

## Tips for a Loving Relationship

When we commit to a long-term relationship, we expect we will act together to realise mutual goals. Every couple, however, will experience relationship difficulties. Couples will be confronted and sometimes overwhelmed by challenges. Most couples can deal with these challenges and move forward. Sometimes these challenges, however, leave each partner feeling alienated and alone and unable to resolve issues. As time passes, one or both individuals might consider separation. Separation and divorce statistics are high, yet many of the difficulties that threaten the survival of relationships can be addressed and resolved. Attending relationship counselling is not just about resolving issues but evolving the relationship by learning how to rekindle the relationship or move forward if separating.

While counselling can assist couples resolve difficulties and enhance their relationship, sometimes counselling is about helping two people separate. This is sometimes the outcome when either both or one party see the damage to a relationship as irreparable or where differences are so significant the relationship can no longer work. Counselling can help the separation process be smoother. Counselling is also beneficial where children are involved to help all parties optimise relationships to ensure ongoing support for them.

### What causes relationship problems?

There are many factors that can contribute to problems occurring in a relationship including:

- ◊ **Neglecting the relationship** - The foundation of a happy relationship is friendship. This simply means: enjoying each other's company and sharing: values, interests, friends and extended family. It also relates to mutual care, support, understanding and 'being there' for each other, working together as a team. This friendship needs to be nurtured to grow and not deteriorate. This might seem obvious, but life demands such as: work pressures, parenting and other personal issues can result in spending less time together and drifting apart with time, losing connection. Couples need to spend time together regularly, engaged in shared activities, talk and make plans.
- ◊ **Conflict** - Unresolved and ongoing conflict leaves us feeling angry, disappointed, frustrated and/or hurt. Conflict needs to be managed effectively to avoid driving your partner away or leaving them feeling resentful. We often expect our partners to change. Although we can change, we are less likely to consider changing if we feel we are being misunderstood, misjudged or attacked for who we are, how we behave, or what we want or need. When one partner's request for change is perceived as criticism, the other partner is likely to be defensive. When conflict grows, criticism can cause contempt resulting in the partner blocking or 'stonewalling'. These behaviours are detrimental to the relationship. Strategies to manage issues leading to conflict are needed.

The distress that accompanies arguments can bring out the worst in us and results in poor behaviours being displayed. This is counterproductive. When we are angry, we do not think clearly. We can say or do things we later regret and cause growing damage to the relationship. It is important to calm down before tackling difficult situations. Attending psychological counselling can provide a neutral environment to work through sensitive issues. The counselling psychologist can act as an objective third party to assist in regulate emotions, clarify communications and assist in learning new ways of communicating and relating.

- 📍 **Poor management of differences** - Differences between partners always exist as we are individuals with different values, priorities and ways of dealing with issues. Examples include attitudes to money, choice of holidays, how much time we spend with family and friends, how much time we spend together or alone, how we show our love, how to discipline children, where we send our children to school, how we drive, how tidy we are, how much effort goes into buying presents and so on. We tend to see our way as the right way and our partner as wrong, expecting them to change. It is more sensible to find a way to manage these differences rather than remove them.
- 📍 **Withdrawing** - Determined to have our own way, we might let our partner know they are wrong by telling them. When that does not work, we might withdraw contributions from the relationship that our partner values. A man, for example, might stop discussing issues with his partner or a woman might stop showing interest in sex. As talking and sex are important elements for feeling close to each other, both might feel misunderstood, despair and lonely.
- 📍 **Loss of compassion** - We all want to be understood. Understanding does not mean agreeing. We do not want to be judged. Being in a relationship requires us to tolerate differences to understand and empathise with our partner. We want to feel valued. Understanding and empathising are important for a relationship to develop mutual care and love. If we do not obtain that support from our relationship we might look for it elsewhere like work, spending time on the internet, etc. If a relationship is under stress, we might also rely on unhealthy coping mechanisms such as being moody, drinking alcohol, drug use, eating disorders and gambling, which can exacerbate the difficulties.
- 📍 **Times of crisis** - Understanding, compassion and friendship are particularly important when we experience a crisis. Individuals act differently to issues such as being retrenched from work; the death of a parent; infertility; a miscarriage; a child's disability; fire or drought; and these differences need to be understood. Couples that work together as a team who care and support each other can work through and recover from life problems while strengthening their relationship.

All relationships face difficulties, and most are resolved over time. When problems become entrenched and seem unable to be solved, it is important to seek professional help. Unfortunately, on average, couples wait six years before seeking help after recognising a problem and then only a small percentage seek professional help. Half of all marriages that end do so in the first seven years. It is best to seek professional help as soon as possible.

When there are signs of relationship problems as outlined above, consider seeking professional help.

## Seeking professional assistance

Ideally both partners will agree that assistance is required to gain a new perspective and to try something different to remove barriers and mend the relationship. If your partner is reluctant or unwilling to seek help, then it can be helpful for you to seek help first. You cannot make your partner change, but changes you make can influence the dynamic in your relationship.

## Tips for a Happy Relationship

**Keep your love alive by valuing and nurturing your relationship in the following ways:**

1. **Invest in your relationship** - Plan regular time together doing something you both enjoy.
2. **Regulate emotions** - When conflict arises, calm yourselves and take time out. Discuss issues later when you are both relaxed, rested and have time to talk.
3. **Manage conflict** - Learn to recognise challenging dynamics in your relationship that result in arguments spiraling out of control and remaining unresolved.
4. **Improve communication and listening** - Listen to what your partner is saying and acknowledge what you have heard. Learn to express your needs in a constructive way.
5. **Improve empathy and understanding** - Step into your partners shoes to understand their position. Give your partner the benefit of the doubt rather than assuming the worst. Be curious and seek to understand why your partner is acting the way they are?
6. **Respect** - Always be respectful. Be prepared to be influenced by what is important to your partner, just as your partner needs to be influenced by you.
7. **Teamwork** - When there are difficulties, talk about what 'we' need to do about it. Look for a mutually satisfactory, win/win outcome.
8. **Be supportive** - Support your partner in difficult times. Encourage them in work, friendships and leisure activities. Also, accept support from your partner when needed.
9. **Be positive** - Keep your sense of humour and have fun. Ensure positive experiences in the relationship outweigh negative experiences by five to one.
10. **Accept responsibility and apologise** - When mistakes are made, admit it, accept your contribution and work to repair the damage.
11. **Express gratitude and appreciation** - Show appreciation for your partner's caring actions, skills, abilities and personal attributes.
12. **Maintain respect and standards** - Be respectful of your partner and maintain their trust through treating them as you would like to be treated, and by being honest with them.

## How a Psychologist can help

At iflow psychology we start by meeting with a couple first if both are willing to attend. Each individual is then seen for one session to explore their history and any personal matters that might

be impacting on the relationship. Therapy then continues with the couple together. It therefore takes up to four sessions to identify the issues, but most couples start seeing benefits before six sessions. While weekly sessions are recommended initially couples can reduce the frequency of their sessions to fortnightly or monthly as therapy progresses.

Therapy is about encouraging open communication, understanding and empathy, as well as problem solving. During therapy each member of the couple is encouraged to focus on changing the way they communicate and interact with the other. Relationship dynamics that are impacting negatively will also be challenged. While therapy can be challenging it should also be a positive growth experience.

## When to seek professional help

If you are experiencing ongoing relationship difficulties, then psychological assistance should be considered.

**iflow psychology** can assist. **Just call 0431 564 257 or book an appointment online** at [www.iflowpsychology.com.au](http://www.iflowpsychology.com.au)

