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association nsw

Relationship Issues

Conflict in Relationships

Many people who are involved in relationships such as a marriage or other partnerships experience conflict. If conflict is dealt with appropriately, it can strengthen the relationship. Otherwise it can have a negative impact, e.g. frequent arguments, uncomfortable silences, and growing further apart. Having a good understanding of yourself and your partner, knowing how to communicate and express thoughts and feelings effectively are all critical for a healthy relationship.

Love alone is not enough to sustain a healthy relationship. We also need to learn the skills or have the 'tools' to maintain and strengthen the relationship. Healthy relationships are important for personal happiness as well as physical and mental wellbeing.

People in relationships are often attracted to each other because their partner is different to themselves. However, these differences in personality, cultural background and family of origin can all lead to painful and destructive conflict if not handled well.

There are some ways of addressing conflict which are never OK, e.g. physical, emotional or sexual violence; and others that are simply not helpful, e.g. sarcasm, put-downs, shouting or 'the silent treatment'.

There are however, ways of making sure that you and your partner deal with conflict in positive and helpful ways. Some of these are outlined below.

'Fighting Fair'

- Attack the problem, not the person.
- Don't argue about everything 'and the kitchen-sink' – stick to the conflict at hand without dragging up past grievances.
- Avoid using words like 'always' and 'never' when telling the person what you are upset about. These words encourage argument about whether the statement is true or not, thus avoiding dealing with the actual issue.
- Take 'time out' if one or both get angry but before you go, agree on a time to discuss the problem when you have both calmed down, so you are not just walking away from the problem.
- Use 'I' statements to express how you feel, this feels less hostile to the person you are talking to and helps you to take responsibility for your own feelings. An example might be saying 'I feel upset when you shout at me. Please could you tell me in a normal voice what you are upset about?' This is more assertive and less emotionally charged than, 'You are always shouting at me and I don't like it'.. It clearly tells the person what it is you are unhappy about, how you feel about it and what you would like them to change.

Fight productively

Whatever the issue is that you are arguing about, there are feelings involved. The emotional component of the disagreement may include anger, distrust, defensiveness, resentment, fear, and feelings of rejection. Feelings about current arguments can be affected by the past, e.g. if you have had similar problems in the past, feelings from this can impact on the present. These feelings may need to be brought into the open before the disagreement or argument can be resolved.

- Treat the other person with respect by allowing them to talk without interruption; take it turns to speak and express how you are feeling.
- Listen until you 'experience the other side' and reflect content, feelings and meanings back to the person, to ensure you have understood what they have said.
- Briefly state your own views, feelings and needs.

When feelings are expressed, heard and accepted by another person, then individuals can discuss their differences more productively. Once the emotions have subsided, problems can be solved collaboratively.

The collaborative problem-solving steps

- Define the problem in terms of the needs of both parties.
- Brainstorm - develop possible solutions together.
- Break up the problem into smaller and more manageable portions.
- Find the best alternatives and make a decision.
- Evaluate how well the solution turned out.

Be a good negotiator

To be able to communicate effectively, you need to be honest and open about your feelings and needs while also accepting and respecting the other person. Empathise with the other person by trying to imagine how they might be feeling – which may be different to how *you* would feel in the same situation. This may help you to hear and understand the problem from other person's perspective.

We do not always have to agree with each other; what makes us so unique as human beings is that we all see things differently and this is part of what makes our relationships precious. Relationships are about learning how to nurture and love ourselves as well as others. In order to take care of yourself, you must be responsible for your own needs and set your own personal boundaries.

How to look after yourself:

- It's all right to disagree with your partner.
- It's all right to ask for personal and emotional space.
- It's all right to leave an issue or problem temporarily unresolved.
- It's all right to have hobbies and interests apart from your partner.
- It's all right to have some different friends.
- It's all right, if you do not like your partner's behavior, for you to discuss the issue with them.

How to relate better to your partner:

- Have clear definitions of the type of intimacy you want (e.g. romance, nurturing, sexual desire, or just wanting to be with the other person)

- Nurture your loving feelings. Try to do one loving thing for your partner every day e.g. a massage, a cup of tea in bed, a text message to say you are thinking of them.....the possibilities are endless.
- Develop or find common interests, shared values and beliefs.
- Develop your friendship with your partner as well as your romance – many people say companionship is the most important part of their relationship.
- Some minor problems may not be 'fixable'; you may have to decide whether some issues are worth learning to live with
- The more you know about each other's inner world, the more rewarding your relationship will be.

Relationships and love have many aspects:

For example:

- Friendship
- Affection
- Concern for the well-being of others.

The most rewarding relationships have more than one of those components. The love between romantic partners, which may begin as affectionate love, is enriched by friendship and deepened and stabilised by a commitment to the wellbeing of one another.

There are many ways of finding help including; reading books about relationships; talking to your friends about your difficulties or seeking professional counselling.

Where to find help:

Relationships Australia: (02) 9418 8725 or www.relationships.com.au

Interrelate: (02) 9747 3988 or www.interrelate.com.au

Australian Counselling Association (ACA): 1300 784 333 or www.theaca.com.au

Australia Psychological Society (APS): 1800 333 497

Mental Health Information Service (MHIS): 1300 794 991

Recommended Reading:

- *Everyone can win: how to resolve conflict.* By Helena Cornelius and Shoshana Faire. (Published by Simon & Schuster Australia, December 1999. ISBN:0684868512.)
- *People skills.* By Robert Bolton Ph.D. (Published by Prentice Hall PTR, October 1979. ISBN:0136557619.)
- *The seven principles for making marriage work.* By Gottman, J., & Silver, N. (Published by Crown publishing group, March 1999.) ISBN: 0609601040.
- *The dance of intimacy: A woman's guide to courageous acts of change in key relationships.* By Lerner, H., Ph.D. (Published by HarperTrade, April 1990. ISBN:006091646X.)
- *Facing codependence: What it is, where it comes from, how it sabotages our lives.* By Melody, P. (Published by HarperSanFrancisco, June 1989. ISBN:0662505890.)
- *The relationship cure: A 5-step guide to strengthening your marriage, family, and friendships.* By Gottman, J. M., Ph.D. (Published by Crown publishing group, June 2002. ISBN:0609 809539.)



Telephone Interpreter Service 131 450

If English is not your first language please call the Mental Health Information Service through the Telephone Interpreter Service (TIS). This service is free to non-English speaking Australian citizens or permanent residents. TIS have access to interpreters speaking more than 120 languages and dialects.

References

1. Helena Cornelius & Shoshana Fire. Everyone can win: how to resolve conflict. Published by Simon & Schuster Australia, December 1999. ISBN: 0684868512.
2. Robert Bolton Ph.D. People skills. Published by Prentice Hall PTR, October 1979. ISBN: 0136557619.
3. Carla Wills-Brandon. Is it love or is it sex. Published by iUniverse, Incorporated, May 2000. ISBN: 0595093507.
4. Weeks, G.R., Ph.D. & Hof, L., M.Div. Integrative solutions: Treating common problems in couples. Published by Brunner-Routledge, October 1995. ISBN0876307810.
5. Gottman, J., & Silver, N. The seven principles for making marriage work. Published by Cron publishing group, March 1999. ISBN: 0609601040.

Disclaimer

This information is for educational purposes. As neither brochures nor websites can diagnose people it is always important to obtain professional advice and/or help when needed. The listed websites provide additional information, but should not be taken as an endorsement or recommendation.

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