

Speaking the same language doesn't mean you always understand each other. Regardless of eloquence or intelligence, communicating and relating kindly and well in a couple can be extraordinarily complex. And considering the inordinate stresses and griefs of the past 10 months – and those yet to come – it would be curious if we weren't experiencing more conflict than normal.

This time of year is tough anyway, and relationships charity Relate always sees a peak in inquiries – as do divorce lawyers – in these weeks, but this January, in a new lockdown, it will be particularly busy. A Relate survey last month found that one in eight respondents intended to break up with their partner in the new year. And yet, while divorce is the right decision for some, as psychotherapist Phillips Perry says, "A lot of these breakdowns could be avoided with a little more emotional intelligence."

Indeed, Relate reported that 16 per cent of respondents planned to seek support for their relationship. Many couples are realising that understanding each other (and themselves) can lead to a stronger, happier connection – and that it's an art they need help to master. That might be via therapy or a workshop – though some have adapted business coaching skills to their personal life.

We will all need to pay special attention to our special relationships in the weeks ahead. Here, a range of experts explain why what we mean can get lost in translation, how to change that, and why being in harmony is about so much more than what we say.

## WHY YOUR PARTNER DOESN'T UNDERSTAND YOU (especially now)

### WE PROJECT THE PAST ON TO THE PRESENT

Perhaps your partner mildly reprimanded you today for finishing the milk – and you felt hurt, stormed out, and accusations of overreacting flew. This may be because, as well as the immediate situation, our history and experiences affect how we respond to each other. So if our parents called us a greedy child, because that was painful it stays with us, and even now we might wrongly assume our partner believes this, too.

The same goes for behaviour experienced in our earliest relationships. Perry, author of *The Book You Wish Your Parents Had Read*, says: "If you had a very noisy mother, who didn't have any boundaries, perhaps you keep your wife at arm's length. Because somewhere in your head, you think she's got the same motivation as your mother. But she might not have."

### WE'RE SCARED OF CONFLICT

Some people feel lonely in their relationships, and this may be, says Perry, "because there's so much taboo in your relationships that feels incendiary and you can't talk about it". Again, this can happen if you didn't grow up in a household where differences were sorted out amicably. "You tend to think that any difference of opinion means conflict rather than an interesting discussion."

### WE FEEL DIMINISHED IN LOCKDOWN

We use those around us as mirrors, says Perry. "Whether people are pleased to see us, or whether we're taken for granted, we see ourselves in how others receive us. When we're out in the world, going to work, meeting friends, we have many mirrors, so we might feel quite good about ourselves." But in lockdown or Tier 4, that's narrowed. "If the only other adult you see regularly is your partner, you might start to feel more two-dimensional, because you have one view of you reflected back."

Then we can start to feel low – for, as Perry says, even the greatest partner can't be all things to one person – "and then you might start to blame your partner. You get a bit shorter in patience, or a little vitriolic. That might be a two-way thing." Rather than take responsibility for our own depression, anger, anxiety, or fear, "it's so much easier to blame someone else than it is to look inwards."



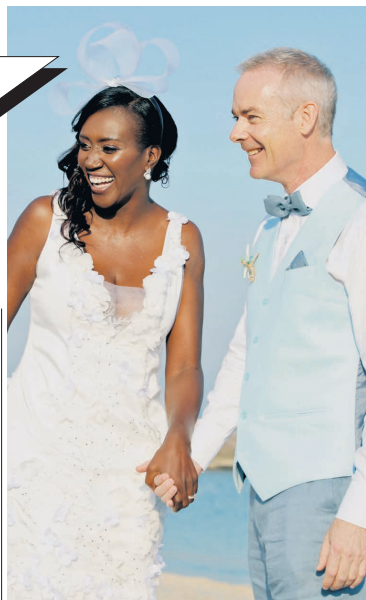
TONY BLANCHARD/DAVID ROSE

'I feel with relationships, the connection is the key'

Cordelia Henry, 53, and Caleb Raywood, 50, Dubai

Cordelia Henry and Caleb Raywood have been together nearly eight years, and married two and a half. Three years ago, Raywood's three children from his first marriage came to live with them, after their mother died. They became his priority. "I went from being fairly carefree, to having great responsibility," he says. "Throwing kids into the mix causes a lot of extra issues. When it was just the two of us, we felt we balanced each other. I'm more on the academic intelligence side, Cordelia very much on the emotional intelligence side." But with the change in environment and situation, he says: "We were struggling. How could

we preserve our relationship?" Henry recalls, "There were lots of challenges." She had previously had counselling to develop her own self-awareness, and is now an Imago Relationship Therapy facilitator, but she says, "One hand can't clap in a relationship – it takes two." But thanks to five days with a relationship coach at The French Retreat, a holistic centre for well-being, the arts and personal growth, their self-awareness and the way they relate to each other has helped them transform their relationship. With guidance, they addressed difficult questions such as: "What do you like about each other, what don't



you like?" "If this relationship failed, what would you miss, what wouldn't you miss?"; and "When things are not going well, what do you do?" For Raywood, the answer was "I might go cycling for the whole day" – a socially acceptable pastime that enabled him to avoid the issue. "I'd also talk to other people about our relationship. I'd not share my feelings with Cordelia." This could, he admits, "end in this fairly depressing cycle. The trick is, how do you stop that happening?"

One revelation for Raywood was that, "when I'm communicating with Cordelia, my job isn't necessarily to fix or to justify or defend, my job is to relate to Cordelia and empathise." He also learnt to accept that, "one reason Cordelia is upset is because I've screwed up somewhere, and to know that I am contributing to this. And the only way you can get through this is by accepting responsibility for your part in what's going wrong."

Another useful lesson, he says, was "the strength you can get out of being vulnerable to someone you love. It's tempting to put up walls, as a defence mechanism. But you're just pushing your partner away."

Whereas, he says, "Trying to be very open and frank and honest with someone who cares for you and wants to understand you, is very

powerful and makes you stronger together."

Before, rather than say what he really felt, he'd agree with Henry as a "quick fix", which would sidestep conflict but ultimately, he learnt, be "fatal to your relationship – you're not expressing yourself". That would frustrate Henry. She says: "I was really keen for Caleb and I to find ways to connect, because the work we had to do was not about 'He said, she said, you're to blame, I'm to blame.' It was more to help each other to feel safe enough to be open."

A technique she found helpful was writing down their thoughts – for instance, in answer to those painful questions. In conversation, she says, "Writing it down helped soften the delivery." They were then helped to communicate their answers in a way that, Raywood recalls "didn't mean I jumped up and left the room".

Henry, too, learnt to take responsibility. She says: "I feel with relationships, the connection is the key, and when you've got connection, you can work on all the other things challenging you as a couple."

However, says Raywood: "It's easy to say, 'Great, I've done it', but you have to keep refreshing yourself. It's why I made notes. It's a journey that will never end."

The French Retreat: retreat.fr

## ARE YOU STUCK?

### HOW TO GET OUT OF YOUR COMMUNICATION RUT

#### Ask yourself, do I avoid problems or flag them?

A helpful question to ask is, "If we've got a problem, who brings it up first?" says independent relationship coach Matthew Pruen, who teaches workshops at the Hoffman Institute (hoffmaninstitute.co.uk). He says with most couples, "there's one person who brings up the problem, and one person who avoids bringing up the problem". The one who speaks up is "direct, honest, passionate, clear." But "they

can sometimes be a little insensitive, blunt, and as worst controlling and bullying." He adds: "The good news is, they're bringing it up, the bad news is, how they're doing it." Their partner is likely to be "sensitive, patient, flexible, considerate." However, "they will bottle up their feelings and thoughts." If you're stuck in that dynamic, it transforms the relationship if the dominant person listens first, and the person who tends to think not speak, speaks first. Pruen says that this shifts a lot of the awful inevitability of "here we are in our usual mess".

#### Think about what you could say sorry for

We have reasons for behaving as we instinctively do, says Pruen, and switching habits will run contrary to our comfort zones. "Most people will probably experience quite a high level of anxiety," he says. To reduce anxiety, before you speak to your partner for while you're biting your tongue) ask yourself, "How am I being? I'm employing my usual coping strategies – I'm bottling up my feelings

and ultimately resenting you and exploding, or I'm relentlessly criticising, and I know that's distressing to you. So – sorry."

#### Think about what you could thank your partner meaningfully for

Even mid-ding-dong, says Pruen, acknowledge that you're focusing on what you find vexing about your partner, and remember what you love

about them. "Oh yes, you sorted out the whole of Christmas this year. So thank you for that." Pruen points out that: "Great Aunt Lucy was right – minding our Ps and Qs really is helpful." But, he adds: "It has to be sincere. You can't do it strategically, or superficially – really find it in your heart."

#### Take the risk of sharing how you feel

Authentic apologies and thanks can

create what Pruen calls "a wave of possibility" which couples can then jump on, and take a risk, and start to have the slightly more brave conversation.

When you catch that wave, Pruen suggests, "don't try to manipulate, or inspire guilt – just share your thoughts, your feelings, your experience, without an agenda." If all you want is to bring your partner up to date with who you are right now, not ask them to do anything about it, he says, "it changes the paradigm."



## ‘Even if we have a dispute in the office, we don’t let it spill over’

Julie Wagstaff, 44, and Ian Christelou, 51, Leicester

Julie Wagstaff and Ian Christelou met at a conference dinner in September 2005, while both working for ActionCoach as business coaches. Christelou says: “I clapped eyes on Julie and I headed straight over. It was love at first sight, for me.” But when he asked her to dance, she said: “No, my feet hurt.” It took another year for them to begin a relationship, initially as colleagues. “Within a few weeks of working together, we got together,” says Christelou. “I still pinch myself every day.” They’re both forthright, Christelou says: “We wear our hearts on our sleeves.”

Wagstaff adds: “We are quite aligned. We think the same in business and in personal life.” Only occasionally is being forthright not as well received in the relationship as in the office.

“Time out is the way we deal with things, she says. “I have to have quiet time, reflecting, working it through, and then I’m good again.” He says: “Julie will sometimes walk the dogs around the garden.”

She explains: “We know what makes each other tick, and what makes each other get angry. Managing what you say, when you say it, and how you say it is important. “If I’ve got feedback, it’s how I manage that because I know what will upset Ian and if he’s in a responsive mood. You learn that over time.”

They have daughters, aged 12 and 10, and the odd “fall-out” is over day-to-day parenting pressures. But the couple make time to go away together, chat, feel connected – and, says

Wagstaff: “When we’re on our own, we never fall out.” They also have a rule of no work talk at home. Wagstaff adds: “Even if we have a dispute in the office – I became MD a year ago, and get the overriding decision on certain things – we don’t allow it to spill over.”

If they do disagree in their personal life, they use their coaching techniques. ActionCoach teaches a concept called ‘Above and Below the Line’, Christelou explains: “People who play below the line have a victim mindset. So they blame other people, make excuses: the reason they’re late is because of the traffic, not because they set off too late; denying there’s a problem. Above the line is about taking ownership, being able to choose your response to situations.”

Wagstaff says: “We live by what we teach. It’s about taking ownership, not blaming others, not making excuses.” Christelou admits that: “Occasionally we forget and fall into arguing.” But, Wagstaff adds: “That’s why I have you. That’s why I have my time out – and when I come back, I’m in a better place.”

Christelou says: “You do have a choice in whether you play above or below the line. We also teach that true communication is the response you get.” Meaning that when you know someone well enough to be aware of what annoys them, and then you elicit a negative reaction, consider your part in that, and think about how you can communicate differently. “It’s really powerful.”

actioncoach.co.uk

## SENSITIVE TOPICS

of pain that drips and festers over the years.” You can’t bypass it, and if you try to, he says, “you trap it between the two of you. You’re stuck with it. And if you’ve got children, that matters.”

### HOW TO DISAGREE BEAUTIFULLY

Every couple has differences and that’s normal. It’s how we manage our differences that matters. Do not play fact tennis, says Perry. Fact tennis is when you say: “We’re going to have my mother round for Easter.” And the other person says: “But we had your mother round last year. It’s my mother’s turn.” Eventually, when one person runs out of facts, the other wins at their expense. But, says Perry: “Difference comes about because you feel differently about whatever you’re discussing. And so you have to talk about feelings.”

For example, one partner might say, “I miss my mother. I’m feeling so sad that she might not be with us.” The other person will say: “I feel I’ve neglected my mother, and I wanted her

to come so I’d feel better about that guilt.” Then it’s easier to be magnanimous. “Oh yes, we haven’t seen your mum.” Ask about your partner’s feelings, she says. “And from that, when you decide on one mother or the other, you’re both on the same page.”

Perry says: “Even when we have differences, differences aren’t the problem. It’s how we deal with them. ‘You are wrong! I am right!’ You have already lost if you think in those terms. You need to feel for the person who wants their parent there – rather than fighting your own feelings but keeping them close to your chest.”

Sharing feelings not facts makes us more vulnerable, she says, but in a loving relationship we should be able to be vulnerable. “Find out how the other feels, and how you feel, weigh up the feelings – not the facts – and then go for a compromise,” says Perry. “You want co-operation and compromise. Not competition. Not opposition.” Then, truly, it’s good to talk.

## WHAT we CAN DO ABOUT IT

Five helpful habits to enhance communication every day

### 1

#### Show your partner you care

Life has a habit of taking over, says therapist Andrew G Marshall, author of *The Happy Couple’s Handbook*. “We imagine that, because our partner loves us, we can let them slide down the list. You tell yourself, ‘He won’t mind, because he knows I love him.’” Alas, it doesn’t work like that. “In our head, our partner is number one, but our actions put them at number 17.”

### 2

#### Create positive rituals

These are habits that protect and nurture your relationship – such as eating together. “You’re not watching the telly, phones are put aside,” says Marshall.

“You’ve got space to download and think. Rituals bring the unspoken material in relationships up to the surface.” Another important ritual is around arriving and leaving. “When you arrive and, say, hello, go to your partner, give them a kiss. And when you leave, say ‘I’m going’ and kiss them goodbye.” He adds: “It’s incredibly reassuring to have those messages – you’re important to me, I notice when you arrive and when you leave. It makes you feel more connected.”

### 3

#### Express your gratitude

Every day, before bed, tell your partner what you’re grateful for that day – one general thing (eg “the blue sky”) and one specific from them. Marshall says: “It’s got to be authentic, timely, specific – not ‘I love you,’ but ‘I love the way you helped me with the crossword. I love your intelligence.’”

And be spontaneous. “Even if you’re apart, and you think, ‘Ah, I do love my partner,’ send the text!” Marshall – whose new podcast is *The Meaningful Life with Andrew G Marshall* – adds: “We often don’t communicate the positives – they’re taken for granted. Think, what is the lack in our relationship? It could be we don’t talk enough – then create a ritual around that.”

### 4

#### Be open and curious

We can be open and curious with our partner, says Philippa Perry. “It’s good to share what’s going on with us – even if that is ‘I’m a bit fed up,’” she says. “If you’re irritable and can’t work out why, share that.” (If my husband doesn’t explain his bad mood, I sometimes assume I’m the source of it – and become grumpy, too.) Likewise, show real interest in your partner’s says.

Perry says: “It’s listening without fixing. It’s not about solving problems.” She calls this “being felt with, not dealt with.” She says: “Just sit with the feeling, sit with the problem. And just be curious about it. Ask open questions – ‘Do you know why you’re feeling like this?’” She adds: “Don’t ask closed questions – ‘Are you feeling like this because Betty cancelled lunch?’ – because that’s you telling the other about your mind.”

### 5

#### Define yourself, not your partner

Our phrasing can make all the difference. “You always” is an argument-starter. Perry advises: “Define yourself, not the other person. Instead of ‘you shouldn’t...’ it’s ‘I don’t like it when you...’ It’s tiny, but if you define yourself rather than the other person, it’s much easier for them to listen. You’re not complaining, you’re just saying what you feel.” And it’s helpful to say what you want, too. “I’m tired of being woken by the cat when I’m trying to have a lie-in because no one else has fed him. So I’d really love it if you fed him.”



## ‘It’s about being aware of what’s happening and not going off’

Grania Haigh, 55, and Niall Haigh, 56, Norfolk

Grania and Niall have been married for 15 years. Niall admits: “Before I met Grania, I wasn’t psychologically aware. So – normal, by modern standards.” But Grania – who’s training to be a relationship therapist – had been in therapy and, Niall adds, “was more sorted than many women I had met.”

Yet the ways they communicated weren’t always helpful. Grania says: “It was very British,” Niall recalls: “It was a bit like the communication between an NCO and a Commanding Officer at times, and we would swap roles. Grania

would say: ‘When you are like this, Niall, you’re like my father, overbearing.’” She felt like a child in his presence.

“In those days, she would say the problem was with me.” In fact, they realised, it was both of them.

As their relationship moved on from the honeymoon stage, it tested their insecurities. Grania says: “It feels like it’s going wrong. It isn’t – it’s the natural progression of the relationship. But for those of us who are not emotionally secure from our own childhood, that’s a big challenge.” She adds: “We

never had screaming rows. That wasn’t our style. It was more brooding silences.” Early in their relationship, they’d repress any resentment because, says Grania: “It feels very threatening to actually say what you really think and feel – it feels like you’re throwing a nuclear bomb into the mix.”

Then, three and a half years ago, Niall found himself in the Priory after suffering a middle crisis. “I was in a state of great anxiety,” he recalls. “I was having quite dramatic panic attacks. I would be shaking, unable to think calmly or rationally. In the build-up to my crisis, Grania was of the opinion that I needed to do some work – and my crisis prompted my starting to do the work at The Priory. But Gran went to the Hoffman Institute first, and when I saw what the Hoffman Process had done for her, I wanted that for myself.”

So three years ago, they both did the Hoffman Process – a seven-day course that teaches clients how to change and resolve persistent negative behaviour patterns and approach their relationships with more compassion. Grania says, “The Hoffman

Process is very thorough and you get to who you really are. We learnt just how much our outlooks were shaped by our family-of-origin issues. Emotional responses that we thought were objective and reasonable – weren’t.”

Niall adds: “The wonderful thing about it is, you go down into the dark and ugly places, find stuff, shed light on it and come out feeling somewhat lighter and a little bit euphoric. Another lovely thing the Hoffman Process tends to do is make people feel that change is possible. Whereas when you go in, you feel no change is possible.”

But, says Grania: “It isn’t the process itself that changes the relationship, it’s what you do next.” Niall says: “Developing compassion for the other – it’s almost like cracking the egg to make the omelette – the Hoffman Process forces you to have compassion for parts of yourself, and understanding of parts of yourself that you really haven’t dared to venture into as an adult for so long. But you start to see that and be aware of it in others and see others more completely because you’ve been encouraged to see it in yourself.”

That said, he adds: “One can have an intellectual understanding of a lot of this stuff, but actually making it function as a part of your daily practice is more challenging. It’s damned hard work, trying to keep yourself regulated and appropriate and healthy as much as one reasonably can.”

Grania agrees: “It’s catching yourself in that moment of the emotional response, not going with it. It’s not about the traditional British suppressing of those reactions and it’s not about the other extreme of reacting and acting out – it’s about being with the reaction and sitting with those feelings. I remember asking one therapist, what’s the point of sitting with those feelings? He said, “Then you have the feelings and they don’t have you. You’re not reacting blindly.”

She says: “It’s about being aware of what’s happening and not going off – it’s like when one firework ignites another firework and the whole lot goes up. It’s being conscious: ‘Oh, a firework has gone off. I don’t have to set off all the others.’”

hoffmaninstitute.co.uk