

Managing Uncertainty During Lockdown

For therapists, uncertainty is an issue that often comes up in therapy and never more so than now. It feels that over the past eight months when the first lockdown started, couples therapy sessions became more focused on uncertainty and anxiety than I can ever remember. Uncertainty about health, job security, schooling, finances, aging parents and the impact of the American election are to name a few. Now into our second national lockdown there seems to be an even more profound sense of uncertainty.

Living with uncertainty is nothing new. We live with it all our lives. What is different now is the pandemic has highlighted the scale of it and the problems and consequences that comes with it.

I see this with couples that can normally manage uncertainty well but now both partners are finding it difficult to manage their own uncertainties let alone the others. Often sessions become a place of anxiety and tension as couples engage in unhealthy behaviours that push each other away rather than move in closer to each other. Nothing can be more stressful than having uncertainty in our relationships. It comes from fear, fear of loss and losing control and not knowing what's coming next.

Living through two periods of isolation has put the spotlight firmly on our partnerships like never before. We have never experienced living so close to one another for so long without our usual social outlets. This has meant that we seem to have become more hyper-vigilant with our partners, seeing things we never saw before, hearing things we never heard or said before. Forced to focus on the everyday minutia seems to have made us forget the bigger picture.

Therapy sessions seem to be a place where little problems become big ones, where there used to be energy between them, there is now lethargy. Closeness is replaced by distance, warmth by coldness. Neither can really make sense of what's not working, but everything from making the bed, to going out for a walk, somehow has become a battleground.

When couples are uncertain during these difficult times it seems to question the security of the whole relationship. When we feel insecure we tend to behave badly. I see partners becoming self focused on what they are not getting. Focusing energy on what their partner isn't doing or what their partner should be doing. Finding fault with difference rather than seeing difference as their strength as it was initially

Fear and loss are often the emotions that are routed in uncertainty and never more so than now. It can feel like a roller coaster. This fear can manifest in many ways in the counselling room:

- Self- esteem – if we don't have a healthy self -relationship, it's hard to expect to have one with a partner
- Should I stay or leave?

- Would somebody else be better for me?
- Ending long term relationships because lockdown has given them an insight of what living together might look like when retirement arrives
- Cancelling a wedding due to fear of losing independence and having to commit to one person for the rest of their lives
- Anxieties about finances and employment feels overwhelming.
- Decisions whether to have a first child or more children is now permanently off the agenda
- Ending a relationship in order to avoid the potential of being hurt (again).
- Breakdown of trust as more partners seek comfort outside a relationship
- Uncertainties may be a result of childhood experiences and/or previous relationship issues
- Recognising how uncertainty plays a part in our couple interaction is all very well but how can we feel more comfortable with uncertainty and use it in a more positive way.
- I often ask couples to try and ask each other these questions. If that feels too difficult at first, perhaps try writing them down:
 - How do I feel about me?
 - How do I feel about you?
 - Do I care about you and how do I show it?
 - Do I want to make you happy? And how do I do that?
- If you have established that you care for each other, you can move on to try and identify calmly and honestly what are your uncertainties? Holding onto them will only cause resentments in the long run. Communication is everything.
- Take time out to acknowledge how you are feeling and what you notice about yourself. Are you more irritable, are you having difficulty sleeping, eating and drinking more than you would do normally. Is your uncertainty contributing to an increase in your stress and anxiety levels?
 - Do you have the same uncertainties or are they different?
 - Does my uncertainty come from the past?
 - Do we have the same expectations of a relationship?
 - What makes me happy about you?
 - What bothers me about you?
 - Do we share the same goals?

Today we are told that a vaccine may be on its way and hopefully that will help alleviate a lot of the anxieties that we have all been dealing with.

We will look back at these unprecedented times of uncertainty and recognise that building on our resilience, to manage our difficulties, helping others who need us, we will emerge better people as a result of this

“If uncertainty is unacceptable to you, it turns into fear. If it is perfectly acceptable, it turns into increased aliveness and creativity – Eckhart Tolle

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: dawnkaffel@couplescounselling.com. **Dawn Kaffel**