

“I can’t go on anymore!”

“I’ve had enough!”

Is that where you are today?

Another row, hurt feelings, disappointment and emotional pain.

Loneliness.

What it could have been. What it could be.

So much disappointment. So much anger and frustration.

Our relationship.

It wasn’t like this once.

It was new – exciting. Desire and physical attraction were strong. Each was the centre, the whole of the other.

New plans. New hopes.

And then life got in the way.

Pressure and demands of work. Children and parents. Poor health and stress. Financial problems.

Expectations: our own and others.

What is there to be done?

First, accept that there is a problem and that we each have a responsibility to address it. The problem is in the relationship. Problems in a relationship are normal. All relationships have problems. What is important is how we face up to and deal with them. They won’t go away by pretending they do not exist.

Notice we said “with the relationship”. That is not the same as with each other.

It is easier to work together on problems in a relationship than to try and change each other.

Each relationship is unique. It is based on what we each bring to our relationship as individuals: our personalities, upbringing, and life experiences. Our expectations and needs.

Second, ask how we communicate. How we talk and listen to each other’s needs and expectations. Do we feel “safe” to share our inmost fears and vulnerable needs.

All couples develop ways of communicating: some good, satisfying and enriching. Some are damaging or unhelpful. We might call them patterns. Think about the last row. Is there a pattern in how it started and developed? How did it end? The reason for the row may be different but the pattern of behaviour may be the same.

Sally had had a bad day. The children were unwell and she had had a particularly stressful time with her mother who again had been over critical about the state of the house. Dan was late home again. It seemed they had been drifting apart for months. She felt overwhelmed and wanted to share with him her frustration and disappointment. He did not want to talk. He had been in meetings all day. He just wanted to shut himself away as he did most evenings either preparing some talk or researching on the internet. He got angry again. She couldn’t bear it when he got angry. She felt put down and very alone. He was so critical. Strong emotions welled up and seemed to take over. Words were said afterwards regretted. A plate was smashed. The children were afraid.

This was a regular happening. A pattern of communicating. We slip into these patterns when we are stressed. Do they work for us? Improve how we feel? Or do they damage our relationship and result in our feeling worse?

Third, recognise and talk about these patterns. Choose a quiet time when you are more relaxed. Practice listening to each other: not suggesting how the other's problems can be solved. But empathise and reflect back what the other is saying.

Avoid the use of "you" as in "you should, you ought, you said/did". Instead use the "I feel, I think, I wish, I need" phrases.

Not ready for this yet? The relationship feels too unsafe? Then, get help. It is not weakness but strength to realise your relationship needs skilled help.

Fourth, Get Help

A skilled couple counsellor will work to provide a safe place for you, together, to explore your needs and expectations from your relationship. You are the experts on your relationship. S/he will work with you; will be non judgemental and rather than give advice from their own personal experience will work with your strengths and help with your weaknesses. Sharing this work will enrich and strengthen your relationship. You will explore what each of you is bringing to the relationship in terms of your own family patterns and your ways of managing "life" from your childhood and through your life experiences.

The first session is usually an assessment of where you are in your relationship and what you want from this form of support. Don't expect answers or great progress. This is the first stage. You will then be given the opportunity for regular weekly or fortnightly sessions, same evening and time. Each will last fifty minutes. Expect a review after four sessions and an ending after around twelve sessions. You will find them challenging, emotional and revealing.

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See articles on *Marriage Enrichment – Communication* and *Marriage Enrichment- Disagreements* on Resources/Relationships on www.chsn.org.uk