

## **Managing conflict in a relationship**

When a couple's relationship is stressed it is often because each sees the other as "the problem" and this naturally becomes confrontational.

Here's something to try.

Think about "the problem" as being a problem of the "relationship" rather than of the other person. Don't try to define the problem at this stage as blame can get in the way.

Then externalise "the problem". This means that together you see the problem as something outside the relationship which is affecting the relationship. Give it a name.

Try then to work together as a "team" to consider the best way to deal with "the problem".

Make time to remember and share what life was like before "the problem" intruded on the relationship. Go for a walk or on a "date" to talk. Leave "the problem" behind for a few hours.

Plan together what to do when "the problem" arises - again as it will.

When "the problem" again intrudes, if you feel safe enough, identify to each other that "the problem" is back and causing trouble again. This can be helpful as then together you can face this external issue which is causing so much stress.

If you don't feel able to do this then get help from a professional couple counsellor who is skilled in creating a safe place to discuss painful issues.

Johnny and Lisa used this externalising process with their problem. Johnny had had an emotional attachment to another woman. They faced it together and this had the effect of strengthening their relationship. They named their problem "her outside"

Fred and Joan had a problem with money. Fred kept spending it. Together they chose to deal with the problem and, instead of Fred becoming more and more isolated and guilt ridden, they worked together to fight "old money bags" which is the name they gave it.

Sue and Paul were struggling with Sue's depression. There were times when she was desperately low and depressed. They called the problem "the bad place". One small thing that helped was that they agreed to smile at each other first thing in the morning because that was the worst time. By working together and agreeing a strategy, they could better manage "the bad place". Medication brought about a steadying of mood which in itself brought healing both in mind and in their relationship.

This process has worked with couples whose relationship has been damaged by conflict. You can get through this difficult time.

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June 2011