

Dawn Kaffel Blog

This can Happen

Mental Health Awareness week takes place from 8-14 May and this year's theme is '**Surviving or Thriving**'. Since 2005 mental health problems are on the rise – we are making progress on our physical health but not doing the same with our mental health. Thanks to journalists and TV programmes speaking out against the stigma of mental health, our awareness is being heightened as to the effects of mental health issues on daily lives. Thanks to Prince Harry leading the charge of his own experience of depression and anxiety and his work with the Heads Together Campaign with The Duke and Duchess of Cambridge they have highlighted the importance and power of conversation and how being able to talk openly about mental health challenges can be life changing. It now seems a good time to think about how mental health issues impact on our couple relationships.

Mental Health Professionals tend to focus on symptoms and treatments with the individual and overlook the huge impact this has on our couple relationships. Any couple relationship can have its proverbial ups and downs but what about when there is the extra challenge of being the partner of someone who has a mental illness. Losing harmony and connection in a relationship is difficult enough but especially so if some of the relationship changes are brought about by one or both partners developing mental health issues. Things can be very challenging for a partner without mental illness who has to assume a care giving role.

Most people fall in love because they are enjoying each other's company, have fun together and live harmoniously. Life doesn't always work out as planned. When a partner becomes depressed, they often tune out, withdraw and have little energy to do much except sleep. This can often give the impression to a partner that they are no longer cared about, and there is no interest in them, or going out or having sex. This often leaves the other partner having to pick up the slack especially if there are children. As frustration and exhaustion develop over time, this often turns to anger and resentment at a partner who can't seem to '*get over*' the depression. If this pattern continues it can often lead to affairs and a complete breakdown of the relationship.

Issues with mental health can be debilitating and its important that partners recognise some of the signs that suggest a partner is suffering,

Here are some signs to look out for:

- withdrawal
- agitation
- hopelessness
- acute tiredness
- poor self care
- change in personality

In my work with couples I see how a healthy relationship can serve as a buffer to help ward off mental health conditions. Equally it is well documented that relationship stress can negatively affect the person who is struggling with mental illness and make the condition worse.

We all come to our adult relationships with conscious and unconscious patterns from our own experiences and feelings around mental health. For example growing up with a parent or family member who may have been depressed, anxious or suicidal can greatly influence how we manage mental health issues in our current partnerships.

Couples coping with some mental health issues are not that different from other couples in therapy. Often individuals experienced a difficult childhood, a history of low self esteem and lack of confidence, trauma and loss. Although many of these things happened in the past, they often find a way of infiltrating the couple relationship resulting in on-going conflict. They too develop patterns of poor communication, increased conflict and loss of intimacy. They too have got stuck in negative cycles leaving them feeling distant, helpless and sad.

Give therapy a try

Coming to Couples Therapy with your partner is a positive step forward. Every Mental Health issue presents its own unique challenge and can be complicated and testing on our relationships. It requires special attention in couples therapy from a skilled couples therapist to help give clarity to the situation.

Finding a qualified couples therapist is a valuable option to help explore the roots of the mental health issues and to try and understand how it affects each partner. At Coupleworks we pride ourselves in taking care to consult with the patients GP, primary care worker or psychiatrist so that we can all work together for the patient to bring about change. We don't have to just Survive we can learn to Thrive.

If you would like to discuss things further or to make an appointment, you can call me on **07976 403741** or **(020) 8959 9528**. Alternatively you can contact me by email: dawn.kaffel@couplecounselling.com.

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