

# Virus lockdown 'pressure-cooker' for marriages, lawyers, counsellors say



**Hailey Chung Wee Kye**

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*Couples cooped up with one another at home during a lockdown are discovering less domestic bliss than marital dysfunction, say experts. – EPA pic, January 31, 2021.*

MINOR irritations and differences that have always existed in a marriage are magnified during a Covid-19 lockdown, growing into serious marital problems that often end in divorce, lawyers and a family services organisation said.

They did not provide figures but told The Malaysian Insight they had seen greater demand for marriage counselling and divorce consultations since the movement-control order (MCO) in March last year.

“There is a gradual rise in divorce based on our observation, mostly among young couples between the ages of 20 and 40,” said lawyer Wilson Tan Wei Sheng of Tam Yuen Hung & Co.

“Financial difficulties and distance during the epidemic are two of the main reasons that are prying some couples apart.

“Couples in long-distance relationships and low to middle-class earners are the groups more commonly involved in divorce.

Amelia Tan Ru Wen, a senior legal associate in the same firm, said it is unfair to blame Covid-19 alone for the growth in divorce. The epidemic is more the catalyst for break-ups that are already on the cards, she said.

“Even prior to the epidemic, we had observed that divorce cases normally increased after families spent a long time together, such as during or after the school holidays,” she said.

“We believe the divorce rate has yet to peak as the epidemic is prolonged.”

Under epidemic circumstances, the firm said most clients opt for a mutual divorce to protect the interests of both sides due to the uncertainties and instability of the economy.

“A mutual divorce is relatively cheaper and faster, and saves time and cost, provided all divorce terms are agreed upon,” said Max Tam Yuen Hung, who handles family and divorce cases at the firm.

As for couples seeking counselling, non-profit organisation Focus on The Family Malaysia (FOFM) said some sessions run longer during the epidemic because the issues are multifaceted and complex.

Adding strain to marriages are job uncertainties, financial problems and coping with children learning from home.

FOFM has volunteers providing family counselling services for free although those who can afford it are encouraged to make a donation of RM70.

FOFM executive director Benny Kong said the aim was always to save the marriage if possible.

“It is true that Asians typically will not confront the problem and only seek help when the problem becomes big.

“If you have an issue, do consider having a third party enter to facilitate (discussion). Talk to somebody, whether in the community or a professional.

“If you do nothing, then it just gets worse. But intervention helps give some hope,” Kong said.

Lockdowns also have some positive aspects, such as providing couples with the time to talk to each other and connect with their kids, he said.

“My wife and I cook so much more often during the MCO, and while cooking together, I realised my wife likes to talk and we find time to connect. We also take walks at night with our seven-year-old boy.

“Prior to (the MCO), we touched base in the morning before leaving, in the middle of the day via message, on the way back from work and before bedtime.

“But now we are with each other at home and we have lunch together.

“So I would say there is some good from the epidemic and these good things should continue,” said Kong.

## **Domestic violence**

Family lawyer Honey Tan Lay Ean of Tan Law Practice is seeing couples in their 40s and older getting divorced.

“In our firm, the most commonly cited proof of irretrievable breakdown of marriage is that the behaviour of the client’s spouse has made it unreasonable for them to live together.

“Domestic violence is the most common example of this behaviour.”

Tan said experts had predicted that domestic violence would worsen during a lockdown and they have been proven right.

“Has the government figured out a way to reach out to the survivors? Phone calls may be impractical when the abuser is at home practically all the time.

“Children who observe domestic violence and/or themselves survivors may exhibit behavioural problems.”

Being isolated at home away from school, the children have no other adults to talk to about their situation, she said.

The court is also concerned about domestic violence and has expressly singled out these cases to be given priority for hearing during the MCO period, she said – February 1, 2021.

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