

What Are You Like?

Successful couples counselling requires at least one person to make significant behavioural changes that their partner recognises as beneficial. However, the relationships that make the most progress in counselling are the ones in which both people make such changes.

In order to understand which behavioural changes you need to make in order to bring out the best in your relationship, you need to develop the most important relationship skill – self-awareness. To help you do this, the best possible question you can ask your partner is ‘What am I like for you?’ You want to know more about what you are like generally but, more specifically, what you are like *for your partner* so that you can make changes that *they* will value.

Early in counselling, this question is likely to be furthest from people’s minds. Often, when people are in relationship crisis they are so bothered by their partner’s behaviour that this becomes their overriding focus. The standard pattern is that each individual builds a case for why their partner is the problem and enlists the counsellor to persuade them to see reason and then change. Their reasons may be valid, however, if both parties see the other as the problem and neither is willing to make any behavioural changes themselves, obviously no progress can occur.

The question ‘What am I like for you?’ may also be perceived as a risky one to ask. Naturally, after your partner finishes singing your praises, you are likely to hear one or two criticisms and perhaps something pretty confronting about yourself – maybe something you’ve never heard before or can even believe. But you need to listen and you need to understand. How else can you meet their needs and, therefore, get the best out of them?

Preparing the ground and following through

Questions can be asked for many reasons, for example, in order to learn, to persuade or to exert power. Are you asking so that you can make a point, or so you have an opportunity 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 the question in order to learn how to improve yourself and the relationship.

Once you’ve clarified your intention and when 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 ‘peace time’ situation.

Say to your partner something like, ‘I want to work on myself and us. I want to understand more about what I am like to be with for you?’ You may then wish to follow up with some more specific questions, such as:

- What am I like when I'm tired?
- What am I like when I'm stressed?
- What am I like as a communicator?
- 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, how they experience you. So, of course, their response tells you something about them also. For example, everyone will take your style of argumentation differently, depending on how sensitive they are to conflict, and everyone will experience your expressions of love differently, depending on what they value.

The next step for you is to receive their answers constructively. Your ability to do this will naturally be affected by the content of what they say. Hopefully, if your timing is right and they have the impression that you are asking for the right reasons, they should respond constructively and relatively dispassionately.

If you find their answers difficult in some way, for example, offensive, obscure, vague or overwhelming, be patient and ask for clarification. Perhaps you could ask them for one or two illustrations of your behaviours. However, don't get too caught up in the details. This is not an opportunity for you to argue with them. Indeed, if you react this way you will just be confirming a perception they may have of you as being a difficult person! Furthermore, you cannot really logically argue with their perceptions, even if you think they are extreme. Even if you think your partner is particularly judgmental or sensitive you need to adapt to these 'conditions'.

If you are lucky, your partner may then ask you the same question!