitchen sink or the empty toilet paper roll in the bathroom: COVID-19.

Emma and Ryan started dating in March, right as the pandemic sent the world into lockdown. Although the timing of the start of their relationship was poor, the couple was luckier than most. When the State University of New York at New Paltz closed campus and shifted to remote learning for the spring semester, Emma and Ryan could still be together. They both went back to

¹ A pseudonym to protect his privacy.

their families on Long Island, only living 30 minutes away from each other. Their summer started with walks in the park and socially distanced backyard hangouts. But as time wore on, the couple started to spend time inside each other's parents' homes. At first it was exciting, even exhilarating, to do something different and risky after months of monotony. But Emma couldn't shake the guilt that came with spending time maskless and indoors with her boyfriend. Her parents never gave her pushback when it came to inviting Ryan into their home; it was Emma who had her doubts. She couldn't bear the thought of possibly getting her parents sick.

The what-ifs dulled the fun Emma expected from a first relationship. She'd replay her shifts at Ace Hardware in her head, wondering if she had truly disinfected every surface or if a customer's bandana mask would really protect her. What if she gave the virus to Ryan after one of her shifts or if she gave it to his family when she joined them for dinner?

Ryan's loose interpretations of COVID-19 restrictions drove a wedge further between them. Emma wasn't seeing her friends because she didn't think it was safe. How was it any more safe to see her boyfriend? Ryan thought it was safe to see Emma because they weren't just friends, they were dating. There was no blueprint to follow and no sure answer to Emma's burning questions. What did or didn't feel safe depended on what part of the news she caught that day—and with Long Island as a persistent hotspot for the virus, most activities didn't feel safe.

Emma couldn't keep up with the pace Ryan set for their relationship and the pandemic made their differences hard to ignore.

“At first it was great because we had each other to lean on,” said Emma. “We were in this little bubble, which was really good for the first couple months and then it was too much. I just wanted to get out of there.”

Emma’s struggle to maintain a relationship during the pandemic illustrates the blend of fear, confusion and isolation many other young people on the edge of adulthood faced. The pandemic scattered them, plucking them from the lives they created for themselves and placing them back in their childhood bedrooms. Some didn’t even have the company of their family and were further isolated in lonely apartments. COVID-19 restrictions made easing loneliness even more difficult, as the prospect of meeting new people shifted almost exclusively online. Couples that never signed up for long-distance dating endured weeks, even months apart—regardless of how far they actually lived from each other. Others longed for distance and felt trapped under stay-at-home orders with only the company of their partners. Those who were without a partner once social isolation began faced another set of challenges: Is spending time with someone you’ve never met worth the possibility of coming face-to-face with COVID?

Human beings are social beings. Although isolation is necessary to slow the spread of COVID-19, it has proven difficult for most people. Maintaining human connection through close relationships has become a crucial part of our survival during the pandemic.

“We are hardwired for what's called the need to belong, the need to be around other people,” said Richard Slatcher, a professor of social psychology and researcher of relationships at the University of Georgia. “If you've ever seen the movie, ‘Cast Away’ with Tom Hanks

shipwrecked on an island, he forms a friendship with a volleyball called Wilson. That's a good demonstration of this effect in the absence of social relationships.”

The human need to connect—it’s a matter of survival

Karla Vermeulen, an associate professor in the SUNY New Paltz psychology department and deputy director of the Institute for Disaster Mental Health, has been conducting research for her upcoming book on what she calls “generation disaster.” She is investigating how emerging adults have been affected by stressors related to coming of age in a post-9/11 world. Vermeulen suggests that the subsequent wars, systemic racial injustice and the economic recession that followed the attacks on September 11, 2001 have created a unique set of challenges for those now 18 to 29 years old that may not be fully understood or felt by other generations.

According to Vermeulen, what we experience during a natural disaster, such as a hurricane—or even a traumatic event like a terrorist attack—is very different from what we experience in a pandemic. That experience deviates from the typical timeline of recovery since there is still no clear end in sight. Our nervous systems are not equipped to cope with such prolonged exposure to a threat that could trigger a fight or flight response.

“The best source of comfort and support for people is social connection,” said Vermeulen. “And the fact that [socialization] has been shut down or severely restricted during the pandemic just completely exacerbates what was already difficult for many young people to begin with.”

Vermeulen conducted a survey among 260 young adults. More than 92 percent of respondents reported restricted socialization with friends during the pandemic and more than 76 percent

reported restricted time spent with family. In an effort to make up for this lack of socialization, technology became a lifeline—but with varying success.

Slatcher found similar results as he worked extensively on the topic of social connections through the global research project, “Love in the Time of COVID.” He found that technology alone may not be enough to connect people the same way in-person interactions do, but it has helped many people stave off depression linked to isolation. This is especially important for 18 to 29 year olds since symptoms of [depression](#) and [anxiety](#) are highest among this age group according to the CDC. Slatcher’s research suggests that video chatting with friends and family predicts greater well-being, lower loneliness, greater happiness with life and lower rates of depression.

After not seeing her friends for months, Emma was initially elated when their familiar faces filled her screen. But the excitement wore off quickly after the calls ended. She was painfully reminded of what she and her friends were missing out on. When Emma moved back home with her parents, she missed her independence. But most of all, she missed her friends.

Caitlin Malczon, Emma’s roommate and close friend, felt a similar void in her central Connecticut home. She was completely isolated from her New York college friends.

“On FaceTime, it's not the same as sleeping five feet from each other. If you can't sleep, you can't roll over and ask if they're still up,” said Caitlin. “[At school, we] would talk for hours and eventually somehow fall back asleep. It’s just a different dynamic.”

Still, the two made the best of the situation and would spend their days in isolation watching shows like “High School Musical: The Musical: The Series” together on FaceTime. Emma often vented about her relationship with Ryan to Caitlin, rattling off a list of all of the things that he did—big and small—that got under her skin. Even though Caitlin and Emma were no longer living the width of a dresser and a mini fridge away from each other, they kept in close touch.

At the end of August, Caitlin returned to New York for the fall semester at SUNY New Paltz. She was never so glad to see such a mess in the common area of her suite. It meant her friends were back. As Caitlin made her way to her room, she noticed a woman standing in the doorway. After spending so many months apart, she almost didn’t recognize her own roommate.

“I could not have been more excited to see her—I probably could have cried,” said Caitlin.

“When we went to bed, I rolled over and saw her there and I was so relieved to know that we were getting back to something better than what it had been.”

Soon after Emma moved back to campus, she decided that it was time to sever her ties with Ryan. He still couldn’t understand her hesitation when it came to spending time together and mixing her pod of seven suitemates with his two housemates. But even without the pressures of COVID, Emma knew the relationship wouldn’t have lasted. She and Ryan had completely different expectations in what they were looking for in a relationship. The pandemic just accelerated a process that was already set in motion.

Later that fall, Emma sat down with Caitlin and told her that she identified as bisexual. Caitlin, who also identifies as bisexual, said that she could not have been more excited for Emma. Emma explained that the period of isolation gave her the space to reflect on her identity. Before the pandemic, friends used to prod her about her sexuality, suspecting she wasn't straight. Emma wanted to reckon with her sexuality on her own terms.

“We say that lockdown was negative but it was actually positive for a lot of people. [Many] felt more safe and secure in some ways from their home to show more of themselves,” said relationship and trauma psychotherapist in London, Silva Neves. “There’s also the sense of ‘I don't want to waste more time of my precious life to live a lie or to pretend.’”

Since Emma and Ryan broke up, she has dabbled a bit on Tinder, but has avoided anything serious, finding dating in the pandemic unsatisfying. And she is not alone. According to Slatcher in his survey of 5,000 people from 57 different countries, most people who were single have diverted their focus away from dating. Instead, they strengthened family bonds and friendships.

Sebastian, a 21-year-old resident of Brewster, New York, leaned on friendships more heavily this past year. He is grateful for how technology has allowed him to stay in touch with close friends. But overall, Sebastian said that an exclusively online connection is not enough.

Sebastian described Tinder, the one avenue he has for meeting someone romantically, with all the passion he'd have for buying toilet paper on Amazon. “I absolutely despise having to create a relationship out of thin air from two people swiping on each other's faces,” he said. “When you are in person and you sit there and you have a conversation with each other, looking each other in the eyes, you understand them a lot better than just texting them. I can't put my entire

personality into a text message. So I've shied away from any sort of love connection during this quarantine.”

Young adults pushed into adulthood too soon

Sebastian lives at home with his older brother and three family members who fall into the at-risk category for COVID-19. His father has smoked since he was 11 years old, which caused him to develop chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD). According to the [CDC](#), Sebastian’s father’s diagnosis puts him at an increased risk for severe illness if he were to contract COVID-19. Sebastian also lives with his mother, who is 60, and his grandmother, who is 93. The CDC also [reported](#) that risk factors seem to correlate with age, with those who are 85 and older being most at risk. Sebastian works at a tile showroom in Bedford, New York, and he worries about contracting the virus from customers. He doesn’t want to compound the risk with in-person socializing. For that reason, Sebastian has kept the bubble of friends he has seen in the past year small.

There comes a point in every child's life when their relationship with their parents is reversed and the child takes on the role of caregiver. Typically this transition happens much later in life, when emerging adults become adults and adults become elderly. But COVID may be accelerating that timeline. Since the risk of hospitalization or even death due to the virus correlates with age, young people are faced with putting part of their mental well-being aside for the protection of their parents or grandparents. According to Neves, this constant reminder of looming death is leading to an existential crisis among young adults, as well as heightened anxiety regarding the safety of their loved ones. The act of moving back home and being physically responsible for parents or grandparents—or worrying about them from a distance,

avoiding contact for their protection—can also affect the typical developmental cycle for this age group.

“Usually emerging adulthood is a time where they separate from their parents, start new relationships, new and exciting careers, and it's all about them,” said Neves. “Suddenly, now it's becoming a period of time where people are actively thinking about their parents, and they are wanting to listen to them and take care of them.”

According to Neves, such a change in the developmental cycle for young people could lead to a pattern of delayed separation between adults and their children in the years to come. The full extent of this shift in responsibilities is largely unknown.

The road to healing

Micah Alexandre, 23, worked at a hospital during the pandemic. She would arrive at New York-Presbyterian Hospital as early as 7 a.m., draped in a medical gown, wearing two, sometimes three pairs of gloves and a face shield with an N95 mask for extra protection. But Micah was not a medical professional. She was a college student working part time as a medical records clerk, hoping to chip away at her \$200,000 in college debt.

“It was mentally draining,” Micah sighed. “I watched people come in who were barely able to say their names. I saw people I would probably never see again. They might not have even lived after they left that tent.”

During her nine months working at the hospital, Micah was face-to-face with what most people only saw depicted on the news from the comfort of home. Micah would often return from a shift at the hospital, burnt out and emotionally drained, to find her boyfriend of two years, Steven Bishop, 24, in the same spot she left him. Steven lost his job as a mover at the start of the pandemic. He said video games helped to pass the time because he too was frustrated with his unemployment status. But Micah said she felt like she was growing from the challenges of the pandemic while he remained stagnant.

Neves said trauma can create an opportunity for growth and drastically change someone's perception of life. But this growth can be problematic when it is only experienced by one individual in a relationship. "When you see somebody who's not changing and doing nothing all day long, they're actually not growing, but they're also regressing. So then the gap gets so much bigger," said Neves.

Micah and Steven fought often, which pulled them further apart. But they couldn't stray too far from each other since Micah lived with Steven in his dad's home in Brewster, New York.

"It was a decent sized room but we were right next to each other 24/7," said Steven. "There was no space for 'me time' for either of us."

A turning point came when Steven found a new job working to restore cable and WiFi to homes, which relieved the couple's financial strain. But with every resolved issue came a new obstacle. In November 2020, Micah was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis (MS).

"My whole perspective of life changed because if they didn't diagnose it, I could potentially have started losing mobility. I could have lost my ability to walk and talk," Micah said.

Micah's diagnosis put the couple on high alert. According to the [Multiple Sclerosis Association of America](#), a person with MS has a malfunctioning immune system, which could have caused a more severe case of COVID-19 for Micah. Even though the couple followed the necessary protocols, Micah contracted COVID-19 in February. Fortunately, her most notable symptom was loss of taste.

Micah and Steven are trying to stay optimistic despite the challenges. They recently upgraded their living situation by moving into Micah's parents' home in Pawling, New York. No longer confined to a single room, they are glad to have their own space. While Steven plays video games after work, Micah has her own space to study. She is pursuing a masters degree in business administration at Sacred Heart University.

“We started off 2020 with looking for houses and apartments and then COVID halted everything,” said Micah. “Now that we are both working we can get back to resuming those goals we had.”

What happens next?

The pandemic has infiltrated every aspect of our lives to varying degrees. We dream of normal times with our hearts racing at the smallest taste of life before COVID. The truth is, it might be a while until normalcy is restored. Even when words like “quarantine” and “vaccine” become part of the past, there is no way of predicting the residual damage of the pandemic, particularly on the relationships and social lives of young adults.

For those anxious about re-entering the dating scene, Slatcher suggests slow vaccine rollout will help make resocialization more gradual. The best advice he can offer? Get vaccinated. The sooner this happens, he said, the sooner young people can get back to dating and socializing

freely. However, Slatcher is unsure of how bonds that were strengthened during the pandemic will fare once the bustle of our everyday lives is restored.

Vermeulen says some emerging adults in her survey indicated they feel “cheated,” having missed out on college experiences and trying to enter a job market that doesn’t look anything like the one they’d expected.

“For emerging adults, you’re just on the cusp of really coming into your own” she said. “And then not to be able to pursue all those typical developmental milestones, including the fun stuff, it’s understandably really frustrating.”

Vermeulen’s advice for young people feeling like they’ve missed out on their best years is to have patience. It may seem like the end of the world when you find yourself in the middle of a disaster, but society eventually finds a way to heal and to stabilize.

“I think this will make [young people] stronger—make them appreciate certain parts of life more. I mean, what’s it gonna be like to be in a restaurant again or a bar again or going to a movie theater again or just being with family again?” said Vermeulen. “I really hope this will give us some appreciation of what we took for granted before.”

Neves is hopeful that young people will pave the way for generations to come. Perhaps more of them will be more confident in their identity given the period of self-discovery experienced by many. Maybe some will continue to expand their search for love by using more online dating platforms while others rush back to the old-fashioned way of dating. But for certain, people of all ages are going to need time to grieve for who and what was lost during the pandemic. And what comes next will be up to us.

“Nobody talks about going back to normal now because I don't think there's any going back,” said Neves. “But the new world will also have different opportunities and the young people now will be the first generation to pave the way for how to navigate this new world.”