

Relationship Challenges (1): When one partner wants to leave

Relationships are complex and challenging, of that there is no doubt. Never more so than over the past two years when we have had to manage Covid and all its implications on top of everything else going on in our lives.

Over the coming months I am going to focus on different relationship challenges that often present in couple therapy.

What I am noticing in many couples at present is a feeling of great unsettledness, a lack of energy and motivation for the relationship and the unwillingness to engage. They are coming to counselling not to work on their relationships but convinced they need to end them. Clients tell me that the enforced togetherness during the pandemic only highlighted the many issues that have never been addressed and now it's too late.

They are stuck in a certain pattern of thinking and often assume the only way to stop feeling this pain is to opt out, leaving behind partners and children who are desperately trying to understand what has just happened here?

The partner who wants to leave has probably struggled a lot of emotional pain for some time to get to this point and often presents with statements like:

"I haven't been happy for a long time"

"You are always so busy at work you have no time for me"

"Our only way of communicating is through arguments and fights"

"I love you, but I'm no longer attracted to you "

"I always want us to be best friends"

They feel the only way to fix these difficult feelings is to leave and then the feelings will vanish.

It always comes as a shock to hear the partner that wants to stay disclose that they had no idea their partner was so unhappy and wanted to leave the marriage. Perhaps that's the real problem. What has been happening in these relationships over the years that I haven't noticed what is going on in front of me?

It's very clear that no one knows exactly what we are getting into long-term when we commit to marriage. The hope is that we will continue to stay committed and connected to each other for the years to come. However, what is not always considered is how both partners will change over the years. What connected them when they first met, may very well change, ten, twenty, thirty years later. What do we do as a couple to prepare us for the changes? What work do we do to make sure we understand the changes in ourselves and how do we connect that to our partners?

Here are a few critical components couples must know to stay connected and to create a relationship of growth.

- Understanding what you both need from the relationship and why
- What drives my partner
- How to keep attraction alive
- How we deal with difference and conflict so there is more security and love

Most of us don't think about these important factors, merely going about our busy lives focusing more on what we are doing and what we are achieving and doing our best to avoid what is too difficult to contemplate.

I remember a male client recently telling me he had told his wife on two separate occasions over the years that he was very unhappy. As he felt she didn't take much notice and just thought he was stressed from work decided the only way for him was to leave the marriage.

Another couple who hadn't had a sexual relationship for many years suddenly found herself very attracted to her fitness trainer and wanted to leave the twenty-five-year marriage rather than understanding what had been happening in their dynamic that had led to this situation.

Unfortunately, long relationships and marriages don't come with a guidebook. We learn things about each other on the way, especially in the beginning and then we seem to give up as life and external factors take pride of place.

What is very clear is that if we don't understand ourselves, what affects us and how we behave and how we connect, how on earth can we expect to understand and know our partner? One of the most positive aspects of couple therapy is how in a safe place with a therapist, individuals can start to understand their own behaviours and the impact that has on their partners. Working with a therapist and using Emotionally Focused Therapy (EFT), first developed and researched by Sue Johnson in Canada, helps partners tune into their important feelings and needs and enables them to put those feelings across to their partners in a safe connecting way rather than in ways that can invite a negative and disconnecting response. Using an attachment lens, couples learn how to live in their relationship to create the closeness and security they need. They learn to recognise their emotional needs for safety and connection and learn to ask in non-blaming ways for partners to help meet their needs. According to Johnson, "emotions are the music of the attachment dance". As we understand our emotions and respond to them, so the dance changes and couples can move from difficulties and struggles to closeness and harmony.

What to Avoid

What I often see in couples when one partner expresses their strong change of feeling message and only wants to leave, is how a comparatively 'stable' relationship starts to destabilise both people at a very fast rate. The overwhelming feeling of shock and worry as everything starts to unravel and, for the partner fighting for the marriage, fear and loss loom large. It's hard to comprehend the reasoning of the partner who wants out. Many who leave still

love their partners and want to stay close and friendly even if the love has lost its sexual charge. This reaction is understandable but often loss of control of emotions can make things worse. Thinking you can change your partner's mind will often make the partner feel manipulated and misunderstood and more determined than ever to leave

Going into couples therapy a partner often hopes the therapist will be able to "talk sense" into the leaving partner. Unfortunately, things don't work this way.

What can Work

A giant tidal wave has hit you and it will take time and a great deal of patience, understanding and resilience to first stabilise the situation before tackling anything.

Working with a therapist can help you to understand:

- a) How some partners can turn off their emotions to protect themselves: often learned behaviour from their family background
- b) Why your connection has broken down.
- c) What has gone so wrong for your partner that they want to leave and what part did I play in that?
- d) What damaging patterns can we identify in our relationship that led to this?
- e) How have we shown up emotionally for each other over the years and what we have experienced in our lives together
- f) Understanding perhaps how the sheer efforts of living difficult life events may have ground you both down and led to much less feelings shown between you.

Whilst it's important that both partners are willing to work on the relationship issues, its equally essential that you stop putting all your focus on your partners needs and feelings and begin to take ownership of your own needs to regain your sense of power.

Your partner may be very unsure about staying in the relationship, but what are you unsure about? What do you want? What are you willing to live with? What do you need to be different if you were to stay together?

This is one of the most difficult of relationship challenges and it's rarely a smooth ride. The more self-awareness, vulnerability and honesty each partner can bring to their positions, the easier it may be to connect and explore options that take both partners' needs and fears into account.

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**