

## Why Are We Together?

One way of understanding the driving forces behind common relationship problems such as high conflict, communication difficulties and lack of intimacy is to ask what is arguably the most fundamental question of all: 'Why are we together?' It seems almost too obvious to ask, doesn't it? However it is striking how few people who seek relationship counselling have ever asked themselves or their partner that question. People are often unable to easily answer that question for themselves or predict how their partner would answer and sometimes people are afraid to ask.

Two further complications exist here. Firstly, people's true reasons for being in the relationship are not necessarily their stated ones. Secondly, each person's perception of why their partner is with them does not necessarily match their partner's stated reasons. It can, understandably, be a very delicate topic. Nevertheless, open exploration of the answers to this big question can reveal a great deal about why people behave as they do in their relationships and also which insecurities or sensitivities may be present in the relationship.

There could be a range of reasons why two people choose to be in a relationship with each other, including love, attraction, convenience, practical considerations, personal values, cultural or religious practices, etc. Most people would probably think that there are no universally right or good reasons. However, it is important for each person to understand them because they can influence each person's emotional state and, accordingly, the overall tone or atmosphere of the relationship.

There are two dimensions involved in the question, 'Why are you together?' Firstly, how you feel about why you are with your partner and secondly, how you feel about why your partner is with you. Here are a few reasons that are commonly expressed in counselling. Consider how closely these match either your reasons or what you imagine your partner's to be:

- We are soul mates.
- We made the commitment of marriage.
- He or she is special to me.
- We've been together for a long time.
- I wouldn't want to be alone or single.
- I'm not sure there is anyone else out there for me.
- For the children's sakes.
- I don't like to give up on things easily.
- My partner or I would have to leave the country if we separated.
- I haven't the strength/courage to end it.
- We used to be so in love.
- He or she has such a lovely family.
- He or she really needs me.

## **Obligation and desire**

The above reasons could be arranged into two categories fitting the two primary types of motivation: desire (attraction to something positive) or obligation (avoidance of some sort of negative consequence). So you could ask yourself if you have an overall sense of being motivated to be with your partner out of desire, obligation or perhaps a bit of both. If you had to choose only one reason for the two of you to be together, what would it be?

When I explore this issue in counselling, most people report that many of their reasons for being in the relationship are to do with obligations. However, people also often add that they would hope that they are with their partner due to desire, due to their partner having a special or unique quality that they hold dear. Similarly, they hope that their partner is also with them primarily due to desire rather than obligation. A lack of desire – or the perception of it – can strike at the heart of a relationship and can lead to hypersensitivity, defensiveness, insecurity and misunderstanding.

## **What to do if obligation outweighs desire**

If you or your partner is in your relationship primarily due to obligation and if you are uncomfortable with this, can you influence the relationship so that you are more motivated by desire? Perhaps you need to remind yourself of what attracted you both to each other when you first met – before the trials and tribulations of life complicated things or before you disappointed each other one too many times. What would you need to do to create or recapture some of the conditions that allow desire to flourish? What would each of you regard as quality time together? What expression of love would you and your partner value the most? If both people are willing and able to make the right sort of behavioural changes, it may be possible to restore the missing element of desire.