

Behind a healthy relationship



There are few areas of our lives to which we devote more time and attention than our relationships. In poems, songs, pictures, photographs and films, we struggle to capture both the agony and the ecstasy of our intimate connections with others.

Research shows that people in long-term relationships are less vulnerable to burnout and are more likely to live longer. Yet in a modern world characterised by instant access and easy disposability, we appear to be finding it increasingly difficult to find and maintain enduring and satisfying relationships.

Recent government figures have revealed that two in five homes in England will be occupied by only one person within the next 20 years. At the same time, however, online dating websites are reporting growth in membership of as much as 250 percent in the last year.

So somewhere along the line, we're not quite finding what

we're looking for. And even when we do, it appears that the magic can prove fragile. Relate, for instance, Britain's largest provider of relationship therapy, has seen a sharp rise in demand for its services since the start of the recession.

This may all sound rather gloomy, but consider also the fact that official figures last year put the divorce rate in Britain at a 26-year-low. So despite all the obstacles and challenges, people continue to make their relationships work, and so can you. If you'd like to discuss any of the issues raised in this Helpsheet, the CiC 24-hour Confidential Care Adviceline is available for practical and emotional support.

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The secret life of intimacy

It's perhaps worth pausing to wonder why relationships are so difficult. For starters, the way we relate to people is shaped from the very earliest weeks and months of our lives. We are relational animals at the very core of our being. The emotions surrounding close relationships, therefore, will often be experienced at the most primitive and vulnerable levels of our inner worlds.

People's first relationship is in most cases with their mother. For a while after birth, babies do not realise that they are separate beings from their mothers, but as time draws on, they begin to understand that their mother is someone else ... someone else with whom they have a relationship.

If the mother is present and reliable and able to provide a sense of safety for the young child, the infant will begin to experience relationships as sources of stability and nourishment. Unfortunately, this process can falter for all sorts of reasons. The mother may be depressed or chaotic, or smothering or overbearing. The point is, if she is not able to provide a stable environment, the child will begin to view the world as a hostile place and relationships as inherently unstable.

If these feelings become unbearable, the child will grow up needing to get rid of them. As he or she enters adulthood, this will set up a tendency to project those feelings on to other people. If you're often perceiving others as angry, for instance,

it is quite likely that you are projecting your own anger onto others as a way of avoiding your own discomfort.

This does two things. It both weakens your sense of your own identity and distorts your view of those close to you. Unfortunately, the person who will most regularly find themselves on the receiving end of these projections is the person with whom you are most intimate ... the person that you are having a relationship with. To make matters even more complicated, we often unconsciously choose people who display the characteristics that we deny in ourselves in an attempt to come to terms with these struggles. But if we're not aware of what's going on, we'll just end up making the same mistakes over and over again.

While these dynamics surface in our dealings with everyone, including family members, friends and work colleagues, they are most dramatically activated in our intimate relationships. Human beings are built at their deepest level for relatedness. Emotional intimacy, then, is the source of our greatest joy but also, when it fails, our greatest pain.

The stages of grieving

Perhaps the biggest single obstacle to a fulfilling relationship is a lack of self knowledge. If you find that you are repeating the same relationship mistakes over and over again, it is probably time to think seriously about the one common denominator ... you!

That's not to say you must heap blame and criticism on yourself. But it does mean you need to take some action. Talking to a therapist or trusted friend is always a good start, whether you are currently in a relationship or single. Knowing yourself and accepting your vulnerabilities will put you on a path towards loving yourself. And once you've achieved that, you'll be in a position to let someone else love you.

We'll examine some other strategies for building up relationships later. But first let's look at some of the other problems. Relationship difficulties can be triggered by a whole host of events, both good and bad. A loss of a job can have a dramatic effect on a relationship, but so can a job promotion, which can radically alter the dynamic between two people, particularly if issues of envy or competitiveness are aroused.

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Other factors that can cause problems include children, money difficulties, sexual issues and chronic illness. Anything that upsets the normal run of things has the capacity to push a couple into tricky territory. Whenever we're under pressure, we tend to regress to more infantile levels of emotional expression. This means that very adult problems are often met with relatively childish responses, such as blame, denial and resentment, all of which can have a dramatic impact on a relationship.

Psychologist Dr John Gottman of the Relationship Research Institute in Seattle has identified four key types of negativity in relationships that he calls the "Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse"! Having studied hundreds of couples over time, focusing on the way in which they argue and resolve conflict, Gottman suggests that the presence of these factors predicts with near certainty that the relationship will fail.

They are:

- ▶ **Criticism.** Partners who regularly make globally negative statements about each other, such as "you always do this" or "you never do anything for me", are heading for trouble.
- ▶ **Contempt.** There are few attitudes as toxic to relationships as contempt. Sarcasm, cynicism, name-calling, eyerolling, sneering, mockery and hostile humor all convey disgust. Few relationships survive it.
- ▶ **Defensiveness.** The damage here is done by a refusal to take responsibility for one's own part in situations.



Defensive partners are quick to blame the other, a tactic that can preserve a fragile ego in the short term, but will always escalate conflict in the long term.

- ▶ **Stonewalling.** Here, one partner will completely disengage from the relationship, possibly by looking away silently and acting as though he or she doesn't care what the other is saying. While it appears quietly dismissive on the outside, it is in reality an intensely aggressive manoeuvre.

According to Gottman and his colleagues, these factors – left unaddressed – lead to a kind of emotional gridlock, where all communication breaks down. If attempts to pull back from this state of affairs fail, divorce or separation can be predicted with more than 90 percent accuracy!

Steps towards lasting partnership

We've taken a look at the ingredients of a recipe for disaster. But what about real success in relationships? Here are some practical guidelines.

- ▶ **Deepen self knowledge.** It is only familiarity with your own inner world that will tell you if you are relating honestly and openly with your partner or struggling with the projections that you have loaded onto them. Often the only way to unravel what's going on is to talk to a qualified counselor. If you feel that you might benefit from this, call the CiC Confidential Care Adviceline and an experienced consultant will help you figure out the best way forward. If both you and your partner want to engage in this process together, CiC can also help you access high-quality couples therapy.
- ▶ **Accept and respect your partner.** No matter how badly you'd like your partner to be different, you will stand no chance of building a healthy relationship until you find a way to accept them just as they are. This does not mean ignoring their flaws or dismissing your own legitimate needs, but it does mean nurturing respect for them. Taking time to get to know them just as they are will create a positive space within which you both have the opportunity to communicate, grow and change.

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- ▶ **Nurture shared meaning.** Partners who have no common vision for the future will almost always have a real struggle on their hands. This does not mean you have to have identical beliefs and goals, but it really pays to find common ground in terms of your deepest values. If partners do not share the same values, it becomes even more important that they are able to listen to the others' dreams with respect and sensitivity.
- ▶ **Overcome gridlock.** In their studies of couples, Gottman and his colleagues have identified gridlock as one of the most dangerous stages for any relationship, because all communication breaks down. Finding a way past gridlock is key, and it can only be achieved through dialogue. This requires effort and, at times, a degree of compromise. It also means really listening to your partner so that, even if you profoundly disagree, you can still understand where they're coming from and why they feel so strongly about an issue. It can also be helpful to agree on ground rules for arguments, such as a ban on humiliating and sarcastic comments.
- ▶ **Find common ground on practicalities.** It's sometimes said that most breakups are caused not by major events such as affairs, but by disagreements over where to keep the toothpaste. This is of course an over-simplification, but it points to the reality that the mundane demands of life can often overwhelm a relationship if they are not addressed. Small demands include distributing tasks such as washing up and cleaning. Larger ones may include identifying financial goals together. Either way, finding common ground will provide a solid base for any relationship.
- ▶ **Stay tuned.** Emotionally intelligent couples stay in touch with the details of each other's emotional and practical lives. That means keeping up with events, remembering birthdays and anniversaries as well as attuning to each other's emotional states, worries and hopes.

What if I'm single?

There are as many different views of being single as there are single people. Some fiercely defend their singleton status having finally found freedom after a long-term bad

relationship. Others consider it a lifestyle choice that liberates them from the responsibilities of catering to the needs and desires of someone else.

Some people are ambivalent about being single, perhaps hoping for a relationship, but enjoying family and friends in the meantime. And still others loathe being single, finding it tiring, demoralizing and to be avoided at all costs.

If you're newly single after a long time attached, the world will suddenly look like a very different place. Former certainties may have evaporated, dynamics with some of your friends may well have changed, and you may also find yourself questioning aspects of your identity that were wrapped up in your partner.

If you're long-term single, you may be beginning to believe that there's something wrong with you and despairing of ever finding love. Whatever your current experience of the single life, you have a choice. You can just give up, or you can view your time as a single person as an opportunity to get to know yourself better, to mourn any losses that you might have experienced, and to face the future with a sense of hope and curiosity. Optimism, it turns out, can be learned, if one is willing to put in the practice. It is also contagious and draws other people in. The more optimistic and upbeat you are, the more attractive you will be to others, and the more likely you will become to find a partner. If you're regularly experiencing feelings of despair, it might well be time to get some help, so give CiC a call (See below.)

Books

Why Marriages Succeed or Fail

by John M. Gottman

Loving Yourself, Loving Another (Relate Guides)

by Julia Cole

Getting the Love You Want: A Guide for Couples

by Harville Hendrix

(This helpsheet is intended for informational purposes only and does not represent any form of clinical diagnosis. While every effort has been made to ensure that the content is accurate, relevant and current, CiC accepts no liability for any errors or omissions contained herein. The list of books is provided for interest only and CiC is not responsible for their availability, accuracy, or content.)