

Relationship Counselling

What are Relationship Problems?

Conflicts and disagreements occur within all close relationships, and are a normal part of dealing with differences in ideas, beliefs, and experiences. However, ongoing or repeated conflict within a relationship can lead to a wide range of problems for both adults and children, and be enormously stressful. Learning effective and respectful ways to communicate differences is an important step in building a healthy, fulfilling relationship.

Many couples experience times of stress and unhappiness that can lead to a wide range of problems, or to a complete breakdown of the relationship and separation. This unhappiness may stem from a variety of concerns, such as weakening commitment, emotional distancing, power struggles, difficulties with problem-solving, poor communication, jealousy and betrayal, differences in values or expectations, sexual issues, or abuse and violence.

Individuals in troubled relationships are more likely to experience a number of mental and physical health concerns, including anxiety, depression, substance abuse, a weakened immune system, or high blood pressure. Relationship difficulties can also lead to problems within other important relationships, such as with family and friends, or with work colleagues. Children of parents with high levels of conflict are at greater risk for problems such as behaviour issues, anxiety, depression, and poorer physical health. Learning to manage and address relationship problems effectively is therefore important, because of the many poor outcomes associated with them for our overall wellbeing and for those around us.

What causes conflict in the relationship?

There are a number of factors that place individuals at a higher risk for relationship problems or separation.

Past experiences

A person's family and upbringing can play an important role in his or her future romantic relationships. Having parents who are divorced is one of the most consistent predictors of marital breakdown, and seeing hostility growing up has been linked to relationship problems later in life. Further, if one or both partners have experienced childhood abuse there is a greater likelihood of relationship dissatisfaction.

Life transitions and stress

Life transitions, such as moving from living together to being married, having a baby, children leaving home, and moving into retirement can put strain on a relationship, and feelings of connectedness can decline. Further, there is a greater likelihood of the relationship suffering when stressful life events occur. When people are stressed, they find it more difficult to behave in a positive or

forgiving way toward their partner, which can lead to less happiness in the relationship. The stress from external events like work problems or financial difficulties, family issues such as difficult relationships with in-laws, or balancing the needs of aging parents with the needs of caring for one's own children can also spill over into the relationship and increase stress between couples.

Cognitive

The way people think about themselves, their partner and their relationship is an important factor in relationship outcomes. For example, it is common among couples experiencing problems to see each other as the cause of arguments and difficulties, and to view their partner's behaviour as done on purpose, as selfish, and deserving of blame. These types of thoughts can lead to negative behaviours, which can then create poor interactions between the couple.

Emotional

Becoming less positive about the relationship over time can play an important role in its breakdown. High levels of negative feelings and thoughts can outweigh the effects of positive behaviours on the relationship, and lead people to pay more attention to negative events than positive ones. This negativity creates less relationship satisfaction and poorer outcomes for couples.

Behavioural

Particular patterns of behaviour can be important signs that a relationship is at risk. Interactions that include contempt, defensiveness, criticism, or 'stonewalling' (avoiding or being unresponsive to each other) are signs that a relationship is in distress. A ratio of five positive interactions to every one negative interaction has been suggested as a good indicator that a relationship is functioning well

Protective factors

Couples that successfully navigate life transitions are those who take time to talk about how they can manage changes together. Consistent positive emotions and behaviours can protect against the regular ups and downs of life. Couples who express positive feelings and see each other in a positive light are more likely to experience success in their relationship, while positive views of the bond can help promote relationship stability and protect against negative feelings, even during arguments. Forgiveness, as well as feeling and expressing gratitude, both have positive effects on the quality of a relationship.

Stressful events can have negative effects on the quality of the relationship, but can also help develop strong coping skills. Successfully coping with small stressors early on in the relationship can lead to increased knowledge and confidence in managing future difficult situations. The ability to listen to and understand the other person's point of view and emotional experience, share one's own thoughts and experiences with one's partner, and engage in problem-solving together are also characteristics of rewarding and successful relationships. These qualities help couples not only to overcome life stress together but also to strengthen their relationship through good times and bad.

What can I do?

How a psychologist can help

Through discussion with the couple and the possible use of questionnaires and monitoring tools, the psychologist develops an understanding of the potential factors that have led to and are maintaining the problems present in the relationship. The psychologist together with the couple then develops a treatment plan. For relationship problems, this usually involves EFT or BCT to help bring about changes in thinking and behaviours, and ways of communicating that are more respectful, open and caring.

The psychologist may also assist each partner to address any lifestyle factors that may increase their capacity to manage their difficulties, and reduce conflict or distress within the relationship. Other mental health concerns or substance use issues might also be evaluated and addressed, assisting both the person experiencing these difficulties, as well as the relationship.

Evidence-based psychological approaches and strategies Relationship problems are a common reason that people seek help from mental health professionals. Emotionfocused couple therapy (EFT) and behavioural couple therapy (BCT) are two of the most widely studied and supported forms of treatment for relationship problems. Research has shown that these psychological interventions are helpful in improving relationship satisfaction and the quality of interactions for many couples. They can also be helpful for other problems associated with or caused by relationship troubles, such as depression or substance abuse.

There are a number of common strategies and principles found within different types of evidence-based couple therapies, particularly EFT and BCT, which can lead to positive outcomes for relationships. These include:

Changing the view of the relationship

Rather than blaming each other, it is important for both partners to accept that their attitudes and behaviours influence the relationship. Each partner might think about the causes and consequences of their behaviour, and develop a better understanding of how their actions affect their partner, positively and negatively.

Expressing emotion

Couples who are experiencing difficulties in their relationship often avoid expressing personal emotions or vulnerabilities, or may criticise or blame each other. Sharing private thoughts and emotions, and encouraging caring, understanding, and acceptance from a partner, can be helpful in building closeness within a relationship.

Using affection and humour

The use of playfulness, affection and positive humour (rather than humour that includes criticism or nastiness), particularly during arguments, also promotes relationship satisfaction and closeness.

Improving communication

Learning effective communication and problem-solving skills can be an important part of improving interactions within a relationship. For example, if there are high levels of criticism or blame, each partner might learn new ways of expressing his or her concerns. Or, for couples who avoid communication, learning to safely share their worries and increase positive expression of emotions may be helpful. Problem-solving within a relationship might include steps such as agreeing on a clear definition of the problem, brainstorming solutions and their likely outcomes for each partner, agreeing on a solution and trying it out, and making a plan to reevaluate whether it solved the problem.

Promoting strengths

Focusing on the positive aspects of the relationship can increase levels of enjoyment and satisfaction. Further, emphasising the positive contributions that each partner makes can in turn increase their likelihood of occurring. For example, couples might like to think about what attracted them to their partner in the first place, or to think about actions they can take that their partner would likely appreciate, and deliberately increase how often they occur.

Changing problem interactions

Physical or psychological aggression threatens the safety of an individual, can be enormously destructive to that partner and the relationship, and delay progress in making positive changes. The type of intervention that is appropriate may depend on the underlying reasons and consequences of the aggression. It may include the use of psychological strategies (for example, helping individuals to change negative or threatening behaviours, or to include brief 'time outs' to promote calmer interactions), or referral to a domestic violence centre. Low-level violence such as pushing and slapping is sometimes present in troubled relationships, and is committed by both men and women; however, almost all serious partner violence is committed by men. For a small group of very violent men, the chance that they will change their behaviours is low. In these cases, couple therapy may be inappropriate, as it might not help to reduce the risk of violence, can prevent women from speaking freely due to fear of punishment, and can in some situations even escalate the violence.

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