

What Are You Like as a Partner?

For intimate relationships to improve, at least one person needs to make meaningful behavioural changes that their partner recognises as beneficial. However, the couples who make the most profound progress are those in which both people make such changes.

To understand which behavioural changes might bring out the best in your relationship, you need to develop perhaps the most important relationship skill—self-awareness. To achieve this, the best question you could possibly ask your partner is:

“What is it like having me as a partner?”

Early in counselling, this question is likely to be furthest from people’s minds. Typically, when people are in a relationship crisis, they are so upset by their partner’s behaviour that it becomes their overriding focus. The standard pattern is for each individual to build a case in their minds for why their partner is the problem and then try to enlist the couples counsellor to support this theory.

Of course, their concerns may be entirely valid. However, if both parties exclusively see the other person as the problem and neither is willing to make any behavioural changes themselves, then obviously no progress can occur.

The questions “What am I like” or “What is it like having me as a partner?” may feel like risky ones to ask. Being vulnerable is scary. Naturally, after your partner finishes singing your praises, you are likely to hear one or two criticisms. You may even hear some that you’ve never heard before or can scarcely believe. You don’t have to agree with their assessment, but if you want the relationship to improve, you do need to listen and at least try to understand.

Preparation

Before you ask the big question, ask yourself why you are *really* asking it. Questions can be asked for many reasons—to learn, to persuade or to exert power. Are you asking so that you can make a point, or so that you get your turn to criticise your partner? Are you asking so that you can persuade them that you are fine the way you are? Ideally, you are asking in order to learn how you can improve yourself and, in turn, the relationship.

Once you’ve clarified your intention and the timing feels right, you are ready to talk to your partner. You may choose to do this either in counselling or outside of it but, if at all possible, it is advisable to choose a ‘peacetime’ situation.

Perhaps you could open with something like:

“I want to work on myself for us. I want to understand more about what it is like for you to have me as your partner.”

Depending on how this broad question goes, you may then wish to follow up with some more specific ones such as:

- What am I like when I’m tired?
- What am I like when I’m stressed?
- How well do I communicate?
- How good a listener am I?
- What am I like to argue with?
- What am I like as a lover?
- What am I like when I’m in a good mood?
- How approachable am I?

Bear in mind that you are not asking the other person for an objective assessment of who you are ‘in reality’. Rather, you are asking about their perception of you—that is, how they experience you. Of course, their responses will also tell you something about *them*. Different people will experience you differently, depending on their personality, attachment and conflict styles, and experiences in previous relationships.

Your next task is to try to receive their answers open-mindedly and non-defensively. Obviously, this will depend on the content of what they say and how they say it. Hopefully, if your timing is right and they believe you are asking for the right reasons, they will respond respectfully and constructively.

If you find their answers difficult in some way—perhaps confronting, obscure, vague, overwhelming or hurtful—be patient and maybe ask for clarification. Perhaps you could ask them for one or two examples of the behaviours they are describing. However, don’t get too caught up in the details. This is not an opportunity to argue with them. Indeed, if you become defensive and start arguing your case, you may simply be confirming an impression they already have of you as defensive and difficult!

Furthermore, you cannot really argue with their perceptions, even if you think they sound extreme or judgmental. Their answers will provide important information about how they experience you and the relationship. Once again, remember that you do not have to agree with their assessments of you, nor should you have to make any changes that may cause you harm. So be brave and ask the big question. If you are lucky, they may even ask it back!