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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 stuck. 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. This information booklet may be a starting point for you.

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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 friendship. Put simply, 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, and 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 mean 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



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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.

Seeking professional assistance

It is important that you seek help from someone who is trained and experienced in working with relationships. Most people ask friends for recommendations, and word of mouth is a good way to find help. You can also ask your GP for a recommendation or phone the APS *Find a Psychologist* service on 1800 333 497. Alternatively, you can locate a psychologist in your area by visiting the APS *Find a Psychologist* website - www.findapsychologist.org.au.

Help can also be found through organisations funded by the Federal Government that employ psychologists and other professionals specialising in relationship counselling. Organisations such as Centacare Catholic Family Services, Relationships Australia and Lifeworks all offer professional assistance.

Ten tips for a happy relationship

Actively keep your love alive by valuing and nurturing your relationship in the following ways.

1. Plan regular time together doing something you both enjoy.
2. Give your partner the benefit of the doubt rather than assuming the worst. Be curious and seek to understand why your partner is acting the way he/she is.
3. Make sure the positive experiences in your relationship outweigh the negative experiences by five to one, and make sure you show your appreciation for your partner's caring actions.
4. When there is conflict make sure you calm yourselves by taking time out when emotions are high, and coming back to the discussion later.
5. When mistakes are made, make sure you both work to repair the damage.
6. Be there to support your partner in times of difficulty, and encourage him or her in work, friendships and leisure activities.
7. Be prepared to be influenced by what is important to your partner, just as your partner needs to be influenced by you.
8. Have a 'team mentality'. When there are difficulties, talk about what 'we' need to do about it.
9. Have high standards for your relationship, and stick to them yourself.
10. Keep your sense of humour, and make sure you have fun.

Other resources for relationship problems

The following websites provide helpful information.

Family Relationships Online

www.familyrelationships.gov.au

Relationships Australia

www.relationships.com.au

Phone: 1300 364 277

Mensline Australia

www.menslineaus.org.au

Phone: 1300 78 99 78

Helpful books include those written by Dr John Gottman. Some of his most recent books are:

The Relationship Cure

The Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work

Why Marriages Succeed or Fail and How You Can Make Yours Last

The Heart of Parenting - Raising an Emotionally Intelligent Child