

RESTORING RELATIONSHIPS

In forming an attachment with a partner we all hope and even long to experience a happy, secure and loving relationship. Unfortunately for many however this is not what is ultimately experienced. The relationship which seemed to hold so much promise at the beginning ends up a source of disappointment, hurt, confusion and misunderstanding.

It often seems a powerless place to be: stuck we can't see how to change the familiar patterns so toxic to our relationship. "If only my partner would change, things would be better" many lament. Yet so much power to change does lie with us.

We have 50% of the power in this as in every relationship we are in and how we use it is crucial, it affects the whole system, ourselves, our partner and the relationship we share together.

Good communication is key. A conscious response instead of a reflex knee jerk reaction is needed. Taking responsibility and making amends for what we can work out we may have done to cause hurt to our partner or for what our partner challenges us with is important. Even if there is only a part, a grain of truth in what we can identify with that is being communicated to us, take ownership of and responsibility for that. Our partner is much more likely to feel heard, understood and responded to in a way that allows the emotional intensity to be reduced.

If we ourselves need to challenge our partner then how we communicate is the key to our success. Complain not criticise, if possible. Owning how we feel and what we need. Using "I" statements is potentially far more effective than the more commonly used "you are; you always; you never". Owning how we feel and what we need in this way leaves our partner more likely to stay connected to us and hear us rather than either withdraw from us or attack back in defensiveness. A potentially destructive episode can be avoided and our partner may actually be motivated to do things differently in the future.

Most of us have a habit of challenging our partner about what they don't do enough of for us or do to irritate or annoy us. We don't however in equal measure share our appreciation of those things our partner does that we feel good about. Challenging ourselves to be mindful of opportunities to express our appreciation is a useful way of opening our minds to the positive experiences we have in our relationship. It also potentially reinforces those things that feel good; as our partner hears us affirm them he/she is more likely to repeat them.

Doing little things we know our partner appreciates is also useful; we do for them what they feel good about and loved because of and so connection is enhanced.

Making regular space to share some quality time together is also very important. Most couples start out spending time having fun together and this can wane over time as life's demands take over. Going out for a meal, going for a walk, doing some gardening, playing a sport, having a weekend away, whatever it is as a couple that you enjoy and allows you to connect in each other's company is very relationship enhancing.

Perhaps it is consciousness that counts after all, the more we practise new ways of moving in our relationship the more we reinforce them and over time it comes more naturally. With all of this we influence ourselves and model something healthy for our partner.

In essence we ultimately facilitate the restoration of our own relationship.

Authored by Sarah Bevan

Sarah is one of the counsellors working on behalf of the Church of Ireland Marriage Council. She, together with the other counsellors, offers both marriage preparation courses and couple counselling.

Details can be found on the Church of Ireland Marriage website: www.towardsmarriage.com