

Relationship Difficulties

Most of us want to find a partner to share our lives with. When we finally fall in love and commit to a relationship that we believe will last us to old age, we have expectations that we will act together to realise our dreams. Inevitably though, every couple will experience relationship difficulties. Couples will always be confronted and sometimes overwhelmed by challenges they face, but mostly they are able to deal with them and move on. However sometimes these challenges leave each partner feeling alienated and alone and unable to sort out the issues, no matter how hard they try. The same old arguments occur, with the same frustrating outcomes, and both partners can feel struck. As time goes on one or both may start considering separation. Sadly, separation and divorce statistics are high, yet many of the difficulties that threaten the survival of relationships can be sorted out, with the right help.

What causes relationship problems?

There are a number of patterns and situations that can develop within a relationship, which will contribute to problems occurring.

Neglect of the relationship

Research shows that the foundation of a happy relationship is a friendship. This means that you can enjoy each other's company, share values, interests, friends and extended family, and believe you care, support, understand, and in every way are 'there' for each other and work together as a team. This friendship needs to be nurtured, because if neglected it will inevitably deteriorate. This means couples need to be regularly spending time together doing things, talking about things that matter to each partner, making plans for the future. This seems obvious, but work pressures and other personal issues, the demands of parenting, and the general busyness of life that we too easily put off spending the necessary time together to stay connected. As a result couples drift apart. This is often the case for high achievers, parents of teenagers, or 'empty nesters' who have neglected their relationship earlier on.

Conflict

Staying friends is more difficult when there is ongoing conflict, which leaves you feeling angry, disappointed, frustrated or hurt. It is really important that this conflict is dealt with in a way that doesn't drive your partner away or leave a build-up of resentment. Conflicts often begin early in the relationship when those differences that we knew were there, and may have admired or managed in the early stages of our relationship, become challenging. Each thinks all

would be well if only the other partner would change. The blame game begins. Although change can happen, we are less likely to consider changing if we feel we are being misunderstood, misjudged or attacked for who we are, how we behave, or what we want or need. Research shows that when one partner's request for change in the other becomes criticism, the other partner is likely to become defensive. When the conflict grows over time, criticism can become contempt, and is likely to be met by the other partner blocking it out or 'stonewalling'. These behaviours can be deadly for the relationship. Therefore it is really important to find ways to manage the issues that are leading to conflict.

The distress that accompanies arguments leads to behaviour that often brings out the worst in us, and that is certainly not to our advantage when we are dealing with our partner for life. When we are worked up, we don't think straight. We can say or do things that we later regret, and cause growing damage to the relationship. It is really important to calm down before tackling difficult situations.

Poor management of differences between partners

Differences between partners will always be there as we are all individuals with different values, priorities and ways of dealing with issues. Examples include attitudes to money, where we like to spend holidays, how much time we spend with extended families and friends, how much time we spend together or alone, how we show our love, how to discipline children, where we send our children to school, how we drive the car, how tidy to keep the house, how much effort goes into buying presents and the list goes on. We of course tend to see that our way is the right way, and that means that our partner is wrong and should change. However it is more sensible to find a way to manage these differences rather than try to wipe them out.

Withdrawing care

We tend to become stubborn in our determination to have our way. We often try to let our partner know how wrong they are by telling them, and as that usually does not work, we then punish them by removing things from the relationship that we know our partner values - for example a man may stop discussing issues with his partner, or a woman may stop showing interest in sex. As talking and sex are two important ingredients for feeling close to our partners it is not surprising that both partners end up feeling lonely, despairing and misunderstood.

Loss of compassion

All of us like to feel that our thinking, feeling and behaviour is understood by the other, and not judged as being wrong. Understanding does not mean agreeing. Unfortunately if partners don't seek to understand, good will can disappear. Until each feels the other is willing to understand them, they are unwilling to understand the other. Empathy and compassion for how the other is feeling is lost. Acts of care and love vanish. It is not surprising then that a partner may consider separation, or find value elsewhere - such as spending more time at work, on committees, with the children, on the internet, or with someone else. It is also not surprising that behaviours that result from a relationship under stress - including anxiety, depression, alcohol and drug use, eating disorders and gambling - can add to the difficulties.

Times of crisis

Understanding, compassion and friendship are particularly important when life sends along a crisis. Individuals act differently to issues such as a retrenchment from a job, death of a parent, infertility, miscarriage, a child's disability, fire or drought, and these differences need to be understood. If couples can support and care for each other, and stand together as a team, working through and recovering from life problems can strengthen a relationship. If not, couples can be torn apart.

Recognising when there are relationship problems

All relationships face difficulties, and most are resolved over time. However when the problems become entrenched and seem unable to be solved, it is important to seek professional help. It is far better to resolve the problems than to dissolve the relationship. Unfortunately, research shows that the average couple waits six years before seeking help once the problem is recognised, and only a small percentage seek the professional help they need. Half of all marriages that end do so in the first seven years. These statistics are very sad.

When there are any signs of the relationship problems outlined in the previous section, then it is time to consider seeking help. Obviously partners will try to deal with relationship issues themselves, but when problems continue to occur it becomes clear that professional help is needed.

Ideally both partners would agree that assistance is required to gain a new perspective and to try something different for the relationship to become unstuck, and for mending to occur. However if your partner is reluctant or unwilling to seek help, then it can be very helpful for you to seek help first. You can't make your partner change, but changes you make can start the domino effect of change for the relationship.

What is domestic and family violence?

Domestic and family violence is when someone intentionally uses violence, threats, force or intimidation to control and manipulate a family member, partner or former partner.

A central component of this definition that is also important for defining the difference between relationship conflict and domestic and family violence is the aspect of power and control. Domestic and family violence is characterised by one partner or family member using abusive behaviours/ tactics to obtain power and control over their victim. The abuse is intentional and systematic, and often increases in frequency and severity the longer the relationship goes on.

Forms of abuse

- Physical abuse: any behaviour that is intended to cause harm e.g. pushing, slapping, punching, choking, and kicking.
- Sexual assault/abuse: forcing you to participate in any kind of sexual activity that you are not comfortable with or do not want to do. Sexual abuse can also include denying sex.
- Financial abuse: taking or limiting your money, stealing.
- Social isolation: keeping you away from friends and family.
- Verbal: threats, put downs, insults, shouting.
- Emotional: mind games, manipulation, humiliation, making you feel worthless and no good.
- Spiritual deprivation: keeping you away from places of worship, forcing you to participate in spiritual/religious practice that you do not want to be involved with.
- Property damage: smashing objects in the home.
- Intimidation/stand over tactics: stalking, following, and making you feel scared.

Other forms of abuse include:

- Threatening to harm or actually harming/killing pets
- Threatening to commit suicide
- Withholding medical treatment
- Driving dangerously with the intent to cause harm or fear.

How does domestic and family violence affect women and children?

Domestic and family violence can have serious, pervasive and long lasting consequences for all aspects of women's and children's health and wellbeing.

In 2000 the World Health Organisation released a report that outlined the impacts of domestic and family violence on women's physical and emotional health including:

Physical health

- Injury
- Death
- Suicide
- Unwanted pregnancy
- Gynaecological problems
- Sexual transmitted diseases
- Miscarriage
- Pelvic inflammatory disease
- Chronic pelvic pain
- Headaches
- Permanent disabilities
- Asthma
- Irritable bowel syndrome
- Self-injurious behaviour (smoking, drug-use, unprotected sex, self-harming)

Emotional health

- Stress
- Depression
- Fear
- Anxiety
- Low self- esteem
- Sexual dysfunction
- Eating problems
- Obsession compulsive disorder
- Post-traumatic stress disorder

Domestic and family violence impacts upon children in a number of different ways, affecting their physical and emotional health and their social skills and behaviour. For children, the impacts related to witnessing or experiencing domestic and family violence begin as early as infancy and can last a lifetime.

Physical

- Children who grow up in a home where there is domestic and family violence are 15 times more likely to be abused or neglected
- Some children and young people turn to drugs and alcohol or other self-injurious behaviour as a coping mechanism

Emotional

- Many children and young people blame themselves for the violence and abuse that occurs at home
- Fear
- Anxiety
- Stress
- Depression
- Post-traumatic stress disorder
- Eating disorders
- Do not feel safe
- Confusion over the mixed feelings towards the abusive parent/family member

Behavioural/social

- Inappropriate use of violence and aggression (as a result of modelling/learning from perpetrators behaviour)
- Sleep disturbance
- Comfort eating
- Withdrawal vs. acting out (behaviours at either end of this extreme are common among children and young people who are exposed to domestic and family violence).

Research has also demonstrated that there is a strong intergenerational transmission of violence in that children and young people who are exposed to violence are significantly more likely to become involved in abusive relationships, either as a victim or perpetrator, when they enter adulthood.

Is your partner too controlling?

Controlling Partner Questionnaire

There are graduated degrees of controlling, and the more extreme, the more difficult it is to improve the relationship. The following is a questionnaire that will help you determine what degree of controlling there is in your relationship.

Indicate how many of these statements apply to your relationship with your partner:

1. Your partner tells you in subtle or not so subtle ways that your perception of reality is wrong or that your feelings are wrong.
2. Your partner seems irritated or angry with you often, even though you haven't done anything that you know of to upset him/her.
3. You often feel that issues don't get fully resolved so that you can feel happy and relieved.
4. You frequently feel confused, sad, frustrated or outraged because you can't get him/her to understand your intentions.
5. You are upset not so much about concrete issues, but about the communication – what he thinks you said and what you heard him say.
6. He/she rarely wants to share his/her thoughts or plans with you.
7. He/she often denies things that you know he/she did or said.
8. He/she seems to take the opposite view from you on many things you mention, but the way he/she says it, your view is wrong and his is right.
9. You often feel unseen or unheard, and sometimes wonder if he/she perceives you as a separate person.
10. He/she is either angry or has no idea what you are talking about when you try to discuss an issue with him.
11. You feel abused or negated by him/her, but he/she insists how much he/she loves you.
12. When you try to communicate how you feel about something, you feel no empathy from him/her, or he negates your feelings.
13. He/she often frightens you with rage to silence you.
14. You often feel no empathy from him/her when you are describing how you feel about something.
15. He/she often manipulates you by ignoring you or withholding affection.

16. You feel diminished by the time he finishes his/her conversation with you.
17. He/she always needs to be one up or right.
18. He/she attempts to define you e.g. You're only doing that for attention.
19. He/she blames, accuses, judges or criticises you.
20. He/she counters, blocks or diverts your conversation.
21. He/she confabulates, i.e. makes up something negative about you and speaks it as if it is the truth.
22. He/she often is well behaved in public, but abusive in private.
23. He/she will not ask for what he/she wants, so that you can negotiate fairly.
24. He/she will not respond at all to your requests, or will respond with frustration, or will only seem to respond, but not follow through.
25. Your attempts to enhance the relationship, improve communication, and find some happiness all lead to difficulties.
26. Whenever you try to explain that you are not thinking what your partner is saying you are thinking or doing, your partner will not hear or understand, or negates you in some way.
27. You partner behaves well towards you when you are of one mind with him/her, but the trouble starts when you express either different views from him/her or your own feelings.
28. You often find him/her angrily accusing you of the very things he/she is doing himself/herself.
29. The way your partner treats you has deteriorated radically since you became more settled together (moved in together, got married, started having children)

Scoring

0 -5 – There is likely to be some misunderstanding between the two of you. Learning some communication skills should be all you need.

6-10 – There is **some level of a control** connection in your relationship. It is likely that your partner is trying to test how far he/she can go in developing a control connection with you. You might like to read more about this topic in the articles here, or I highly recommend both of Patricia Evans books *The Verbally Abusive Relationship*, and *Controlling People*. The best practical advice is to nip it in the bud on each occasion, as soon as he/she starts by saying something like “Cut it out!” or a repeated “What?”

11 – 20 – Your partner is almost certainly attempting to control you to a **reasonable degree**. Also, in not being able to see or understand fully what has really been going on, you have unwittingly allowed it to continue. I suggest you get help on your own first, as soon as possible. We can help you form an Agreement with your partner against controlling and abuse, and can also help each of you individually in managing this process.

20 and above – Your partner is **very controlling**. Get help on your own first. There is only a small chance that you will be able to re-engineer a more healthy relationship while still living with him/her. We can assist you and support you in this process.

Seeking professional assistance

It is important that you seek help from someone who is trained and experienced in working with relationships.