

RELATIONSHIP ISSUES

There is no way that we can cover all the very complex issues around relationship difficulties in one or two pages. These are, or should be, learned skills, built up on a solid basis of love, respect and mutual benefit. However, here are some guidelines for when things get a little rocky:

Don't Question ... That you ever loved each other; that you still love each other; and also that, currently, there are some serious difficulties preventing you exchanging that love properly.

Pain: Because you love(d) each other a lot, and are/were very open to each other, you are also capable of hurting each other very deeply. It just goes with the territory. If one person in the relationship (A) feels hurt, the other person (B) must acknowledge that. This does not inevitably mean that the second person (B) has actually 'hurt' the first person (A), but the first person definitely still feels 'hurt'. Try to explore that tension between you. Try to understand some of the dynamics. Try to tease out the point where (perhaps) B actually did do something to A, and A somehow feels much more hurt by that than is actually justified by the nature of the event or offence: maybe it touches on an old, unhealed wound. So A feels *really* hurt, and B feels that s/he didn't do *that* bad a thing and cannot understand why A is making 'such a fuss'. So then A feels that his/her pain is not being acknowledged, etc.

R.D. Laing wrote a wonderful book in 1970 called "Knots" that goes into some these confusions in depth. This is just a very simple sample:

JACK You are a pain in the neck
To stop you giving me a pain in the neck
I protect my neck by tightening my neck muscles,
Which gives me the pain in the neck
You are.
JILL My head aches through trying to stop you
Giving me a headache.

Trust: There has almost certainly been a breakdown of trust somewhere between the two of you. This is serious, and potentially damaging, but it does not necessarily mean that the love between you has gone totally. One may feel betrayed that the other has had an affair; and the other may feel betrayed that the first doesn't love them after a single indiscretion. And so on! However trust does not come back easily. It has to be re-gained, slowly and consistently over time. Any further serious breaches of trust, especially after a seeming determination (on both sides) to reform and change, might probably prove fatal (terminal) to the essential core of the relationship: it depends on many factors.

Help: You both will almost certainly need help from an outside party, as well as from friends and relatives. Unfortunately those closer to one than the other may well take sides, which is not helpful. Try and get to see a Couples Counsellor or similar - together. You both have got a problem here in that the relationship that has supported you both is in difficulty. It does not matter who thinks what, or where the 'fault' (if any) is, you are walking on the edge of a precipice and need a guide.

Is there a 'friend' or third party that could act as a mediator, or witness – just to stop the two of you getting into the same old patterns. They don't have to (shouldn't) say anything: just a third party being there makes a difference.

Objectivity: Failing that, for the moment try to be a little more objective. If *he* says 'that', don't just react: make a neutral statement like: "*I need to think about this for a while. I'm going out for a walk. I will be back in about half-an-hour.*" Give yourself a little time and distance: take the iPod or MP3 player with you and put the headphones on: don't obsess about what they said, just take the space and distance. You will know how you feel when you come back in. If *she* always does 'this', again ... don't lay in, or explode, or criticise. These will get you nowhere; you have done all that before, probably many times. Go chill out: have a bath, read a book or something. Then come back in and see if can both talk about it a little more objectively.

Alternatively, try setting up a digital camera, then talk about the issues: you will soon forget that it is there. Then each of you look at the tape afterwards, but do it separately. Make notes about what you liked or didn't like about the exchange; what worked and what didn't – for you; when you felt closer and when you felt more distant or defensive. Then, when you have both done this, talk through the notes, listening to what the other person says about their feelings: "*When you raise your voice / use that tone / start to do this or that / or clench your fists ... or whatever, it has this effect on me.*" This is feed-back: you are telling them about yourself. It is not criticism: you are not telling them what to do. There is a big difference.

Co-Listening: Perhaps the best thing you can do – together – is really to listen to each other. So often we get into our habitual patterns of relationship that just don't work any more. She says: "*Why didn't you do this?*" He feels attacked and disrespected and so stomps out. She then feels ignored and abandoned. And so on. Here is an exercise. Try it out!

Person A talks for an agreed length of time (say 15 or 20 minutes) about issues (in the relationship) that work, or don't work for them, using the topics below if you like, or other more specific issues, like sex, the attitude to the kids, how fast the person drives, or how much they drink. Don't make it all negative, put some positives in as well. Please use 'I' statements: "*When you do this or when that happens, I feel*". B is not allowed to interrupt or say anything except to as a question for further information. ("*Who is Mary?*" "*Is John the new boss?*"). At the end of the allotted time period, **Person B** repeats back to Person A (in about 5 minutes) as detailed a synopsis as possible of what A has said. ("*I heard you say that* and that

You said this and

Please try not to comment about what you feel about what they have said: just give them a synopsis. Then you take a short break and do NOT discuss what has been said.

Person B then talks for the same period and then **Person A** repeats back their synopsis. The exercise is then almost over. You then need to set up another time when you can talk about the content of what each person has said. The reason that this can work is that both A and B have now been listened to, and know that they have been heard. It is a very good start. This is an exercise in listening to each other. It is really important to keep your comments, your opinions, and your feelings completely out of the exchange.

Relationship Satisfaction:

There is a relatively simple measurement of relationship satisfaction that can also be used as a guide or tool to improving your relationship. Copy the table below, and each person fill in their rating for each of the categories. Use the scoring system: -3, very dissatisfied; -2, moderately dissatisfied; -1, slightly dissatisfied; 0, neutral; +1 slightly satisfied; +2, moderately satisfied; +3, very satisfied.

Score for:							
• Intimacy and Closeness:	-3	-2	-1	0	+1	+2	+3
• Affection and Caring:	-3	-2	-1	0	+1	+2	+3
• Communication about Feelings:	-3	-2	-1	0	+1	+2	+3
• Pleasure, Laughter, Fun:	-3	-2	-1	0	+1	+2	+3
• Respect and Consideration:	-3	-2	-1	0	+1	+2	+3
• Honesty and Openness:	-3	-2	-1	0	+1	+2	+3
• Solidity and Support:	-3	-2	-1	0	+1	+2	+3
• Resolving Conflicts & Difficulties:	-3	-2	-1	0	+1	+2	+3
• Trust and Reliance:	-3	-2	-1	0	+1	+2	+3
• Comfort & Relaxation:	-3	-2	-1	0	+1	+2	+3
• How good do you feel in this relationship:	-3	-2	-1	0	+1	+2	+3
• How much do you like the other person:	-3	-2	-1	0	+1	+2	+3

Do this completely separately, then come together and agree some time together so that you can compare the results. You may need an evening when the kids are staying over with their grandparents, or something: quality time. This is an important exercise: take it seriously.

The total maximum & minimum score possible is +36 or – 36 (both very rare), however, for most people (about 60-75%), some of the positive and negative scores will tend to cancel each other out and the normal grouping of totals is somewhere more within the centre of this range, (say: –15 to +15).

➤ If both of you have totals that are positive, even if they differ, that is great – and there may also be a few issues (those few points that scored negative) that you may need to work on to improve the relationship a little more and make it even better.

➤ If one person's total is positive and the other's is negative, then I suggest that you both enter into some process (perhaps regular relationship counselling) to try and sort out this disparity. N.B. the person who scores the relationship as negative may not be the one who actually has the problem; they may be having a problem with you, or visa versa.

➤ If you both have negative totals, then you are definitely going to need some help to try to turn this relationship around before it becomes too late. Get into some proper relationship counselling.

In more detail:

➤ Using this 'test' as a guide or a tool, you can also ask yourself, and each other, "*How could we make this category's negative score become a bit more positive? What would you need? What would I like?*" Listen carefully to the other person's suggestions, and to your own inner voice. Try to share some of your thoughts and feelings. This process should give you some definite material to work with. Maybe you could use the co-counselling/ co-listening exercise above to do this.

➤ Make a commitment to follow up on these suggestions: say an hour once a week. Put the time aside: go and get a pizza that evening; protect the space and support the relationship.

➤ Try repeating this relationship satisfaction 'test' in about 3 months time and see if there has been any significant change.

➤ Work with each other in the interim. Both parties try to make some positive changes. It will take time, determination and effort: not easy!

Build Positive Bridges:

It is very easy to criticise and to feel negative, angry, indifferent or despairing when the other person doesn't seem to be doing what you want them to do. Then they get angry because you are negative, angry, critical, indifferent or despairing; and so you get yourselves into a negative spiral.

Try building positive bridges. "*Do you remember that day in ... when we laughed until our sides ached?*" "*I loved it when we did ... this ... and ... that ...*". These sorts of positive bridges, what does (or did) work rather than what doesn't work, can lead you away from the brink of the precipice. You can be a bit more specific: try saying: "*When you do ... this... rather than that, it works for me and makes me feel much more positive towards you again.*" This is a positive statement, hopefully leading the other person away from their 'dysfunctional' behaviour towards a more positive pattern: a bridge.

Sometimes relationship difficulties have something else behind them – something dating from one (or both) of your past experiences. It is not just that the two of you are not getting on: something else might be 'wrong' and this is affecting the relationship. It is probably best to take this sort of issue into some sort of counselling or psychotherapy. It can actually be quite a relief to discover this.

The 'Relationship' as a third entity:

Imagine that you exist as one entity: complete, separate, maybe not quite perfect, but intact. Your partner is also an entity – different from you. They are also complete, separate, and also not quite perfect. So what is the relationship?

Imagine a third entity that exists between you, a bit like an energy field, built up by what you give and the other person receives (not necessarily the same thing), and what they give – maybe quite a lot - and what do you receive or take. Sometimes this might be a negative: that they give something that you don't want, and visa versa: or they don't give you something that you really need. This constant flow and the interchange builds up, over time, into the relationship: the energy field – a third entity.

What quality has this got? What does it look like? What size, colour, shape, taste, feel? What does it do for you? How would you describe it? How might others see it?

Now – what are you giving and what are you not giving? Don't worry about their contribution for the moment: focus on your own. You can do something about this: you can't do anything about their contribution – yet. What changes can you make? What can you do differently? What do you fear might happen if you did that? What might you hope for?

See the relationship as a complex 3-D painting or energetic sculpture – how can you shape it slightly differently? Pay attention to your contribution. Don't make any changes conditional: I'll do this only if you do that. Just offer – and try – to do 'this' instead of 'that'.

The other person may respond differently: they might decide to do 'that' when you do 'this'. Oh, that's a change! Does it work better? What else could you do? Hmm: that's interesting! What does the relationship look like now?

Does the other person agree? How does it work for them? Was the change worth it? Can you continue with this? Or do something else, or a bit more?

If both of you are trying to make some significant changes, maybe only one or two, it can have an amazing effect on the quality (or flavour) of the relationship. Maybe you begin to get something back that you were missing, or you can see the other person is really trying – and it is *that* that makes the difference.

Hope springs eternal.

Other ‘Problems’:

Sexual Difficulties: There might be (say) sexual difficulties, which are not being talked about properly. Most of us have sexual difficulties at some time in our lives and these can be caused by a variety of factors such as stress, difficulties at work, poor self-esteem, or even an undiagnosed medical problem. Some prescribed drugs can affect one’s sexual functioning. There may be some underlying complex psychological difficulties or even confusion over sexual orientation - for instance choosing the right time and place to "come out". Sexual difficulties that can respond well to psychological or psychosexual therapy include (for women) difficulties with vaginal intercourse or penetration (vaginismus), orgasmic difficulties (anorgasmia); (for men) erectile difficulties (impotence), painful intercourse (dysparuenia), premature or retarded ejaculation; and (for both) sexual phobia, sexual orientation issues, loss of sex drive, or loss of desire for partner.

Loss: Maybe you have lost one significant relationship (like a parent or a child) and you may be emotionally grieving. Sometimes this can impact on other relationships (as with a partner) for considerable periods of time. If your partner is having a problem with this, it might just be a bit more their problem than yours. Perhaps some form of couples’ counselling, or (for you) bereavement counselling, might be appropriate.

Life Changes: At certain times in our lives, as with childbirth, menopause, retirement, etc. we change the perception that we have of ourselves. This effectively means that we change. This is normal and natural. If however, our partner (or children, or parents) are saying, *“You’ve changed: you are not the same person that we knew and loved.”* Then, again, the problem may be slightly more theirs’ than yours, even though it impacts on you considerably as well. There is nothing wrong with you, other than you have (naturally and normally) changed according to life’s circumstances. Their expectation may be that they want *“the same old ... you”*. This sort of change can also be applied to one person developing a serious illness, (re-)starting work/college, children leaving home, or one of you becoming attracted (for a while) to someone else. Again some form of couples’ counselling may be appropriate, or otherwise, some in depth discussion about what these changes might mean for both of you.

Underlying Emotions: This can be like a minefield. Perhaps (at the Christmas Party) your partner sees you laughing and joking with people at your work. They get a little envious or even jealous, if it is with a member of the opposite sex. This makes them a bit cold or abrupt with you. Their reactions drive you a little further away, more into the company of the ‘friends’ at work. A whole negative cycle can start. This just has to be talked out properly. Again a counsellor can act as a mediator.

Behaviour Patterns: Sometimes long-established behaviour patterns have a detrimental effect on the relationship. It is not just a matter of changing the pattern of behaviour; sometimes the person’s whole perception about themselves and others has to change as well. How we were parented affected us; it may model or affect how we relate to a significant other, or how we parent. These aspects can all impinge on the relationship we are in now.

How we manage these difficult changes or these more complex issues is extremely significant. Hopefully we can keep out of the areas of divorce and separation, but even if things are ‘rocky’ just for a while, they can still be profoundly upsetting and distressing. Even a temporary loss of love, lack of trust or respect can have a long term, corrosive effect. However, if the ‘problem’ or ‘issue’ is caught relatively soon and dealt with reasonably appropriately, much later distress can be avoided.