

Many families must 'dance' their way to COVID-19 survival

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Marketing managers and academics have been studying how families plan ahead and make decisions about family care and family consumption for a long time—but what happens when planning ahead is not possible? When consumers can't plan ahead...they "dance."

Although there has been a lot of talk about how COVID-19 has 'slowed down' family life, a new study in the *Journal of Marketing Management* by researchers at the University of Birmingham (UK), University of Melbourne (Australia) and Adolfo Ibanez University (Chile) argues that this is not the case for every family.

Dr. Pilar Rojas Gaviria, Lecturer in Marketing at the University of Birmingham, comments: "For many families, life has become more precarious, anxious, and accelerated. Rather than a combination of strategic activities and well-planned decisions, we found that when normality is disrupted abruptly, family care looks more like an intricate improvised 'dance.'"

Dr. Rojas Gaviria and her colleagues note that when facing unplanned disruptions to [family life](#), such as COVID-19, while some families may enjoy more free time because they are not commuting, others face unprecedented situations, such as disrupted careers, caring for others and suffering from the loss of income.

She comments: "We should avoid assumptions about families being affected in the same way. Many families are struggling with mental health while others are coping well. Many have lost friends or family members, others have not.

"This means that organisations should aim to better understand the needs of individual employees and their families and think about how they can support them by acknowledging that these needs are different and that they evolve through time."

Particularly, Dr. Rojas Gaviria and her colleagues found that families who already deal with more intensive care needs—such as those who have a family member with a chronic health condition—must 'dance' their way through unplanned disruptions such as the COVID-19 crisis.

Families strike a balance between day-to-day routines—resorting to what the researchers call 'grounding' activities—and other more creative, emotionally-laden and inspirational activities that go well beyond their daily schedules in order to counter massive disruption to their everyday life.

In their study of families living with diabetic children, they discovered how, in the midst of chaos, each family finds its own style to 'dance' through their life constraints by alternating 'grounding' and 'aerial' activities.

They also found that that this process often occurs instinctively and invisibly, and is usually lead by one family member who "orchestrates" resources and talents at hand to help their family develop its 'dance.'

Dr. Rojas Gaviria adds: "In keeping that 'dance' going, it is essential for the family to balance 'grounding movements' with 'aerial movements' that soothe, inspire and motivate [family members](#)."

"For instance, we saw how, during the COVID-19 lockdown both 'grounding' activities—such as knitting, gardening and baking—combined with 'aerial' activities—like becoming a helping hand in the community, placing rainbows in the [family](#) home's windows, supporting local shops, fisheries and farms, or raising funds for the NHS—to comfort families and help them connect to each other, even from a distance."

Dr. Rojas Gaviria argues that there is an untapped need for public policies and support programmes that can be flexible and adaptable to different moments and different life circumstances and that aim at enhancing the creative competencies of the families.

"The aim should be helping families gather resources for movement

(energy, time, focus, hope in the future) instead of telling them how to move by setting very strict rules that not everyone is able to follow. Designing a diverse set of support tools that can be offered for different circumstances and at different moments in time is a challenge for our societal systems," she adds.

More information: Flavia Cardoso et al. Restoring balance: how consumers orchestrate family care following unplanned disruptions, *Journal of Marketing Management* (2020). [DOI: 10.1080/0267257X.2020.1780297](https://doi.org/10.1080/0267257X.2020.1780297)

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