



6 RELATIONSHIP
MYTHS
THAT GET
COUPLES IN TROUBLE

Six relationship myths that get couples in trouble, and the truth so you don't fall into the same trap.

These days it seems like you only have to turn around to see someone else touting themselves as a 'relationship expert'. Due to this, many couples come in to see me believing things about 'how to be in a relationship' that are not only false but are potentially very harmful.

Many a misconception has either led couples to *believe* that they are incompatible, leading them down the wrong path that just gets exacerbated by the complexities of living with another person, or these myths cause them to say or do destructive things, eliciting similarly destructive responses from their partner causing them to *feel* that they're with the wrong person.

Myth 1: Conflict is a sure sign that you're in a bad relationship.

It's important to understand why conflict is happening – most of the time it occurs due to ineffective attempts to communicate. This conflict gets especially heightened when one person is endeavoring to get close and the way they go about it triggers a poor response from their partner, heightening the sense of rejection and ramping up the reactivity.

The irony is that conflict often means there is still love there. As I like to say; the opposite of love is not hate, it's indifference. In anger there is passion and at least you still care enough to get triggered. The most difficult cases I see are not the highly conflicted ones, they are the ones where indifference reigns – a sure sign that either one or both partners are checked out of the relationship (or was never really there from the get go).

Even research done on the 'Master' couples (those who have been together for over 20 and are still very much in love) show they also fight, but factors like how they do it and how quickly they repair are the real indicators of a good, functional relationship.

Myth 2: Love is enough and if you have to work hard at it you're not 'soulmates'.

It's important to understand that when you hear people say this, the 'love' they're referring to is the noun and oftentimes during the honeymoon phase of

the relationship, most of us have had experiences where it actually is enough. It's all-sustaining, heck we almost don't even need to eat, we could just live off that love alone. Not to mention the great job Hollywood does to collude in perpetuating this myth.

Inevitably this 'love' wears off leaving us feeling disappointed. The first one out of the relationship gets to believe that the other wasn't 'the one'. The partner who gets dumped walks away not only with the incompatibility myth but also a belief that they must be flawed.

The reality is *real love is a verb*. It's something you *do*, consistently, daily! When thinking about what love is, most people talk about the grand gestures but really what's important are the tiny, little, unspectacular acts. Like showing your partner you're excited to see them and that you're going to miss them when you leave, telling them you appreciate the things they do for you and reciprocating by doing things for them. Looking into their eyes and really seeing them, laughing at a less-than-stellar joke, smiling at them for no reason or just being willing to listen to them. Little acts of kindness and caring that over time mount up to a sum much greater than their parts.

Myth 3: Talking about things that hurt you in the past is not helpful – after all the past is passed.

This is a myth that men (and proponents of the positive psychology school of thought) find especially easy to believe because men are 'doers' and many believe that since you can't go back and change the past there's not much point dwelling on it.

Recent brain research shows that there is a grain of truth to this in that allowing your mind to dwell on the negative creates more negative neural pathways to form, but equally other research shows that just going around thinking positive thoughts and ignoring anything negative doesn't work in healing painful or traumatic events either... especially if you're still with the person who caused them.

Oftentimes talking about (or processing) these things is very helpful. For most women it's actually critical to do so, yet the majority of men would rather have a root canal. Instead in most couples, she talks to her friends about it (often getting advice that only exacerbates things) and he gets to avoid talking at all. Sadly this approach just creates strangers in the relationship and not much healing is happening either. Ironically when I ask most of my clients who come in to see me due to an affair what quality they liked most about their affair partner they tell me it was the ability to talk to them at a deep level... we all need it.

Myth 4: If we're not on the same page about most things it shows we're not a great match and are probably doomed.

So often couples come to see me believing that they are just not with the 'right' partner and hoping I'll point that out. In the spirit of gender equality this is one mostly held by the ladies. When we talk about being on the same page what we really mean is; does my partner agree with everything I say or at least say things like "Wow, great point", "I didn't know that". Or at least respectfully agree to disagree.

In fact Helen Fisher one of the worlds leading authorities on love suggests that feeling you have something in common is part of the reason we fall in love in the first place and when over time the differences begin to appear (as they always, always, always do), the shine begins to wear off.

The key to lasting love can be found in how you deal with those differences. Most couples do it in such destructive ways that cause each other to get deeply entrenched in opposing viewpoints and a breeding ground for power struggles ensues. This leaves you feeling that your partner really doesn't get you. They don't, and you don't get them either because no one's really listening to each other anymore. It's gotten so emotionally charged that you can't even agree to disagree.

Myth 5: What couples fight about most is money, sex, the kids and the in-laws.

Most of these are just great excuses to fight but they aren't actually what caused it – the real issues are much deeper. What most couples fight about are failed attempts at connection. When partners inadvertently hurt each other they don't share that they've been hurt in ways that allow the other to easily fix it, or they do but their partner denies, defends, or discounts them. What then tends to happen is they (over)react by criticizing or shutting down, leaving their partner feeling ashamed or abandoned. Then our negative-biased brains come in and add a huge heaping of insult to injury. Generally by the time we end up addressing the initial issue we've spiraled so out of control we're just happy to use any excuse (the above ones being most common) to be really, really mad at our partner.

The solution is to not get stuck in the 'content' or the *why* you're fighting but to focus instead on the 'process' or the *how* you're fighting. The really interesting thing to keep in mind (as the research shows) is that 69% of relationship conflict is perpetual which means it keep happening, so really it can't be resolved, it has to be managed instead. Acceptance of each other's different stances and dialogue to try to understand each other and reach a more common ground is how that's achieved.

Myth 6: It's only a matter of time before the sex gets boring.

I often see people use this as a convenient excuse to leave a relationship rather than recognizing it as a symptom. At school I had a teacher who used to say "if you're bored you're boring". What he meant was if you're a creative, vital and present individual you would never get bored. I like to see sex that way, not that I'm calling anyone here boring of course.

There's also an unfortunate paradox with sex in that the more deeply you fall in love with someone the higher the stakes, so you tend to subconsciously risk less to preserve the bond. Self-consciousness (not necessarily physical) creeps in and the gay abandonment of the honeymoon period can be replaced by a more cautionary approach. A lot of my clients have reported that it's easy to have dirty, erotic sex with strangers and really push the boundaries because there's nothing at stake, you don't care if or how you're judged.

Also as you encounter relationship challenges, the inevitable residual anxiety and resentment have a direct and detrimental effect on your libido. Not to mention childbirth, stress, trauma and the long-term effects of smoking, drinking and overeating. Ironically too much closeness can also affect excitement, a fire needs space between the logs to burn hottest. The truth is sex, like any other pursuit, can become boring if you allow mindlessness and repetition to run the show.

In relationships where partners feel accepted and valued and in which each person brings their 'best self' to the relationship (and not 'the left-overs'), the security and knowledge of self and other gained over time can enable couples to develop a creative and highly satisfying sex life - unparalleled by newer relationships.