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The Relationship Health Report

2020 Edition



ABOUT THE REPORT

Welcome

2020 has been a monumental year and the impact of it on our closest relationships will be felt for a long time.

In October 2020, we set out to get answers to some important questions, such as: How has 2020 impacted our relationships? What has it done for our mental health and how has that impacted our relationships? Are more people actually getting divorced? How have our sex lives been affected? Are millennials and Gen X coping differently and why? Does a strong intimate relationship increase resilience to stress and extreme circumstances?

This report is based on a survey of 1,736 adults based across the US who are or have been in long-term relationships or marriages. I've been saddened, relieved and inspired by the stories I've heard during this project - while COVID-19 has been devastating in so many ways, there are still glimmers of hope for the future.

We're excited to share our results with you.



Lesley Eccles
Founder & CEO
HelloRelish Inc



About Relish

Established in 2018, Relish is a relationship coaching company with an award-winning coaching and self-care app available in the [App Store](#) and [Play Store](#) called Relish. The company is headquartered in New York.

Learn more at
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KEY FINDINGS

- 01 The most significant impact of COVID-19 has been on our mental health**
58% of respondents said the biggest impact they have experienced this year was on their mental health.
- 02 Relationships that would have otherwise lasted longer have been cut short by COVID-19**
68% of respondents who broke up this year believe it might have been due to COVID-19.
- 03 Working women with children have seen the most negative impact**
Amongst parents with children living at home, 41% of working mothers have either quit their jobs, considered quitting or asked for less responsibility at work, compared to only 24% of working fathers. Nearly 20% of working parents don't have access to adequate childcare - twice as many as pre-pandemic.
- 04 A substantial increase in mobile phone use has negatively impacted relationships**
Phone usage is up 23%, with 54% of people saying their partner's use of their mobile phone impacts their relationship.
- 05 Despite more time together, we are having significantly less sex - but we don't mind**
Respondents report having 15% less sex since March, but there was no difference between how much sex people wanted to have, and how much they are currently having.
- 06 Couples who have survived 2020 intact report relationships that are happier than ever**
41% of respondents report that their relationship is better now than pre-COVID-19.

OVERALL RELATIONSHIP HEALTH

Our findings present a picture of couples under significant pressure - particularly those with children and those facing financial stress. They are struggling to find ways to cope with major changes to their home and work lives.

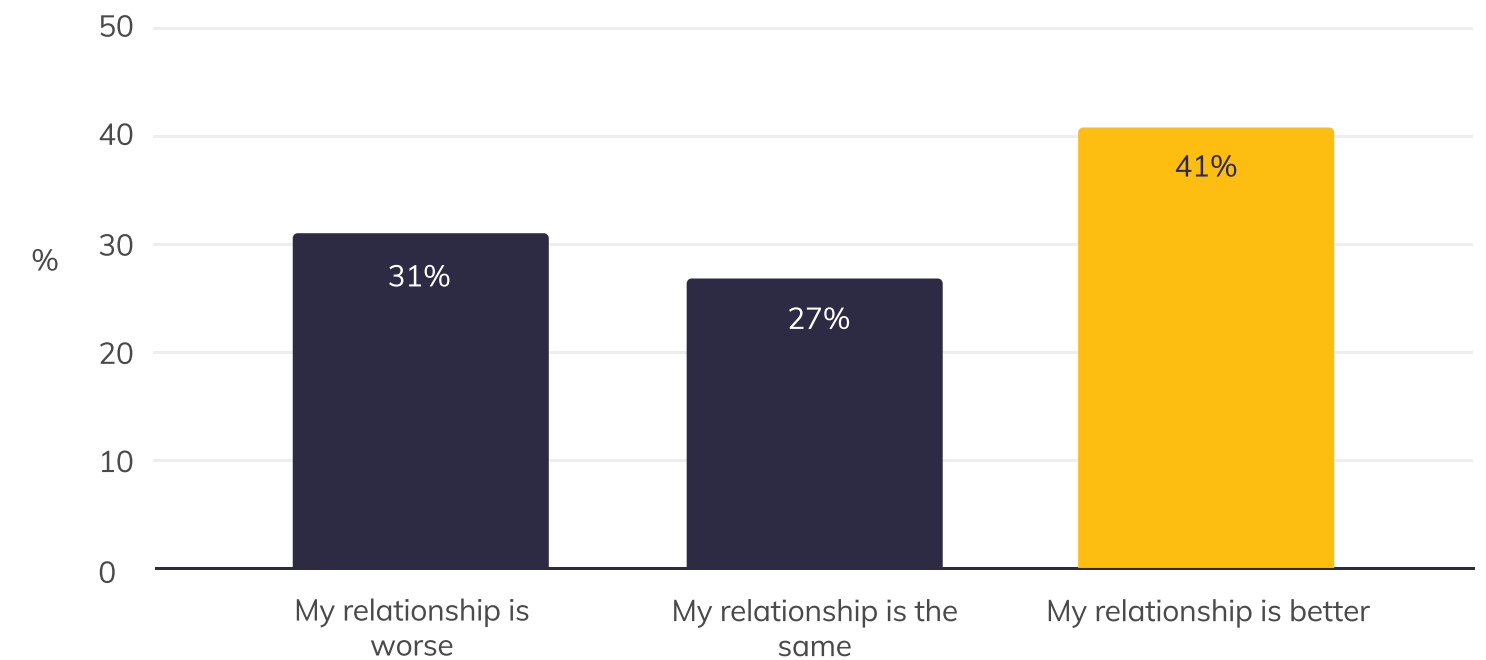
The good news however, is that more people **(41%)** say that their relationship is better this year than say it's worse **(30%)**.

These people describe having strengthened their relationships since the start of the pandemic, having a new appreciation and understanding of their partner, and being more comfortable showing their partner how they really feel.

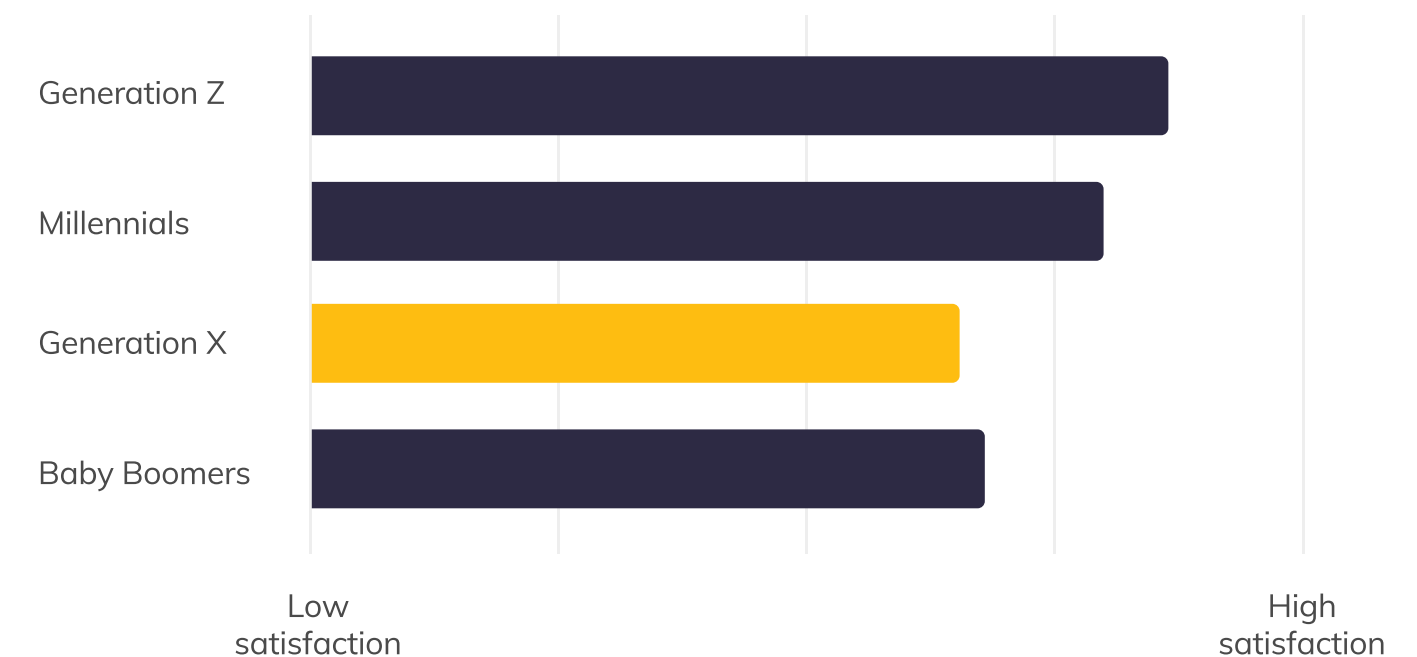
Meanwhile, Gen X, the generation coping with raising children, aging parents and more stressful jobs, report they are the most unhappy in their relationship this year - **23%** less satisfied than the happiest cohort (Gen Z). This generation appears to have been particularly impacted by pandemic-induced stress.

We believe that those couples who have thrived through 2020 can tell us a great deal about post-traumatic growth and resilience in relationships, and how we can support our loved ones and ourselves during stressful times.

How has your relationship changed since the start of the pandemic?



Relationship Satisfaction by Generation





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Mental Health & Stress The New Normal?

“

I always experience anxiety and depression, but due to the pandemic my partner has begun to experience both as well.

It is definitely a different dynamic for both of us to be struggling with our mental health at the same time.

— Research Participant, November 2020

MENTAL HEALTH & STRESS

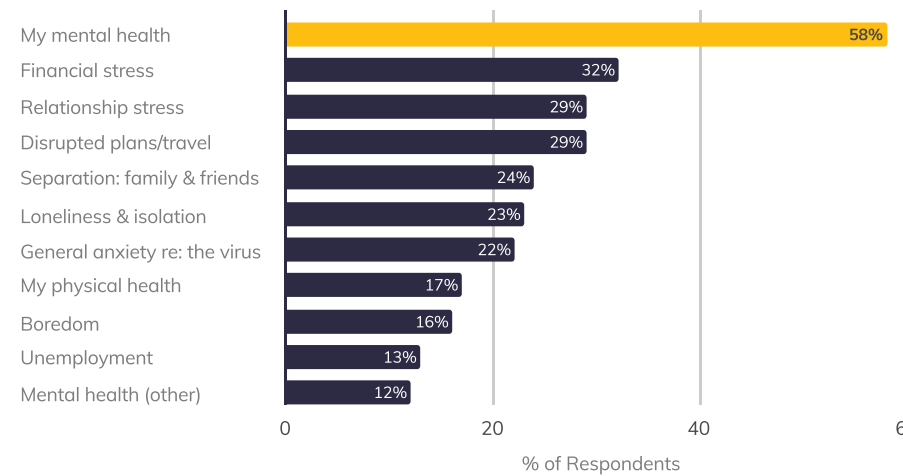
The most significant impact of 2020 - by a long way - has been on our mental health

These results offer a snapshot of the 'new normal' for mental health during COVID-19 - elevated stress, anxiety and depression symptoms.

This is particularly the case for Gen Z individuals, whose mental health is significantly lower than other generations. This reflects the growing mental health crisis in young people, exacerbated by a global pandemic and an uncertain future.

We also see strong evidence for the link between our relationships and mental health - with those in happier relationships also reporting better mental health. This is reflective of extensive research which points to happy relationships as a major predictor of good mental health - and, conversely, unhappy relationships as a predictor of psychological distress¹.

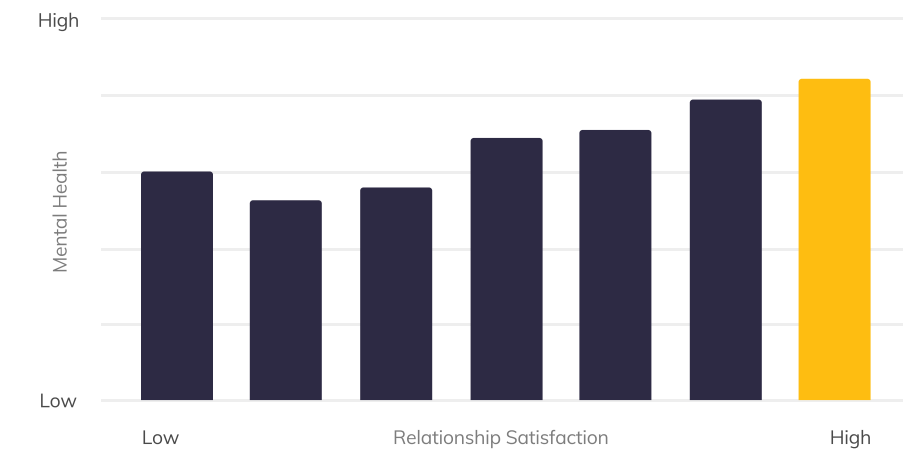
Top three impacts you've experienced as a result of COVID-19?



58% of survey respondents rated their own mental health as the major impact of COVID-19 - above other factors such as financial issues or relationship stress.

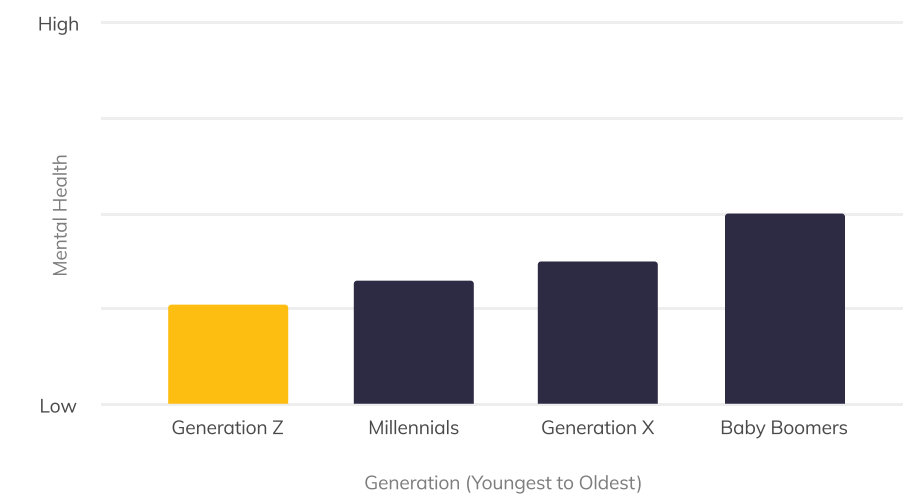
39% of our respondents reported significant anxiety issues and **32%** reported significant issues with depression.

Mental Health vs. Relationship Satisfaction



There is a strong bi-directional association between mental health and relationship health - with those in the happiest relationships demonstrating **27%** better mental health than those in unhappy relationships.

Age vs. Mental Health



Gen Z reports significantly poorer mental health than older generations: **13%** worse than Gen X and **23%** worse than Baby Boomers.

Overall, we observed a positive trend with mental health improving with age.

MENTAL HEALTH & STRESS

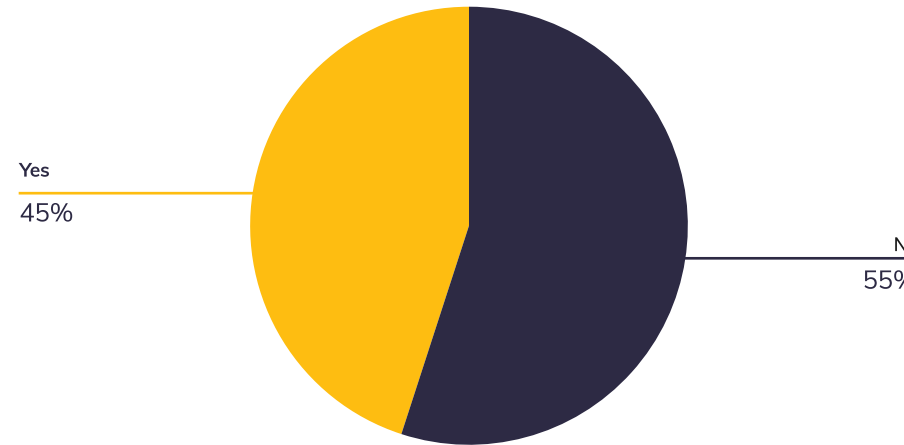
Financial stress has resulted in worse relationship health and impacted our mental health further

There is a well established impact of income on our mental health². Lower income individuals in our sample reported significantly more mental health symptoms than those with higher incomes.

Low income results in a lack of a 'safety net', or buffer for life events, greater stress and vulnerability - which in turn leads to poorer mental health.

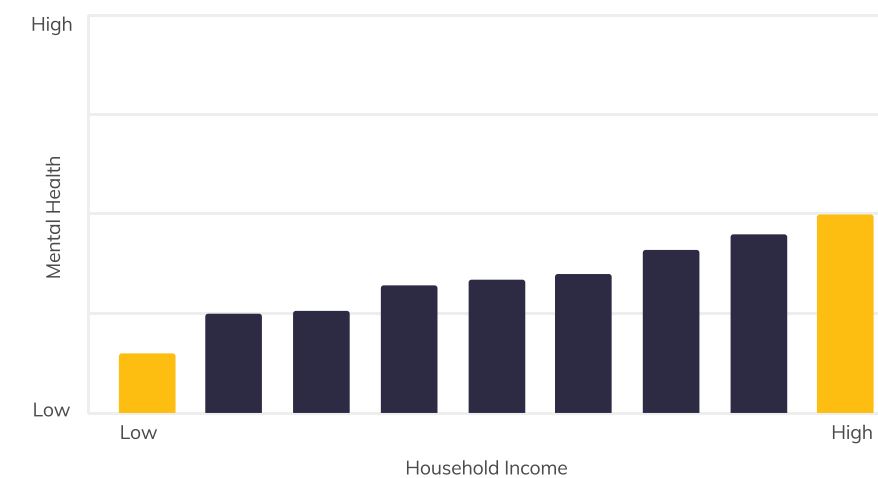
Under financial pressure, a lot of our cognitive resources are focused on questions of survival or housing - rather than how well our relationship is going, or how we can reach our full potential.

Have you or your partner lost your job or experienced a significant loss of income due to COVID-19?



45% of our respondents reported a significant loss of job or income due to COVID-19 - making it clear that financial issues are a reality of daily life for many.

Mental Health vs Household Income



There is a strong association between mental health and household income. Those respondents in the lowest income bracket experienced 26% more mental health symptoms than those in the highest income bracket.

Relationship Satisfaction vs Job or Income Loss



A link between income loss and relationship satisfaction was also found, with couples who had both lost their jobs 11% less satisfied than those who had not lost jobs.

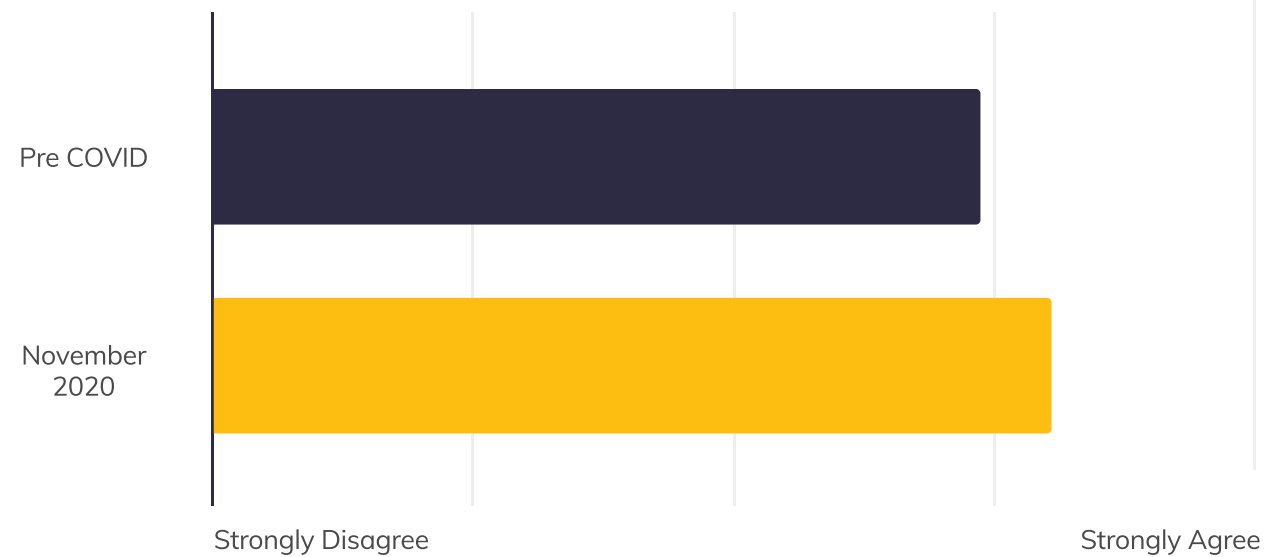
MENTAL HEALTH & STRESS

Under all this stress, we are increasingly using our partners as emotional support

Stress has been found to negatively impact our relationship happiness³, but if we are able to ask for support and speak openly and productively about our emotions, we can actually leverage that stress to strengthen our relationship.

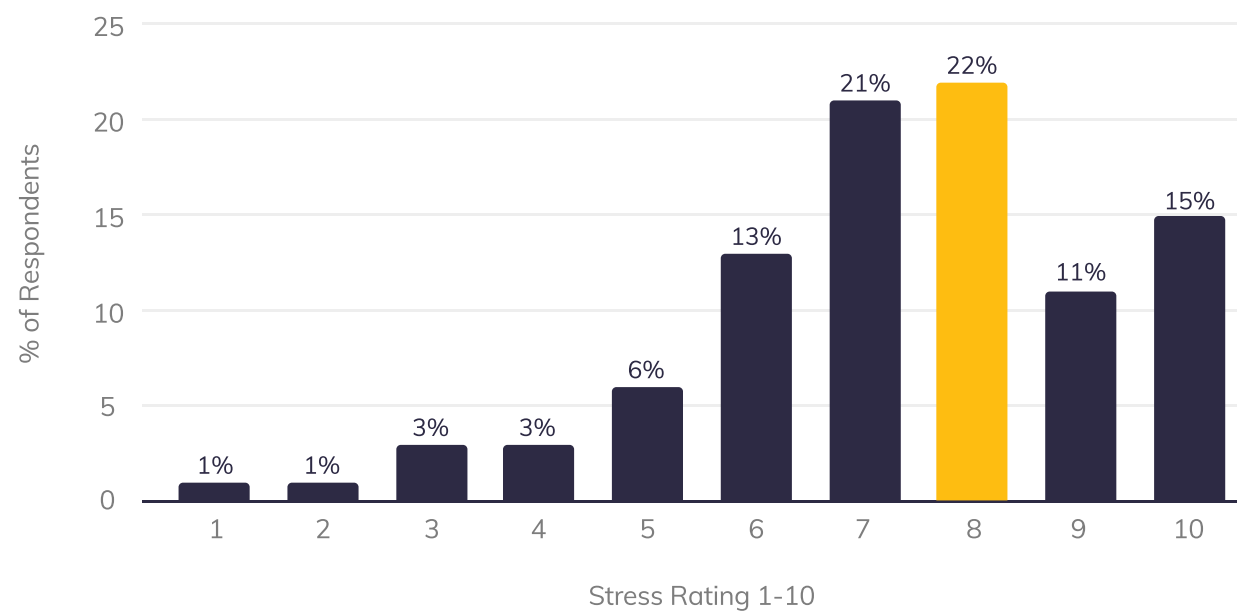
We are seeing people becoming more open with their partners as a way of coping. Although this may not always be comfortable, emotional intimacy is a proven way to help couples cope with stress⁴, and can help us to develop resilience and a growth mindset in our relationship - and a buffer to whatever stresses 2021 will bring.

I feel comfortable showing my partner how I really feel, and sharing my private thoughts and feelings



We found a **9%** increase in how comfortable people felt sharing their personal feelings with their partner - indicating an increase in emotional intimacy and a decrease in emotional inhibition.

On a scale of 1-10, how stressful has the COVID-19 pandemic been for you?



The average respondent rated the stress they've experienced this year as 7.2 out of 10, with **70%** of respondents rating their level of stress 7 or higher.

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The pandemic really brought our weaknesses and shortcomings to light in an almost violent way. I think that the state of the world exacerbated issues that could have otherwise been worked through.

— Research Participant, November 2020

Divorce & Breakups

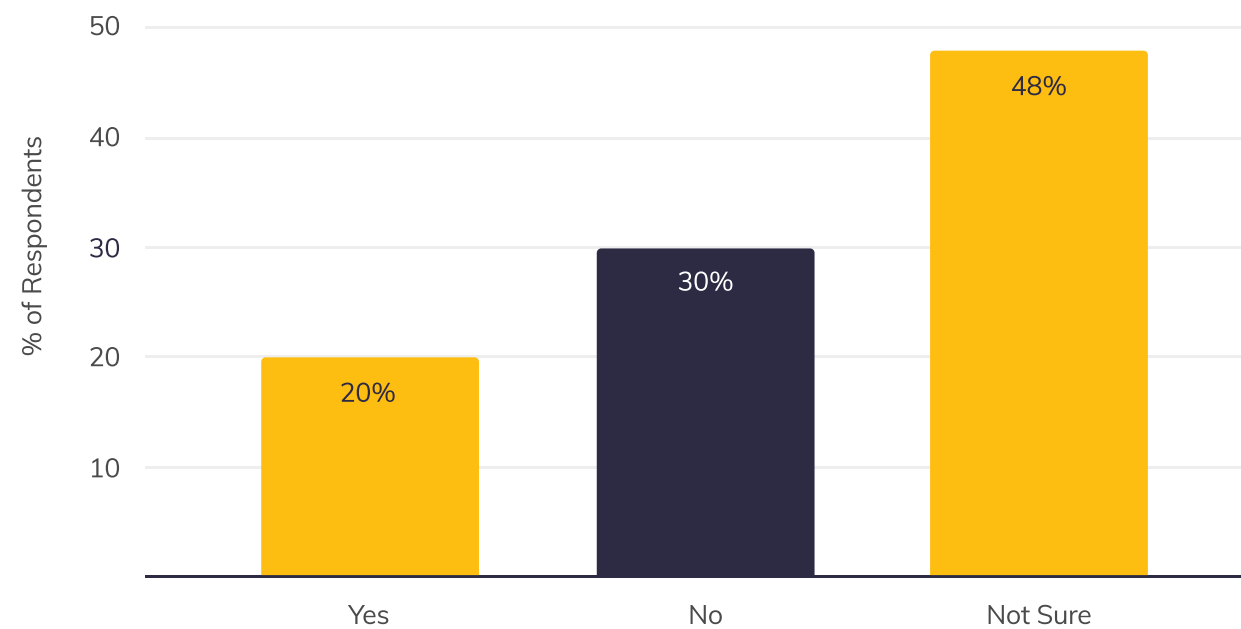
The COVID Pressure Cooker

DIVORCE & BREAKUPS

The pressure of living through 2020 has led to unprecedented and expedited relationship distress for many

Our results fit with the analogy of a 'pressure cooker' - a rocky relationship that is put under even more strain due to quarantining together (not to mention working from home, financial stressors and homeschooling) - meaning that COVID-19 has sadly resulted in the demise of couples who, under different circumstances, may have resolved their underlying issues successfully.

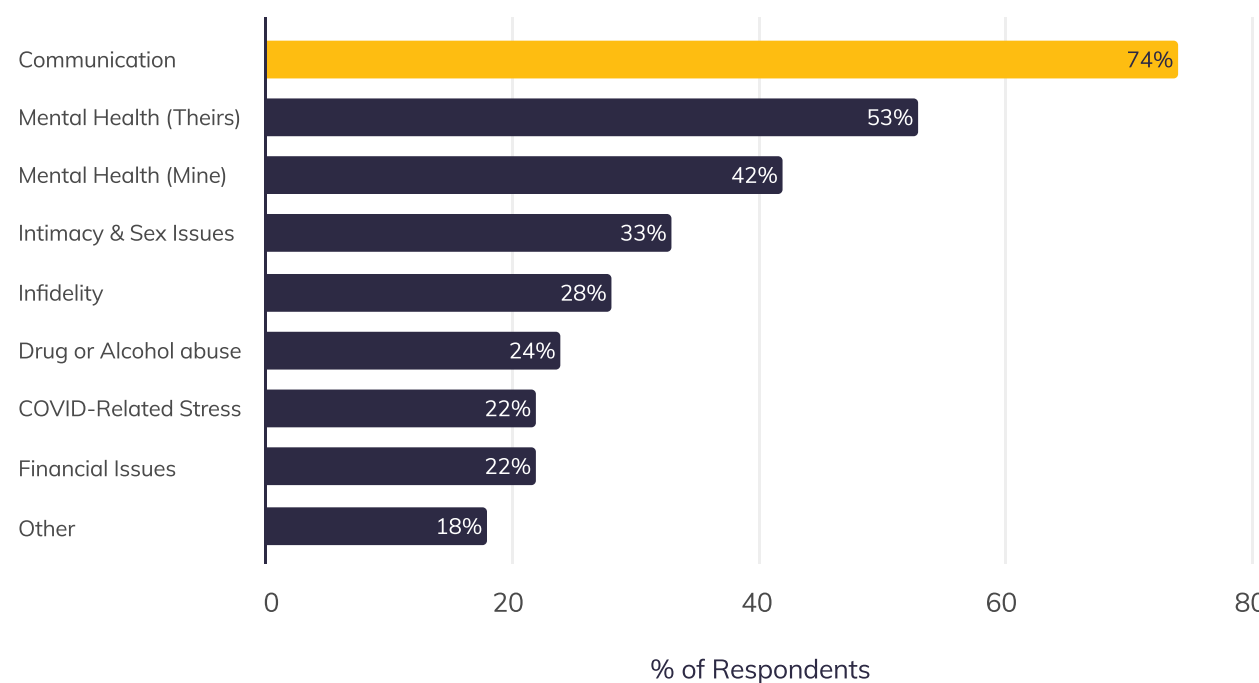
Do you feel you would still be together if COVID-19 hadn't occurred?



Of the respondents who had broken up since March 2020, **20%** believe that they would still be together if not for COVID-19, and an additional **48%** say that they were not sure if they would still be together if not for the pandemic.

Only **30%** were sure that their breakup was nothing to do with COVID-19.

What were the major issues that led to your breakup?



The three most common reasons for a recent breakup were problems communicating (**74%**), ex-partner's mental health issues (**53%**), and their own mental health (**42%**).

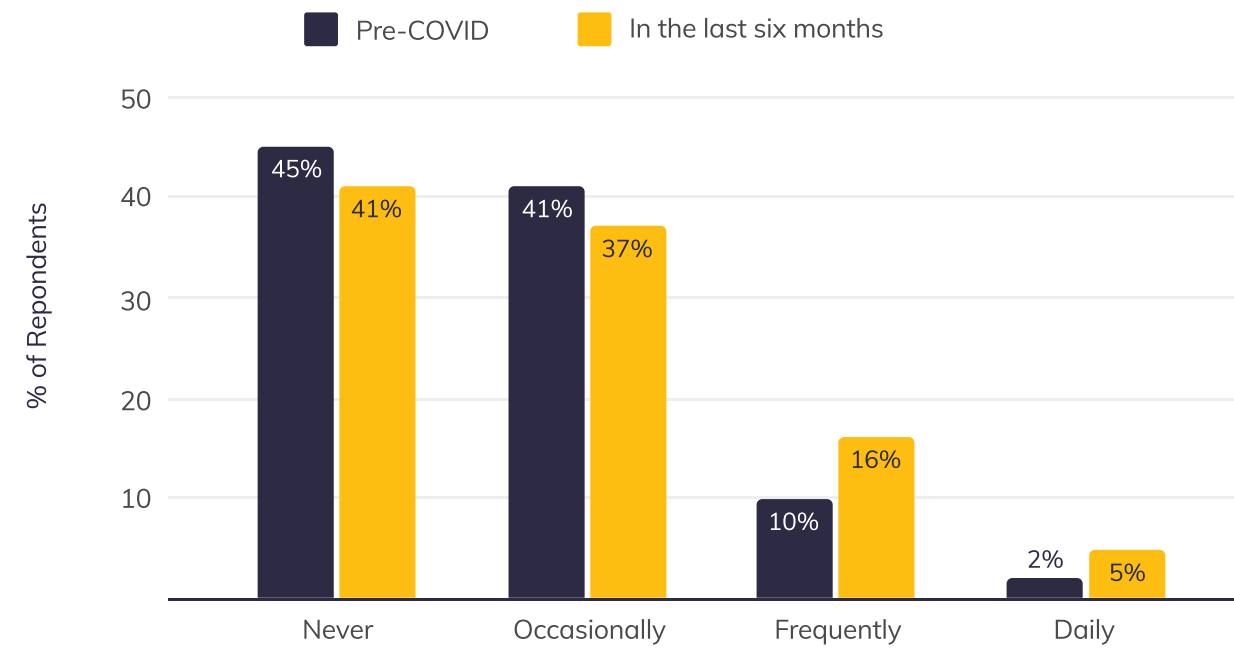
DIVORCE & BREAKUPS

Of those couples who have survived 2020 intact, significantly more of them are thinking about divorce or breaking up

Although most people are not regularly thinking about divorce, a subset of the population is thinking about it more regularly than before. This adds to our emerging picture of the 'struggling' couples whose relationships may have been rocky pre-pandemic - and are becoming more challenging by the day.

In terms of infidelity, the surprise is that despite social distancing and the restricted opportunities to meet people, 9% are still reporting infidelity. While frequency of sex is not associated with infidelity, the factors such as aggression, lower dedication, lower commitment, and suspicion are some major predictors⁵. Emotional infidelity may be more likely than physical infidelity due to lockdown restrictions.

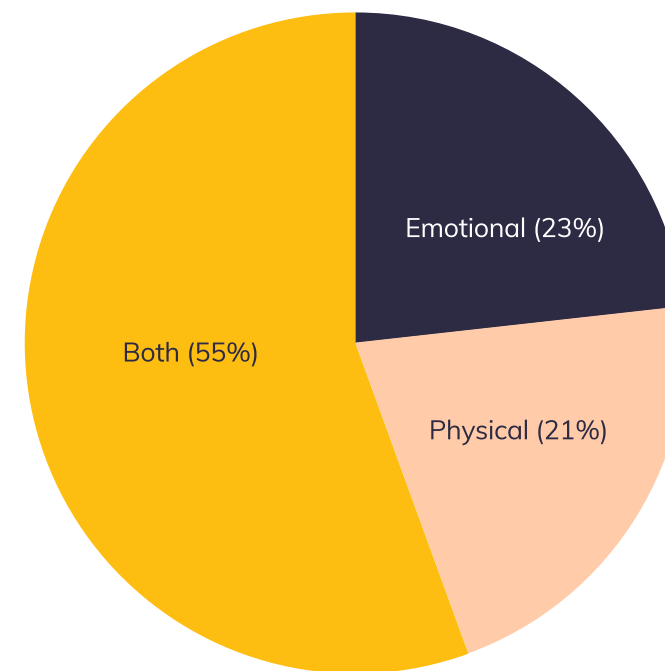
How often have you thought about breaking up?



Significantly more people (**10%**) are thinking about divorce or breaking up now as compared to pre-COVID-19.

The survey also shows a **75%** increase in the number of people thinking about divorce daily or frequently.

Was the infidelity emotional or physical?



26% of our respondents reported experiencing infidelity in their relationships at some point, with **23%** reporting emotional infidelity, **21%** physical infidelity and the majority (**55%**) reporting both emotional and physical infidelity.

Overall, **9%** of people reported infidelity in their relationship during the COVID-19 pandemic.

A woman with glasses and a green hoodie is sitting at a desk, working on a laptop. In the foreground, a baby is lying on the floor, wearing a red shirt and patterned pants. The woman's hand is resting on the baby's back. The scene is set in a home office environment.

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Family Life The Juggle

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My husband was forced to stay at home for 3 months and he has told me that he didn't realize how much I really did for our family.

That means a lot.

— Research Participant, November 2020

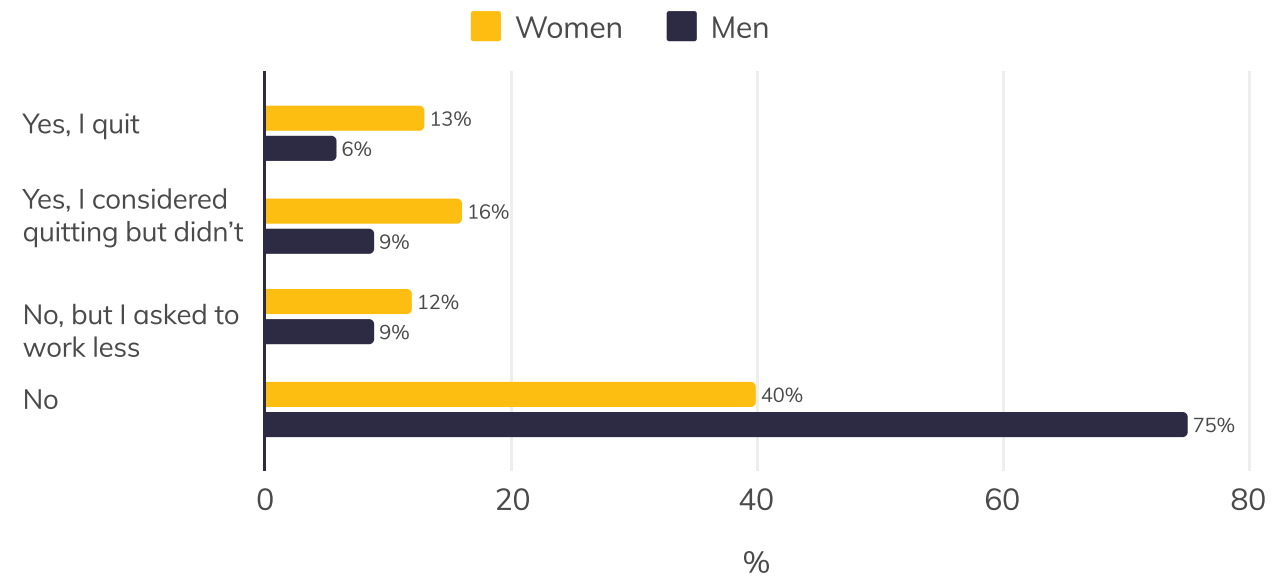
FAMILY LIFE

Changes to schooling and childcare have resulted in a re-evaluation of life choices, primarily for working mothers

Compared to male parents, female parents are being disproportionately impacted by the 'squeeze' of pandemic-related changes - feeling the need to scale back their employment or leave their jobs due to responsibilities at home.

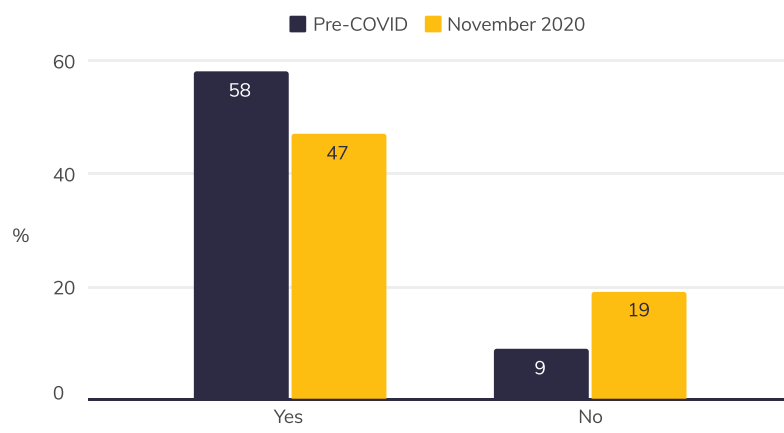
Families in general are under pressure, with twice as many respondents without access to adequate childcare as before the pandemic. Importantly, access to adequate childcare is related to relationship satisfaction - with those respondents who had access to childcare also reporting happier relationships.

Have you quit or considered quitting your job due to COVID-related challenges?



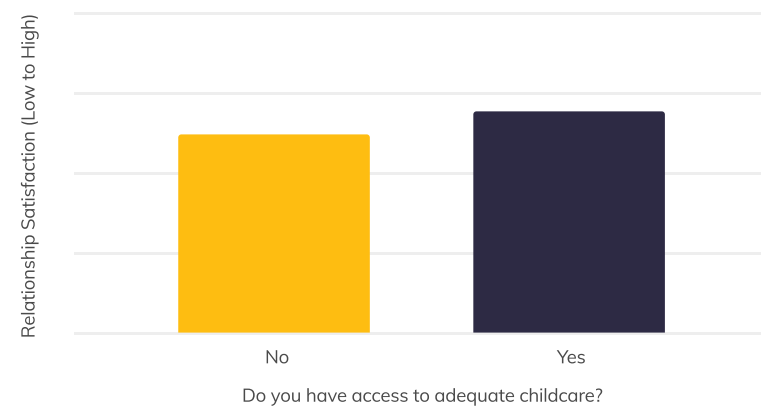
Amongst parents with children at home, **46%** of women had either quit their jobs, thought about quitting or asked for less responsibility at work since COVID-19 - compared to **25%** of men.

Do you have access to adequate childcare?



Nearly **20%** of people reported not having access to adequate childcare - a number that has more than doubled since the pandemic began.

Relationship Satisfaction vs. Adequate Childcare



Respondents who had adequate child care scored on average **7%** higher in terms of relationship satisfaction.

FAMILY LIFE

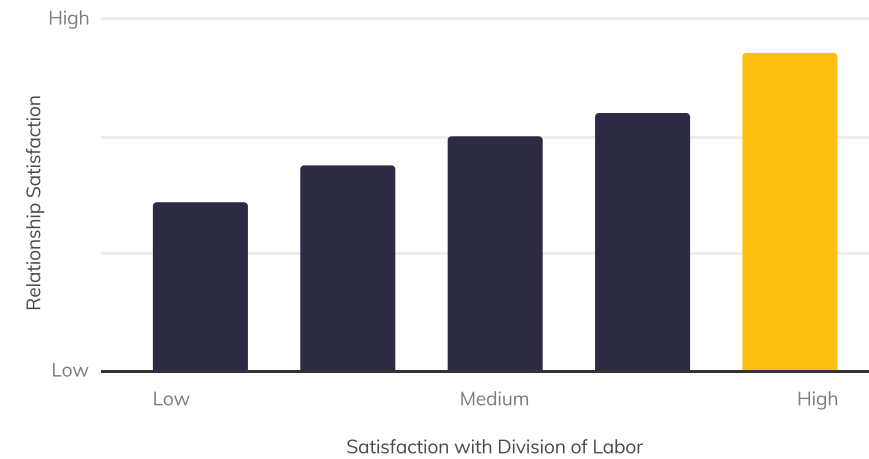
Equity with chores is related to happier relationships and improved mental health

This is a compelling reminder that equity in home duties has a knock-on effect in other areas - with greater satisfaction in the relationship, and better mental health⁶.

Couples who equitably share household chores experience less fighting, greater sexual intimacy, and greater relationship satisfaction⁷.

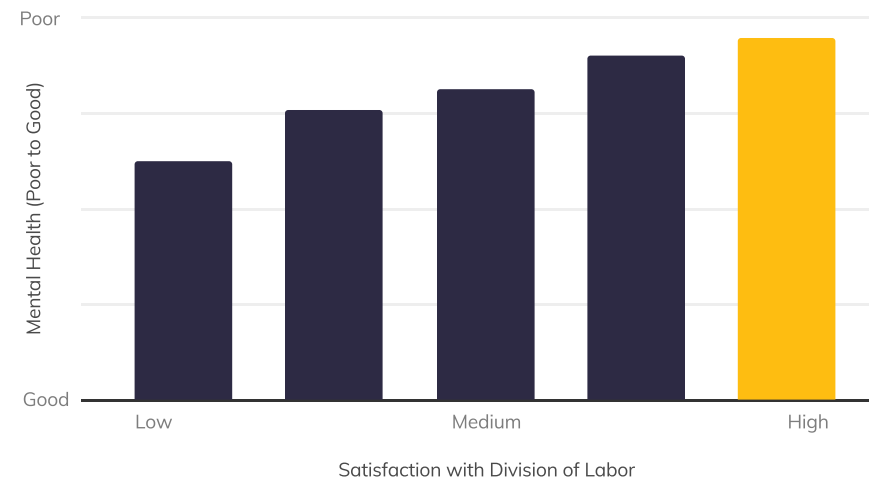
In light of the significant challenges posed by pandemic-related changes to work and childcare, it is more important than ever to work towards equity in the home - particularly due to the clear impact on our mental health and quality of the relationship.

Relationship Satisfaction vs. Satisfaction with Division of Labor



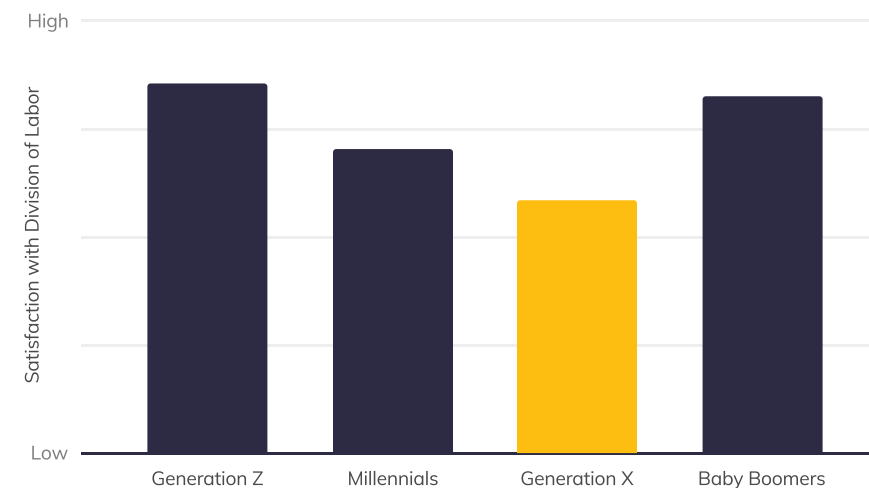
Respondents who were very satisfied with the division of labor at home were **76%** more satisfied in their relationships than those who were very dissatisfied with the division of labor.

Satisfaction with Division of Labor vs Mental Health



Respondents who were very satisfied with the division of labor at home also had **31%** better mental health than those who were very dissatisfied - demonstrating once more the benefits and importance of an equal partnership in the home.

Age vs. Satisfaction with Division of Labor



Out of all the age groups, Gen X (age 40 - 55) reported the lowest satisfaction with the division of labor, and are **27%** less satisfied than Gen Z (23 and under) - likely due to heavier responsibilities in their home and work lives.



Sex & Screen Time The Phubbing Effect

“

I feel like our friendship has grown, but I don't feel like our intimacy has improved. We do life very well together and 2020 has solidified that, but sometimes it just feels like we are great room mates more than wife/husband.'

— Research Participant, November 2020

SEX & SCREEN TIME

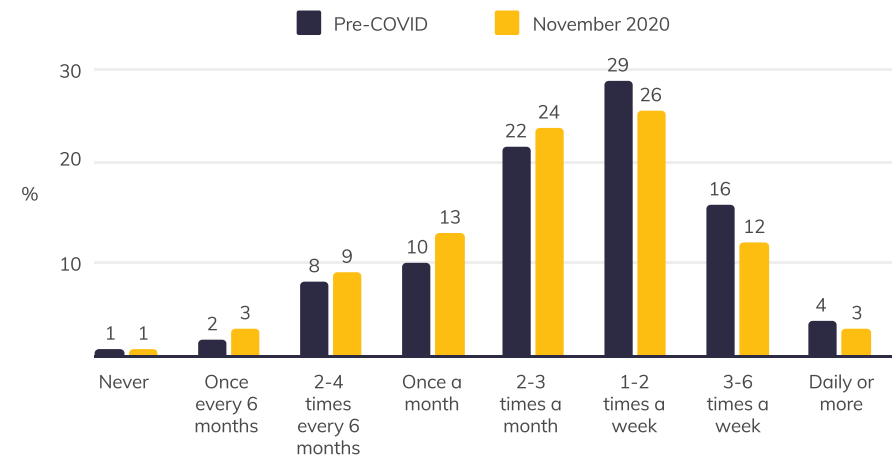
We are having significantly less sex - but we don't mind at all

A drop in sexual activity is understandable, given the link between stress and lower sexual activity⁸. The good news is that since the gap between how often we are having sex and how often we would *like* to have sex is negligible, this should not have a significant impact on our relationship health.

Gen Z is having more sex than Millennials and Gen X, which may be due to having less responsibilities such as work, family and caring for elderly parents. However, we see that even controlling for people with children, Gen Z are still having more sex than Millennials.

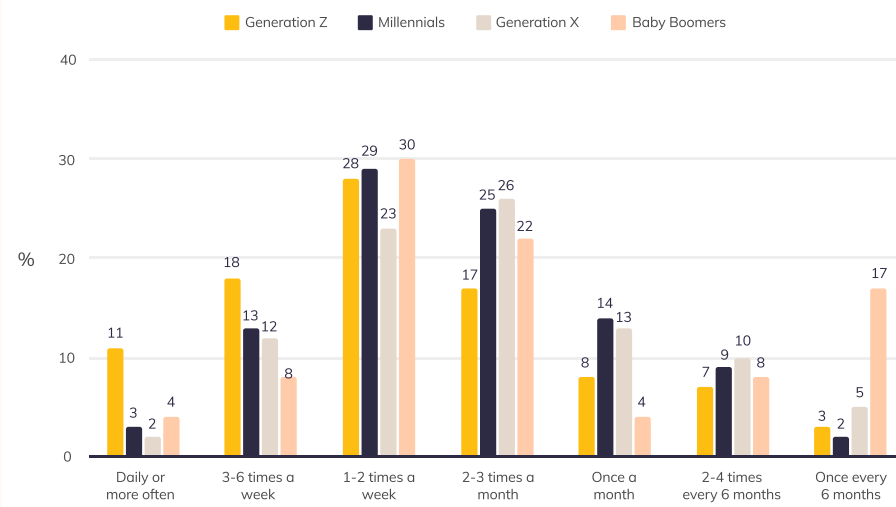
One explanation for this is that both relationship satisfaction and frequency of sex are associated with relationship length - so Gen Z may be benefitting from the 'honeymoon period', since their relationships are likely to have been shorter in duration.

How often did you have sex pre-COVID vs. currently?



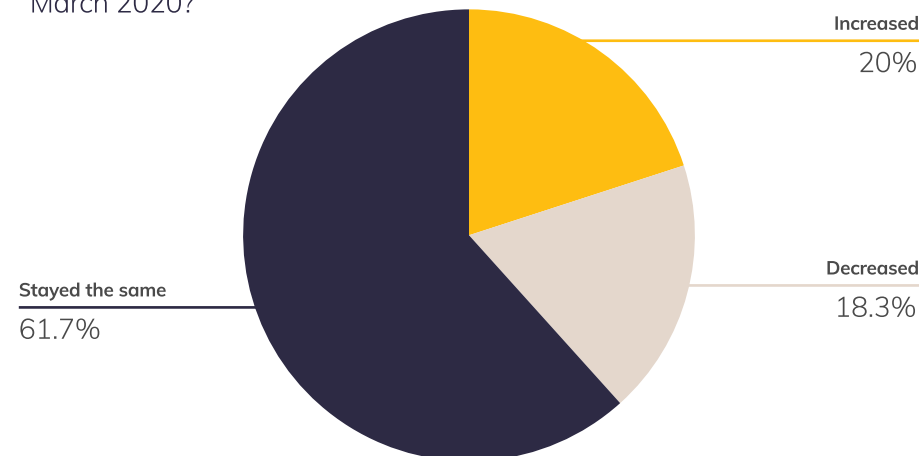
There has been an overall **15%** decrease in how often we are having sex since COVID-19, with **50%** of respondents saying it happens less than once a week (up from 43%).

How often do you and your partner have sex?



29% of Gen Z respondents report having sex three or more times a week, compared with only **16%** of Millennials and **12%** of Gen X and Baby Boomers.

How has your porn usage changed for you or your partner since March 2020?



Porn usage has largely stayed the same this year, with **20%** saying their usage had increased and **18%** saying it had decreased.

12% of respondents report that porn usage has been an issue for their relationship.

SEX & SCREEN TIME

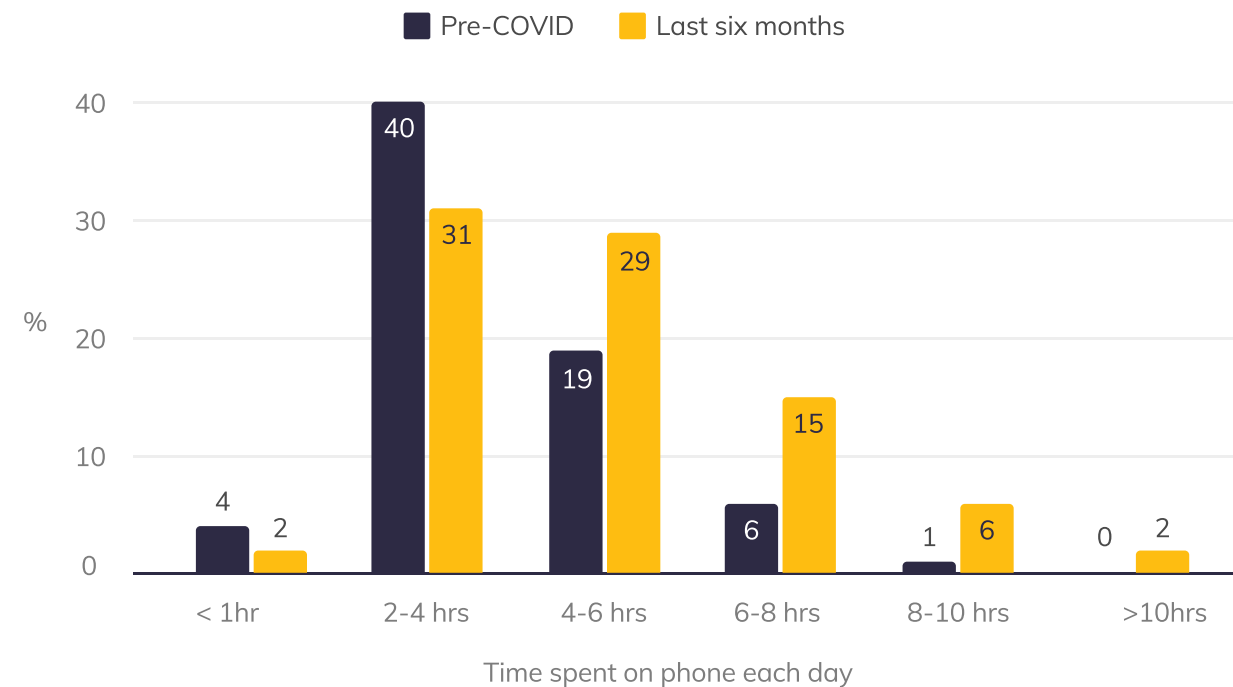
Our phone usage has increased by 23% since COVID-19 - and even happy couples think this is an issue

We are using our phones more than ever, with social media and streaming services offering a temporary escape from a stressful reality.

We can see a rise in issues related to social media and trust in relationships, as well as social media addiction.

The new phenomenon of 'phubbing' - which refers to ignoring our partner in favour of our phone - has emerged as a major issue, with 54% of respondents saying that they felt that their partner's use of their phone while in their presence affects their relationship.

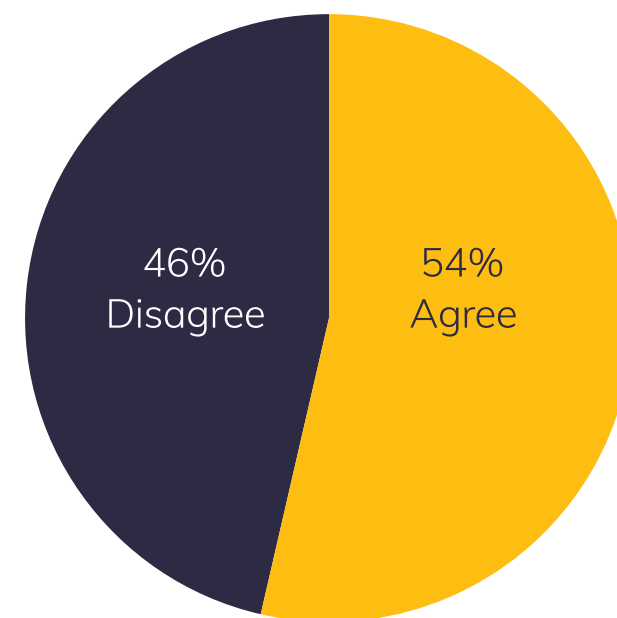
How long do you spend on your phone each day?



The amount of time we're spending on our phones increased by **23%** this year.

39% of people described signs of social media addiction, with **28%** of people reporting that social media use has caused issues in their relationships.

My partner's use of their mobile phone in my presence affects our relationship



54% of respondents felt that their partner's use of their mobile phone impacts their relationship - but we found that phone use was not completely correlated to relationship satisfaction. That is, even happy couples felt like their partner's phone usage was a problem.

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Couples' Resilience The Reset Button

“

I wish working from home would become the new norm. We learnt that being able to kiss each other during the day is the most precious thing ever.

— Research Participant, November 2020

COUPLES' RESILIENCE

A recurring theme for respondents was of having grown as a couple - and of being forced to do things differently

Our results tell the story of two different types of couples - those who are struggling and growing further apart, and those who are adapting and growing closer together.

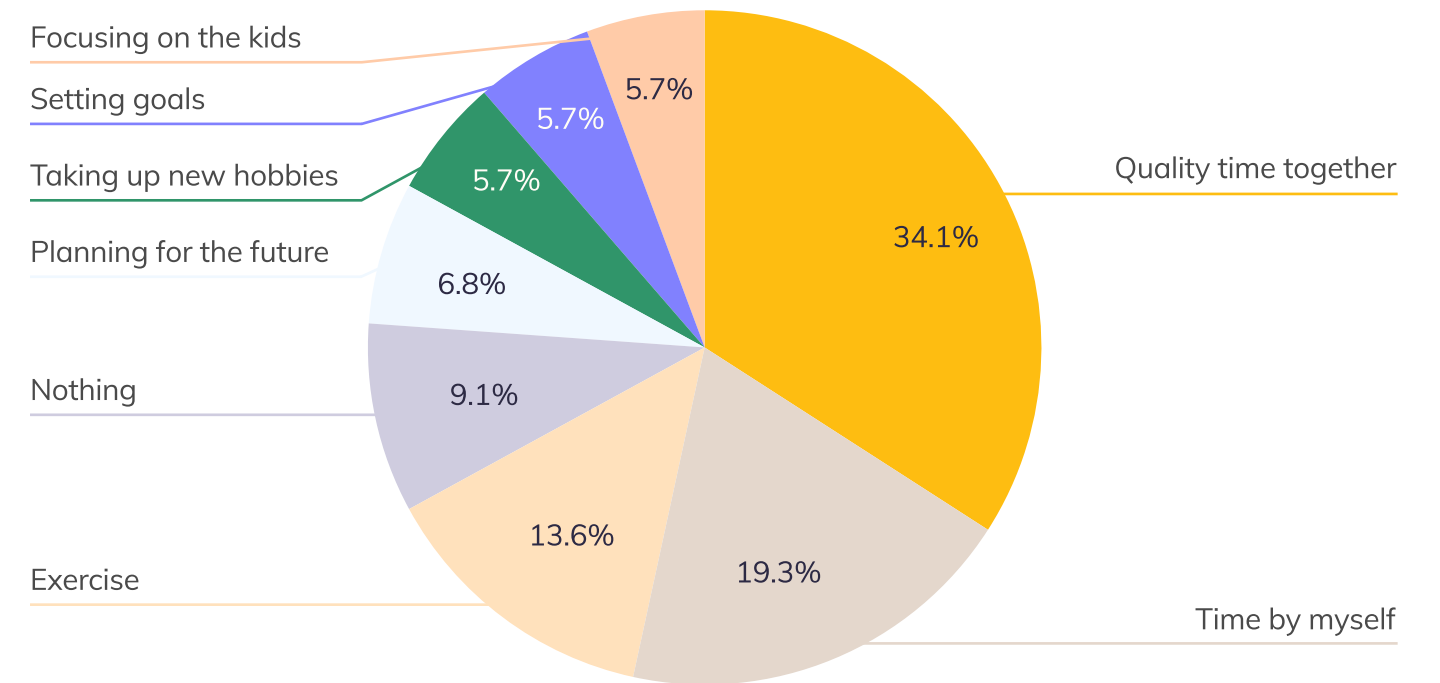
Overall, couples cited quality time together, time alone and exercise as the most useful things they have done for their relationship during COVID-19.

When we compared the happiest and unhappiest couples on this question, we saw that time together and future, goal-directed activities were the activities chosen by the couples who were doing well.

The unhappy couples cited doing nothing, focusing on the kids, spending time alone and connecting with old friends. As useful as these activities might be, they can also be seen as somewhat avoidant - as compared to happy couples, who are intentionally spending time together and working towards the future.

Overall, we can see that - for some couples - this year has helped them to develop resilience and grow in a way they may not have predicted. In the words of one of our survey respondents - **'you can't make diamonds without a little pressure'**.

What has been helpful for your relationship during the COVID-19 pandemic?



The top responses for the unhappiest couples were

- Nothing
- Focusing on the kids
- Couples therapy
- Time by myself
- Connecting with old friends

The top responses for happiest couples were

- Quality time together
- Planning for the future
- Focusing on goals
- Taking up new hobbies
- Exercise

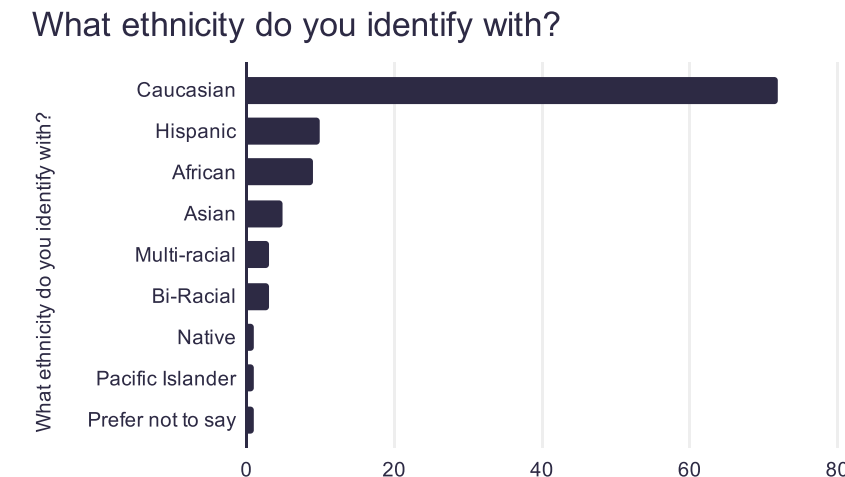
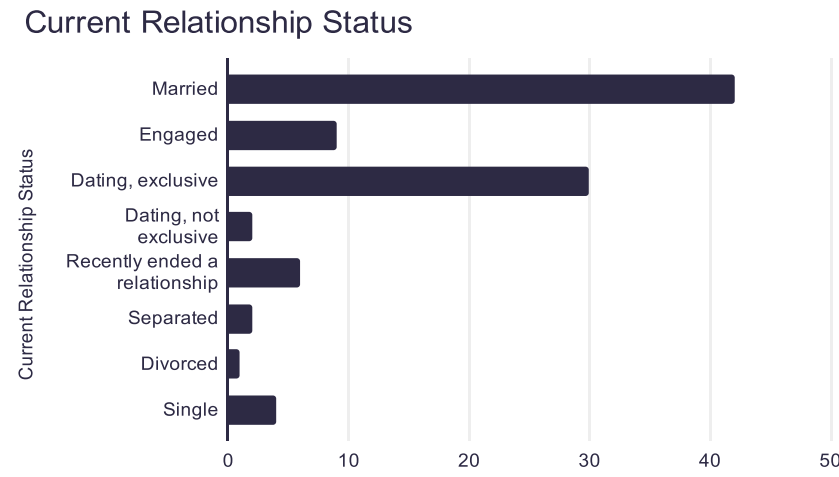
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Demographics & References

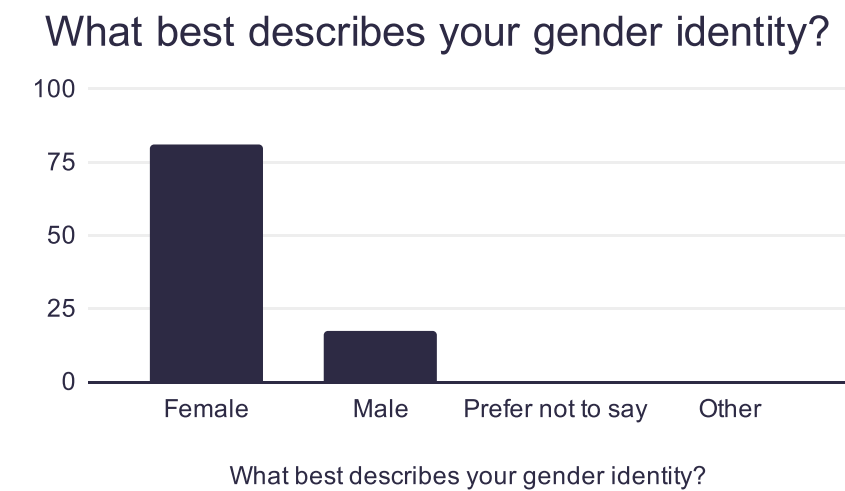
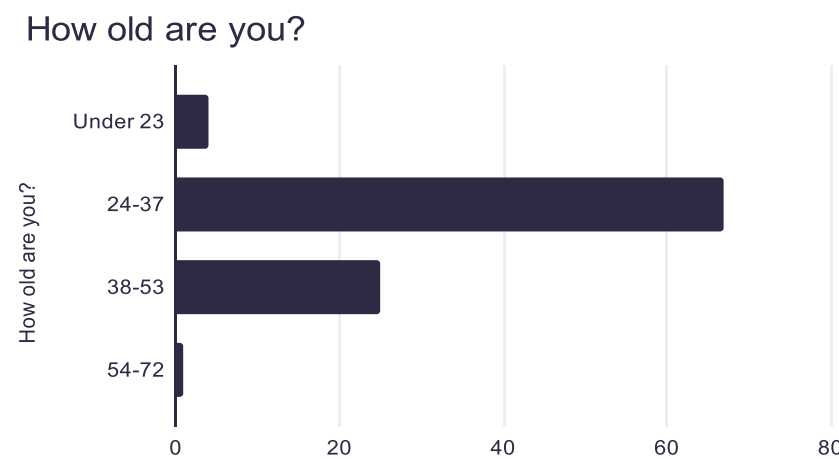
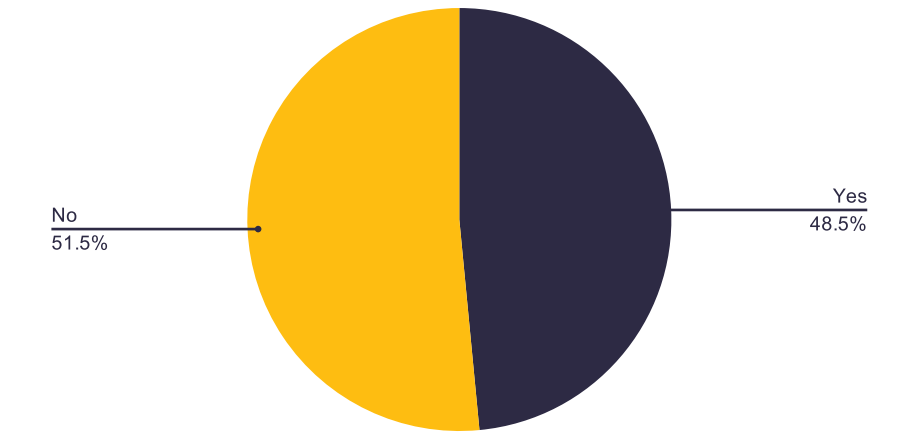
DEMOGRAPHICS

The results of this report are based on a survey of 1,736 adults based across the US who are or have been in long-term relationships or marriages. Results were collected in October & November 2020.

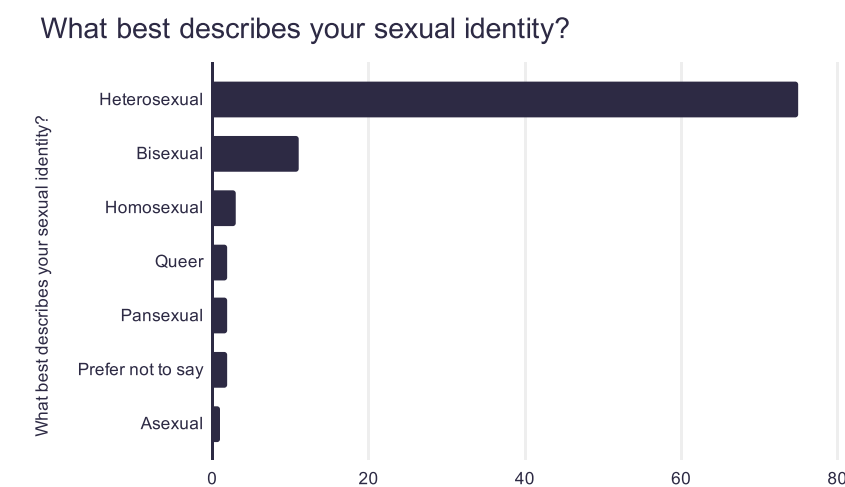
Report created in association with Aimee Hubbard M.A., LAMFT, University of Minnesota (PhD, Couples & Family Therapy 2021).



Do you or your partner have children who live with you?



Generation	Age	Characteristics
Gen Z	23 and under	Smartphones & social media, mental health and global unrest
Gen Y (Millennials)	24-39	The internet generation, post 9/11 & global financial crisis
Gen X	40-55	Latch-key generation, MTV generation
Baby Boomers	56-74	Post WWII optimism, the Cold War, the Hippie Movement



We'd like to offer our heartfelt thanks to all the people who responded to this survey and provided us with insightful and useful information about how their relationships have changed in 2020.

Stay tuned for our next Relationship Health Report coming in 2021.

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