

# Relationship Problems and Solutions



Living in a close relationship with another person can be a source of comfort, support and fun and also, at times, a source of distress, frustration and despair. Close relationships typically go through phases of development with normal highs and lows in attraction, energy and enthusiasm.

The fluctuations in relationship satisfaction are also influenced by other factors, including our own level of tiredness, skills in communicating, problem solving and managing stress, our ability to deal with outside pressures such as work, family, finances and our own dreams, goals and expectations for our own life and our relationship.

## Common Problem Areas in Relationships

When problems occur in a relationship there can be a diverse range of reasons related to both individual problems and problems relating to patterns of interactions within the relationship. Individual problems that appear to place stress on relationships often arise due to individual needs being unmet. These unmet needs often arise due to dysfunctional patterns of interactions within the relationship. Specifically, these dysfunctional interactions can include an inability to communicate effectively, inadequate partner support, poor problem solving skills, lack of quality time and a lack of positive enjoyable shared experiences.

### Poor communication

Poor communication is an area identified in practically all problems within relationships. The way people talk (or don't talk) to one another can cause a lot of distress and tension within a relationship. In examining common problems seen in communication the following dysfunctional patterns have been identified:

- Demand-withdrawal. This is where one person adopts a demanding, intrusive or pushy communication style and the other partner withdraws or refuses to communicate in response.
- Negative emotion and labelling. This is where a person uses negative emotion, such as anger and sadness, to manipulate the other person. Labelling occurs when you use general/global terms about your partner – such as 'lazy', 'stupid', 'annoying' – to describe him or her, as opposed to describing the behaviour the person does not like.
- Emotional invalidation and ineffective listening. This occurs when a person does not use receptive body language and verbal feedback to show concern and understanding. They may be distracted by excessive noise or competing demands (i.e. television).

## **Poor problem solving**

Problem solving is a critical skill necessary to generate effective solutions to the multitude of seemingly complex daily problems that people living together in relationships have to face. Problems can include: organising schedules each day to get everything done, paying bills and budgeting, organising social activities and outings and making sure time is set aside for each other on a regular basis. Common problems encountered when trying to problem solve include:

- Failing to identify the actual problem. Often we fail to recognise what the problem really is. For example, in relationships often we think that our partner may not be very pleasant any more and may not like us, when in actual fact the real problem may not be that but rather that he or she is not getting enough rest and there is a lack of quality time together.
- Not thinking widely for all possible solutions before choosing one. Often we jump to conclusions about how to fix something without thinking about all the options. In relationships, sometimes one partner may think that a big holiday is needed to fix things and overlook little daily changes that could be made to bring about the same improvements. Similarly, we often think about ways to earn more money rather than cutting back on costly lifestyle choices.
- Not discussing and involving our partner in selecting, implementing and reviewing the strategy. Sometimes we try and solve relationship problems without involving our partner. We deny him or her the opportunity to be involved and share the process and may tend to blame one another when things don't work out, rather than working together on issues.

## **Inadequate partner support**

In order for a relationship to survive and flourish both partners need to feel they are receiving adequate support. Having these needs met is a combination of each partner having realistic expectations about the other's ability to meet your needs, creating an environment where both partners are aware of and able to meet each other's need for support.

Common problems in this area include:

- Having unrealistic expectations about your needs. It is important to be realistic in assessing what your needs are in terms of partner support. Relying solely on your partner to meet all your support needs is likely to be unrealistic and place too much demand on your partner.
- Placing unrealistic demands on your partner. Sometimes relationships become strained when one partner places unrealistic demands on the other and does not take into consideration the partner's humanness. Your partner is only human and makes mistakes, get tired and has his or her own needs.
- Failing to communicate and problem solve to enable needs to be met. Often arguments occur when one partner is upset that the other has not remembered or done something, which may or may not have been communicated effectively. In this case, things get worse when communication and problem solving is not used effectively to generate alternate solutions to meet needs.

## **Lack of quality time & enjoyable shared experiences**

- Lack of quality time and enjoyable shared experiences is another area frequently observed in relationship dissatisfaction. In highlighting the specific area identified the following problems are frequently observed:
- Lack of quality time. Couples often don't plan ahead to ensure they get quality time together. When they do have time alone it is not "quality" as they are often tired and distracted and end up arguing or failing to enjoy each other's company.
- Lack of shared enjoyable activities. Another area which can cause problems in relationships is when couple's don't have shared interests which they can both participate in and enjoy.

### Improving Your Relationship (some starting points...)

There are several things you can do to begin the processes of improving your relationship. Making changes to the way you and your partner relate and spend time together, and improving your skills in communicating and problem solving can form the basis for marked improvements and gains in relationship satisfaction and also pave the way for new growth together.

### **Enhancing communication**

Communication provides the basis for either a great relationship or an average one. Your APS Psychologist is an expert in this area and has many strategies to enhance your communication whether learning the basics or fine tuning your skills.

Some basic strategies and principles to get you started are outlined here:

- Remove all distractions when trying to communicate. Turn the television or radio off and remove distractions when trying to discuss things. If it's not convenient to discuss things now then advise your partner and provide a time (soon) when you can discuss things.
- Do not speak while your partner is speaking. Always wait until your partner has finished talking and then, if unsure or upset, summarise back what you have heard and check for accuracy before you speak in reply.
- Do not use blaming and labelling. Do not blame or label your partner as lazy, uncaring etc., but rather focus on the problem behaviours. Blaming will not achieve positive outcomes whereas identifying specific difficulties provides more of an opportunity for future change.
- Build your partner up and use encouraging words when speaking. Always look for positive ways to discuss things and attempt to phrase things in ways that, while honest, also aim to build your partner up with encouragement instead of putting him or her down.

### **Problem solving: generating new effective solutions**

Problem solving is a skill that whilst sounding simplistic can be very difficult to learn and even more difficult to apply properly when encountering difficulties. Your APS Psychologist can provide expert assistance in learning to problem solve and applying problem solving to seemingly impossible problems.

- Break down big problems into smaller ones and only solve one at a time. Some problems seem impossible because they are so overwhelming. In this case it's time to break the

problem down into parts and begin solving them one at a time in order of urgency and importance.

- Think of all possible solutions before choosing the one you will use. Don't forget to think through all possible solutions and strategies before you select one. Sometimes the unusual ones turn out to be the most helpful or may be needed later on.
- Involve your partner and work as a team. In order to problem-solve relationship issues, both partners need to be involved in order to have a sense of shared ownership in the process and shared responsibility in the outcomes. Remember to ask your partner for ideas and opinions and get feedback regularly.
- Remember to focus on the positive and learn from each situation. If things don't go exactly how you want them, don't just look at the negatives but also focus on the positives. What went well? What aspect did work? What did you and your partner do well together? What could you do differently next time?

### **Promoting partner support**

Promoting partner support requires many skills and energy. Your APS Psychologist is familiar with the complexities of understanding these issues and enhancing relationship satisfaction and meeting needs.

- Take time out to identify what your needs for support are. Take time to think out what it is your partner can do or be to assist you to feel more supported in the relationship. Keep in mind the need to have realistic and practical ideas in this area.
- Communicate clearly to your partner your expectations and check understanding. When you know what you want, make sure you can communicate this clearly to your partner and that he or she understands what you've said and what assistance is required.
- Be forgiving and patient as humans aren't perfect. Remember that your partner is not perfect and can let you down for any number of reasons ranging from simply forgetting through to being exhausted. Maintain a gentle and forgiving attitude and do not expect too much – that way you'll be pleasantly surprised when things work out the way you had hoped.

### **Increasing quality time and enjoyable shared experiences**

Quality time and enjoyable shared experiences is an area you and your partner can work on together both as a couple and in conjunction with your APS Psychologist:

- Plan regular quality times and ensure the quality time together. Plan ahead with your partner to have time together when you are not tired or distracted and can focus on each other and enjoy each other's company. Stay focused on pleasant topics and only discuss more difficult issues if you both agree beforehand.
- Make enjoyable shared experiences an ongoing growth area. If there are activities you enjoy, continue to do these together but also begin to expand or diversify your shared interests, or deepen your understanding of the specific aspect of each activity that your partner enjoys the most. If you do not have many enjoyable shared activities, start developing a list of activities you can try together. Review them so that, through trial and error, you will begin to develop more enjoyable activities you can participate in together.