

PURPOSE

To understand some ways to keep open to each other and some skills to support you to

MATERIALS**TIME**

2 hours – It would be best to activities one at a time with a break in between

At the beginning of relationships, time, energy and priority are given to the relationship and there is considerable delight in getting to know each other. There is a delicious feeling of contact and support.

As time goes on life and differences begin to eat away at that feeling. Couples that stay together work out ways to cope with their differences. They also develop ways to repair their relationship when difficulties arise.

Dealing with differences and repairing damage when it occurs means that feelings of distance and coldness don't last. So, people stay open and the warmth continues.

THE MEANING OF LIFE AND EVERYTHING

Differences of personality, language use, background and culture all pose their challenges to relationships. In many cases, a balance is found and the couple finds a way to cope with, and sometimes even enjoy their differences. But sometimes, differences result in ongoing, damaging, bitter arguments that come up again and again.

Gottman and Silver have followed couples through many years and found that they tend to be still arguing about the same thing years after the argument is first observed.

“Couples spend year after year trying to change each other's minds - but it can't be done. This is because most of their disagreements are rooted in fundamental differences of lifestyle, personality or values. By fighting over these differences all they succeed in doing is wasting their time and harming their marriage.”

These are not the differences about the management of daily life where some listening and creative problem solving will work it out. These are the ones that endlessly recycle through the years. The arguments may be about seemingly trivial things, but the pain and passion is very real. Often the issue being fought over is like a thread that if pulled leads back to something that means much more such as a pattern of living that was set down in childhood.

1 Gottman and Silver 1999: 3 and 23
2 Gottman and Silver 1999: 23 -24



“You committed to having Sundays together. I don’t care if it is your golf championship. That’s what being a family means.”

“Being home before the kids go to bed is really important. You just don’t care about them.”

Sometimes it is a life dream.

“I’ve always wanted to have a holiday on the canals in England.”

“I’ve always wanted to live on a boat.”

“I’m terrified about not having enough money when we get old, so we have to be careful about our money now.”

When there is no conflict people get on with “living the dream”. It is only when there appear to be contradictions between the dreams of the couple that the trouble starts.

He has always wanted a big family.
She thinks two is more than enough.

She thinks that going to University is something everyone should do.
He thinks that a trade is more practical and more likely to lead to a job.

It is the background meaning that these statements carry that is the key to understanding and stopping the arguments. It needs a careful look behind the words to the meaning that is attached to them.

WHAT DO YOU MAKE IT MEAN?

Any verbal communication needs people to agree on the meaning of words. In many situations this is MUCH more complicated than we usually assume. In fact, most of the time we don’t think about it at all.

As children grow, they work out what actions, relationships and events mean to them. Their own special meaning is attached to everything in their life.

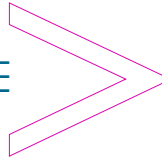
A good part of the meaning of who they are is worked out through the reactions and input of the people in their life. Family stories, important family events, the one special person who always has time, the teacher who inspires an interest, as well as the difficulties and disappointments all contribute.

The meanings and connections that are created are very strong and often last until the end of life if nothing happens to challenge them. They help describe what a good person is, what a caring parent does, what a comfortable home is like, what a good holiday is.

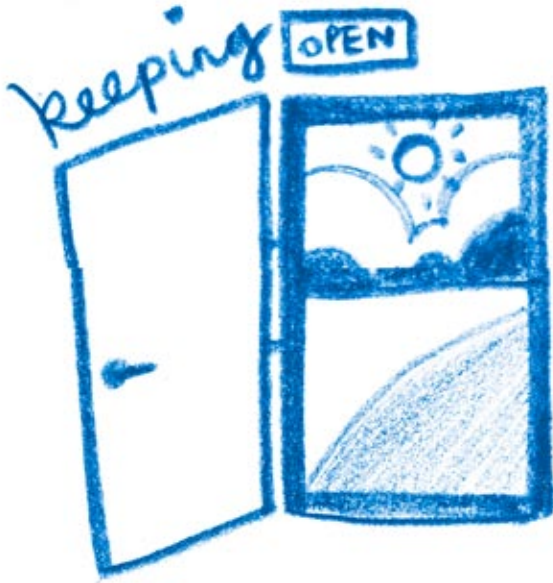
When a couple is getting to know each other and sharing their lives they will discover many areas of difference in meaning and connections.

A weekend meal that was a lovely time of family fun in one family was a nightmare of recriminations and sarcasm for another....you can imagine!!

ACTIVITY ONE



MAKING MEANING



Individually, think of one person, one family event and one other event that was important in forming you when you were a child. Write down something they contributed to your understanding of the world.

Person

Family event (could be something that happened regularly)

Other event

SHARE these three with your partner.

Write down what a good parent of the same sex as you should do.
(Do this even if you are not a parent).

SHARE this with your partner.

What do you think are the three most important acts of a good partner?

SHARE this with your partner.

What differences have you found?

SHARE this with your partner.

When there is a conflict of meaning, the stakes seem very high. People think about what is happening and KNOW what it means to them.

There are many situations where the meaning that is given to the same thing by different people, is very different.

Unless the background meaning for each person is made clear, the situation can never be resolved. It is like two icebergs crunching into each other – most of the action is hidden.

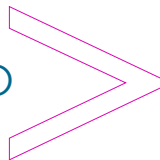
One way through this is to really try to find out what the situation to the other person. A skill that will help you is having a structured discussion.

STRUCTURED DISCUSSION

Understanding is the first step. Set aside time to work on an ongoing issue at a time when both partners can be open and at least try to understand the other's way of understanding the world.

- 1 First person talks in detail about how they understand the issue and where their understanding of it has come from. The other person asks questions to help the first person talk and explore the issue. They can ONLY seek information and try to understand the other's point of view. It sometimes happens that even the 'facts' seem different. The point is not to attack and defend but to understand and get clear.
- 2 Together, summarise the main points.
- 3 Second person talks and the first person supports them by asking questions and listening.
- 4 Summarise the second person's main points.
- 5 Put the main points together and see if you can spot the clashes. This can be painful, but you are already a long way ahead of where you were.
- 7 Work out a plan to deal with the differences.

ACTIVITY TWO



STRUCTURED DISCUSSION

Try this structure out on a couple of issues that are a bit uncomfortable or need a decision but are not very important to you. The practice will help you sort out exactly how this works.

REPAIR ATTEMPTS

Couples who are trying to stay close by managing their differences make repair attempts when there is difficulty brewing.

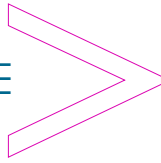
Gottman and Silver have identified that the success or failure of a couple's repair attempts is one of the primary factors in whether their marriage flourishes or flounders.

Repair attempts diffuse the tension between the couple when discussion is getting loud or negative. It is a signal that the relationship is more important than winning this particular battle.

Repairs also need to happen when there has been a negative time between partners. An offer of repair can be anything: a cup of tea, an apology, recognition that some of the difficulty is your fault, a smile, bringing in the washing. It just depends on what is meaningful to the couple.



ACTIVITY THREE



DIFFUSING DIFFICULTIES

With your partner, in your relationship identify the things you do to diffuse difficulties as they are happening?

Think of words and actions.

An offer of repair that is accepted is a bond that strengthens the relationship.

Sometimes an offer of repair is made before the other partner is ready. They still feel hurt and can't move. They may not even notice the offer because they are too miserable.

Focussing on the importance of the relationship is helpful for the person making the offer and they might need to stick with it until their offer is accepted.