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OVERCOMING RELATIONSHIP PROBLEMS

*A self-help guide using
Cognitive Behavioral Techniques*

MICHAEL CROWE



ROBINSON

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Note

The 'cases' I have reported in this book are based on couples seen in therapy, but names and recognizable details have always been changed.

Introduction

Why cognitive behavioral and systemic therapy?

You may have picked up this book uncertain as to why a psychological therapy such as cognitive behavioral and systemic therapy could help you overcome your relationship problems. The first of the two components, cognitive behavior therapy (CBT) was developed initially for the treatment of depression, and the techniques this therapy uses have been found to be extremely effective for a wide range of problems, including compulsive gambling and drug and alcohol addiction. Systemic therapy, the second component, was developed mainly in the context of the treatment of families, particularly those in which there was a child with a psychological problem, and has also been widely used in couple therapy. So what is CBT and how does it work?

In the 1950s and 1960s a set of techniques was developed, collectively termed 'behavior therapy'. These techniques shared two basic features. First, they aimed to remove symptoms (such as anxiety) by dealing with those symptoms themselves, rather than their deep-seated underlying historical causes (traditionally the focus of psychoanalysis, the approach developed by Sigmund Freud and his followers). Second, they were techniques loosely related to what

laboratory psychologists were finding out about the mechanisms of learning, which could potentially be put to the test, or had already been proven to be of practical value to sufferers. The area where these techniques proved to be of most value was in the treatment of anxiety disorders, especially specific phobias (such as fear of animals or heights) and agoraphobia, both notoriously difficult to treat using conventional psychotherapies.

After an initial flush of enthusiasm, discontent with behavior therapy grew. There were a number of reasons for this, an important one of which was the fact that behavior therapy did not deal with the internal thoughts which were so obviously central to the distress that patients were experiencing. In particular, behavior therapy proved inadequate when it came to the treatment of depression. In the late 1960s and early 1970s a treatment was developed for depression called 'cognitive therapy'. The pioneer in this enterprise was an American psychiatrist, Professor Aaron T. Beck, who developed a theory of depression which emphasized the importance of people's depressed styles of thinking. He also specified a new form of therapy. It would not be an exaggeration to say that Beck's work has changed the nature of psychotherapy, not just for depression but for a range of psychological problems.

The techniques introduced by Beck have been merged with the techniques developed earlier by the behavior therapists to produce a therapeutic approach which has come to be known as 'cognitive behavior therapy'. This therapy has been subjected to the strictest scientific testing; and it has been found to be a highly successful treatment for a significant proportion of cases of depression. It has now become clear that specific patterns of thinking identified by Beck are associated with a wide range of psychological problems and that the treatments which deal with these

styles of thinking are highly effective. So, effective cognitive behavioral treatments have been developed for anxiety disorders, like panic disorder, generalized anxiety disorder, specific phobias and social phobia, obsessive compulsive disorders, and hypochondriasis (health anxiety). They have also been applied to other conditions such as compulsive gambling, alcohol and drug addiction, and eating disorders like bulimia nervosa and binge-eating disorder. Indeed, cognitive behavioral techniques have a wide application beyond the narrow categories of psychological disorders: they have been applied effectively, for example, to helping people with low self-esteem, those with weight problems, those who wish to give up smoking, and, as in this book, those with relationship problems.

This book is based partly on a cognitive-behavioral approach to relationship problems. This can be, however, only partially successful, because the behavior and thinking of the two individuals involved is only part of the story. Things happen in relationships which neither partner seems to have initiated, but which arise from the ongoing patterns that have built up over the course of the relationship. This is where systemic thinking comes in, and this can help us to understand and change the patterns of interaction which may otherwise seem difficult to alter.

So the second component of this approach is systemic therapy. This is a form of therapy which studies and alters the patterns of relationships within families. It was developed originally from the work of von Bertalanffy on the effects of positive and negative feedback in mechanical and biological systems. In the early 1960s, family therapists such as Haley, Minuchin, Jackson and Bateson conceptualized that a family could be seen to be functioning as a 'system', for example when one member began to withdraw and behave in an unpredictable way, and the family members would do

something resembling the action of a safety valve to draw that member back into a closer relationship with them. This would keep the family functioning despite the unusual behavior of the one member. However, positive feedback, the opposite process, in which one person's behavior becomes disturbed and the other family members seem to encourage it, can be destructive to the family, in the same way as when in the steam engine the pressure gets too high and the cylinder explodes.

One revolutionary aspect of systemic thinking is the concept of circular causality. This points out that in the ongoing series of interactions that occur within families, there is no clear starting point: things emerge from the ongoing relationship of the two or more individuals, and the only way to pinpoint a 'cause' for what happens is in an artificial way to start your analysis with the actions of a particular family member. If you start the analysis from another starting point, another family member seems to have 'caused' what happens next.

Systemic thinking was then extended to look at other aspects of family life, and the concepts of boundaries, alliances, coalitions and repetitive sequences of interaction (see Chapter 2) were brought in to explain some of the observed difficulties that occur in families. The resulting forms of therapy involved the therapist taking on the role of balancing the influence of the various family members and helping some of them to overcome the positive feedback loops which perpetuated disturbed behavior, or the negative feedback loops which might be preventing them from living their own lives independently.

The form of therapy which Crowe has developed (cognitive behavioral and systemic couple therapy) combines the cognitive behavioral approach with a systemic understanding of relationships and their problems. It has been proven

to be effective in a number of scientific trials, both for relationship problems as such and for sexual and psychological problems occurring within the couple relationship. It is this combination of therapies that the present book is based on.

Although effective cognitive behavioral and systemic therapies have been developed for a wide range of problems, they are not widely available; and when people try to help themselves it may sometimes make matters worse. In recent years the community of cognitive behavior therapists has responded to this situation. What they have done is to take the principles and techniques of specific cognitive behavior therapies for particular problems, or as in this case the combined cognitive behavioral and systemic therapy for relationships, and present them in self-help manuals. These manuals specify a systematic programme of treatment which the individual sufferer is advised to work through to overcome their difficulties. In this way, these therapeutic techniques of proven value are being made available on the widest possible basis.

Self-help manuals are never going to replace therapists. Many people will need individual treatment from a qualified therapist. It is also the case that, despite the widespread success of cognitive behavioral and systemic therapies, some people will not respond to them and will need one of the other treatments available. Nevertheless, although research on the use of these self-help manuals is at an early stage, the work done to date indicates that for a very great many people such a manual will prove sufficient for them to overcome their problems without professional help.

Many people suffer silently and secretly for years. Sometimes appropriate help is not forthcoming despite their efforts to find it. Sometimes they feel too ashamed or guilty to reveal their problems to anyone. For many of these people

this series of self-help manuals will provide a lifeline to recovery and a better future.

Professor Peter Cooper
The University of Reading, 2004

PART ONE

Relationships and Relationship Problems

About relationships

Introduction

Why do we need a book like this?

Most adults spend the major part of their life in an intimate relationship. The fact that you are reading this book probably means that you are either in a relationship or would like to be in one. Relationships are potentially very satisfying, they protect us from loneliness and improve our physical and mental health. A two-parent family is also the most successful setting for the care and upbringing of children. But it is not all plain sailing, and there are an enormous number of problems that can cause disturbances in these relationships. These are not just arguments, power struggles and fights, but may also include stress reactions of one sort or another, and these can sometimes lead to depression or anxiety in one or both of the partners. Again, problems such as jealousy and sexual difficulties can often cloud what might otherwise be a successful relationship.

During the years when I was running the couple therapy clinic at the Maudsley Hospital in south London, my team and I devised a method for treating these problems, which we found to be very beneficial. It is chiefly on this experience in treating couples that this book is based. There are many good books on how to manage problems like anxiety,

shyness and low self-esteem, and many guides to having a better sex life. However, there are not many books available to help couples with their relationships, and therefore this one is being put forward to try to fill the gap.

Do-it-yourself couple therapy?

You may wonder whether this type of book can be used by the couple themselves without the help of a therapist. Well, I hope that after reading it you will be able to give a positive answer to this question. I am encouraged to think so because much of our therapy in the clinics at the Maudsley was directed towards giving our couples 'homework' exercises to be carried out before our next meeting with them. The couples themselves were therefore responsible for quite a lot of their own successes in therapy, and many of the exercises we devised are included in the various sections of the book. So I think it is very likely that the do-it-yourself approach proposed in this book will be helpful, at least for those couples who are prepared to work together on their relationship and are not inexorably set on the road to divorce. Of course you don't need to have serious problems in your relationship to make use of the book: it may simply be used as a way of enhancing what is already a good relationship.

How will this book help?

My aim is to help you to learn new ways of dealing with the kinds of problems that crop up every day, problems which if repeated day after day may undermine the foundations of the relationship and can lead to separation. The focus is on the practical side, and wherever problems are mentioned I have tried to suggest a possible solution. You may well find

that some of the problem descriptions and case examples remind you of difficulties you have had in your own relationship, and that you can use them to give you ideas for new ways of dealing with them. You may also find that the problems and the couples I refer to will trigger an emotional response, perhaps one of anger or one of sympathy or sadness. This could hopefully act as the stimulus for you to do something about the problems in your own relationship which have caused that emotional response.

How should you read the book?

At the first reading, you will probably be sitting quietly on your own. But this means that, if you have a partner, only half of the relationship is getting the information, and it would be good to share the ideas with your partner as soon as you are able to do so. In fact, you could try reading it together, perhaps even using a copy each for the purpose! Even if only one of you is reading it, you could share the ideas with your partner. You could have a kind of brainstorming session to discuss them, and try some of the exercises together.

Sometimes of course the person reading the book will have a partner who won't get involved in discussing the relationship. You could still read it yourself, making use of the suggestions in Chapter 5 for those working unilaterally to improve their relationship, and things might get better as a result. It doesn't need to be read from cover to cover, unless you choose to do so. You can select which part to start with, and I have included a number of cross-references from one chapter to another, so that you can follow your interest in a particular field through different chapters.

The three sections of the book

- The first (Chapters 1 to 4) is about relationships and the problems that can arise in them. I have included a chapter on sexual relations in this section because I think it is important not to leave sex out when discussing relationships generally, as if it was part of a separate world.
- The second section (Chapters 5 and 6) is about how to help yourselves to employ more effective communication and better negotiating skills, and how to balance the various pressures on the relationship from family members, children and work.
- The third section (Chapters 7 to 12) covers special areas such as dealing with sexual problems, illnesses, psychological problems, violence, divorce, 'blended' families (families with stepchildren), and lastly how to get into a relationship if you don't currently have a partner.

Couple relationships today

Couple relationships today are in a state of flux, with an increasing divorce rate and an increase in both single-parent families and blended families, and it is not at all clear how the situation will change over time. I do believe, however, that there will always be a need for couple relationships, because they provide stability and comfort for those who are involved in them, and they are the best way we know of providing a secure setting for raising children.

The wide variety of relationships

The variety of relationships today is much wider than would have been thought acceptable 50 years ago. Today we see married couples, couples living together and often having children without being married, and also couples who have a steady sexual relationship but choose not to live together. With the increasing divorce rate comes a large number of people who get married but then change their partners through divorce (some people call this serial monogamy). As a result of this, and because many women have also decided to have children without living with the father, many children now live in one-parent households. Blended families, where there is a step-parent sharing the care of the partner's children, are also very common.

Same-sex relationships

Gay and lesbian relationships are now respected in a way that would have been impossible in the past. They are no longer against the law in most of Europe, and are also legal in many states of the USA. Since December 2005 civil partnerships are also now legal in the UK, with some European countries and American states also legally recognizing same-sex marriage. It is now also more common for same-sex couples to bring up children. In this context I should say that, although most of the case examples in the book are of heterosexual couples, and the exercises and cases are orientated to this type of relationship, I hope that it may be relevant to same-sex couples as well, in that the kinds of problems encountered by them are basically very similar to those encountered by heterosexual couples, and may be susceptible to similar solutions.

Relationship problems are often similar whatever kind of relationship you are in

What are the problems affecting these different types of relationships? These are much the same, whether we are looking at short term or long term, heterosexual or same-sex relationships, and whether we are considering European, Asian or African cultures. It is these common problems, occurring in most kinds of relationships, which I will be dealing with throughout the book, and for all of them I will try to offer possible solutions.

The pressures on couple relationships

The rising divorce rate

The pressures on marital and long-term cohabiting relationships have greatly increased in recent times. In fact, the number of couples getting married, including second marriages, has been decreasing year on year since 1996, while the number of divorces continues to increase (it involved 39 per cent of married couples in 1996 and is now approaching 50 per cent). It has become much easier to obtain a divorce, and the greater economic independence of women has made it easier for them to continue their lives as single parents after the breakup of their marriage or cohabitation. Divorce is for many a relief from the tensions that they have experienced in the marriage, and there is some evidence that, both for the couple and for their children, a good divorce can be better than a bad marriage. It is now easier socially for divorced women and men to be accepted in their peer groups, and it is easier for children to be accepted by their schoolmates nowadays if their parents are no longer together.

Changing perceptions of marriage

There have been many changes in the attitude of society to marriage, particularly in the twentieth century. The decreasing influence of the churches, the increase in sexual freedom and the increase in the wish for personal satisfaction could all be cited as reasons for the decline of marriage. It seems also that there are for many people increased expectations of satisfaction from a marriage, and there is a tendency for partners to be more intolerant of the stresses which inevitably occur in a long-term relationship. If one looked at the situation cynically, it might be thought that people were treating their relationships, and their partners, as commodities to be returned to the factory or traded in if they are not satisfactory.

Traditional and modern views of marriage

In the nineteenth century, marriage was seen as a means to respectability, women were expected to submit themselves to the will of their husbands, men were expected to provide for the family, and children were expected to be 'seen and not heard'. Divorce was difficult to obtain, and couples often stayed together in spite of their mutual antagonism. With the rise of individualism, and also feminism, in the West in the twentieth century, many changes have occurred in the status and stability of marriage, although there are still many Asian and African societies in which the traditional views of marriage persist. In the West, the continuation of a marriage depends on an ongoing agreement by both partners to keep it going, and too much 'taking each other for granted' may lead to a loss of this agreement and therefore to separation or divorce. In more traditional cultures divorce is still frowned on, and brings more of a stigma with it.

Equality within relationships

The concept of the 'modern man' has been around for the last thirty years or so. This involves the man in sharing household chores, looking after children, and even being the house husband or main carer for children. It is a very good ideal to aim for, and in some couples it works satisfactorily. Whether this is often achieved, however, is another matter, and I have often seen couples who aspire to this situation, but the wife is the one who is more conscientious about household matters and does most of the hard work in house cleaning and childcare. Indeed, the lack of participation by the apparently 'modern' husband is sometimes cited as a reason for separation or divorce. In same-sex relationships, the partners may seem more equal than heterosexual couples, but actually these couples also often settle down to a kind of traditional division of labour, with one of the two being more conscientious over household matters while the other deals more with the outside world. However, there is plenty of scope for conflict, and the partners will often spend a good deal of time debating the rights and wrongs of the division of labour. In one way, however, same-sex partners have an advantage over heterosexual partners, in that the common male-female misunderstandings (see Chapter 3) are avoided.

Arranged marriages and the clash of cultures

In more traditional couples, including those from South Asia, the marriages are often arranged by the parents, the couple may not actually meet before the wedding, and the idea of love as a reason for being together is not always thought of as a priority. Here the pressures are of a different kind. The wife may be expected to live with the husband's family and cook and serve meals for them, and there may be

considerable conflict if, for example, she is in a profession in which she wishes to continue. These problems are often highlighted when the family is living in the West, where there is a clash of cultures between this traditional way and modern Western ideas. Interestingly, divorce is much rarer in Asian cultural groups than in Western societies generally, and the negative cultural attitude to divorce, along with the idea of marriage as being for the benefit of the family and society rather than for individual satisfaction, may have a lot to do with this. However, an increasing number of people of Asian origin living in the West are getting into relationships outside their own culture, and this too is the cause in many cases for conflict.

Case example: Ahmet (28) and Aisha (21)

This Muslim couple had been married for two years, and had no children. They were both born in England but their parents came from Pakistan. They were complaining of not being able to have a satisfactory sex life, mainly because they lived with Ahmet's parents, and the parents insisted on their sitting up with them until late at night. By the time the couple eventually got to bed it was already time for everyone to sleep. In their culture, the wife has to go to the bathroom to wash after sex and if they had intercourse Aisha was embarrassed about the parents knowing what they had been doing. There was, however, some pressure from both sets of parents for them to conceive a child, and so they were looking for help as a couple.

In therapy they were able to devise a plan to resist the pressure from the parents to sit up with them, on the excuse that they needed some time to themselves in order to get enough sleep to be fresh for their work the next morning. They were then able to have sex earlier, and so

the bathroom problem was not so acute. This is an example of a cultural issue which needed to be overcome before a couple could have a normal intimate life together. It is also an example of setting boundaries around the couple which exclude other people, but are acceptable within their cultural limits.

Starting a relationship (see Chapter 12)

Meeting a partner

Whatever the specific cultural or social pressures on a couple, there is a sequence of events which is fairly uniform and which almost every long-term relationship goes through sooner or later. The first part of this process is meeting and becoming attracted. In Western societies this often takes the form of 'falling in love', although this is by no means the only way of starting a relationship, and in some ways carries a greater risk of instability than moving from friendship to dating, or even the more traditional 'arranged' marriages.

Happily ever after?

If the couple do fall in love, there is usually a stage in which they idealize the relationship and each other. Some people have likened this to a form of temporary insanity in which the person in love loses contact with reality, and may even suffer from ideas of being all-powerful, or believe that everything will be perfect for them forever. 'They lived happily ever after' is the typical ending to a fairy tale, and some lovers believe this about themselves. Accompanying this feeling is the wish to be in the presence of the loved one, to share all their hopes and fears, to have no secrets and to be the perfect couple.

When the differences emerge

This situation does not always last very long, and other realities make their presence felt. The clash of personalities may often be the first problem encountered, for example one partner wanting to spend money freely while the other wants to save. The partners may have very different tastes in music or leisure activities. They may disagree about politics, they may have friends who don't get along with their new partner, or they may have different educational backgrounds, or different sexual drive levels. All these will conspire to weaken the heady feeling of being in love and expecting to remain 'on the cloud' forever. On the other hand, this loss of an idealistic honeymoon situation could be seen as giving the partners the opportunity of getting to know each other as real people, and 'growing up' in the process.

The need for tolerance and understanding

There is a real need for interpersonal skills to understand and resolve the differences between partners. Tolerance, understanding, negotiating skills and the ability to solve conflicts are all important. So is the ability to remain part of a couple rather than thinking of oneself as an individual who 'happens to be in a relationship'. In many couples the sexual side is strong enough to overcome these difficulties, and makes it worth the partners' while to make the relationship work. But in others these early stumbling blocks are fatal to the relationship and the partners separate.

Factors that favour stability

What then are the factors that help a couple to get together and stay together beyond the first few meetings? It is almost

a cliché to say that mutual interests, combined with sexual attraction, help a couple to cement a relationship and maintain it. Here is a list of some of the factors found in research work to favour stability and satisfaction in a relationship.

THE FOUNDATIONS OF A GOOD RELATIONSHIP

- Mutual attraction
- Good clear communication
- Emotional understanding
- Negotiation and compromise
- Clear boundaries
- Commitment
- Both partners comfortable with intimacy (sexual and otherwise)
- Both partners comfortable with any power differences

What are the things that attract people to each other?

There are many things which draw people together. For example, the attraction may be based either on a similarity of personality or on the attraction of opposites. There are some people who value peace above excitement, while others would be bored without a few dramas in their lives. In some of these situations, the exciting people attract each other, and the quiet people also attract each other. However, at times the combination of two exciting people would be too much for both of them: I have heard such couples describe their relationship as 'World War III'. Two very quiet people, on the other hand, might end up in a relationship that is too unexciting, and might crave some more stimulating experiences.

The other side of the coin is the 'union of opposites', which many find to be more exciting and can be satisfying, as long as each partner doesn't expect the other to be a clone of themselves, and as long as they can tolerate the major differences that they usually encounter in each other.

Your family of origin and its influence

Another factor in the choosing of a partner is the influence of one's experience of family life as a child. There is often a subtle similarity between the partner one chooses and the parent of the opposite sex. This may take the form of a physical likeness, or it may be in terms of personality or ways of interacting. The psychoanalytic view of 'marital fit' is that there is a kind of unconscious blueprint in everybody of the sort of partner they would like to have, based often on their experiences with parents. They then choose a partner on the basis of factors they are unaware of and cannot understand. Certainly there is in many people a mystery over what it was that attracted them to their partner, and yet the attraction is clear and lasting.

The early stages

Whatever the way in which a couple get together, there is almost always a period of experimentation before the relationship becomes permanent. This is very variable in its duration, and may involve many false starts. The couple may meet in various ways, from being work colleagues to meeting at parties or on holiday, or increasingly nowadays meeting through dating agencies or via the Internet. However they meet, they have to negotiate various issues: if and when to begin a sexual relationship, whether to declare their relationship to friends and/or family, and whether to live together.

These transitions will always be difficult, and will raise dilemmas about whether they are really now a couple or two individuals who happen to be close friends (see Chapter 12 for a more detailed discussion).

Transition stages

At different stages in the process, there are rituals which tend to be followed. For example, the decision to move in together, the engagement (and exchange of promises and/or rings), the arrangements for the wedding ceremony and so forth all have to be negotiated. This can be a crisis for the couple, and I have seen some couples who have so much difficulty with this transition period that they split up as a result. Sometimes it has something to do with the negotiations as to who is in charge: one partner may have very different expectations from the other about their life patterns in the phase following the engagement.

Case example: Roger (28) and Caroline (29)

This couple, who had had a good relationship before their engagement, began to live together at that stage, and began to experience differences over their desire to socialize. Roger was a quiet person who preferred to stay home in the evenings and sit by the television. Caroline had had a lively social life with friends, and became rather bored staying in. In therapy they worked out a compromise in which they would spend every Friday evening at home together, and Sundays were to be their socializing day, when they would either go out with friends or entertain at home. This enabled Caroline to get the social life she wanted while Roger was able to have the intimate 'couple' sessions that he valued.

Decisions at the time of moving in together

There are a number of issues that couples need to work out at the time they begin living together. These can range from the very practical, such as who pays the rent and other living costs, to more complex ones, such as how much of the couple's personal life to share with the parents of each partner. Couples who do not plan these things in advance are at risk of running into conflict if they each make the assumption that the partner is going to take responsibility for the issue, and in fact neither of them does so. Similar problems arise when couples get married and have to make decisions about joint bank accounts or mortgages. The assumptions may be that they will carry on as their respective parents have done, but there may be serious differences of opinion about it, which they don't even realize exist until the crisis occurs. It is much better to sort these things out in detailed discussions before the couple marry.

The family life-cycle

Each family goes through several stages in its development. These are sometimes known as the family life-cycle. The idea as it was first developed is based on the typical nuclear family of the mid-twentieth century, with a husband, wife and 2.4 children. Of course not every couple or family goes through each stage, but it is a simple way of documenting the stage which a couple has reached, and can help to understand some of the stresses they are experiencing.

STAGES IN THE FAMILY LIFE-CYCLE

- 1 The couple meet and form a relationship
- 2 The couple get engaged
- 3 The couple get married
- 4 They have their first child
- 5 The first child goes to school
- 6 The youngest child leaves school
- 7 The youngest child leaves home (empty nest)
- 8 Retirement of one or both partners
- 9 Death of one partner

This is of course a very limited and rather stylized account of the progress of relationships, and in many cases the end stage is divorce rather than death. It takes no account of same-sex relationships, and the question of childless marriages, second marriages and non-marital cohabitation is not considered. However, it remains a useful way of thinking about family relationships, and may help the readers of this book to understand some of the particular stresses which they encounter in their lives. One useful result of thinking in this way is that it helps one to recognize that each of the transitions in the family life-cycle brings decisions and adjustments that have to be made, and if the couple avoid making them, there may be problems for them and their children. Dealing with changes in the family is something I will be covering in more detail in Chapter 6.

The influence of the family of origin

Many of the difficulties in relationships come from the expectations that the partners come with. Many of these, in turn, derive from their experiences in their families of origin. In some families, the father is the undoubted boss, and nothing happens without his agreement. In others, the mother has this leadership role. In yet others, there is no leadership pattern, and whoever shouts the loudest gets their way. When two people form a relationship, their ideas about what is right may be very different, and conflict may arise from the gap between expectations and reality.

Openness within the family

One typical example of this which is quite commonly seen, is where one partner's family is outgoing and open while the other's is quiet and diplomatic. A case will illustrate the problems that might arise from this.

Case example

Arnold and Angela had been married for three years, and they complained of misunderstandings which resulted in Arnold becoming withdrawn, while Angela felt angry and expressed her frustrations because he would not discuss the problems. Her family of origin had been one in which the members were always outspoken, often in conflict with each other and usually made up any differences as soon as the problems had been aired. His parents, in contrast, never had any arguments, and felt that conflict was a very dangerous thing which might lead to divorce. In therapy the couple worked out a system of time-limited arguments (see Chapter 6), in which they could air their differences and then bring the discussion to a close by

hugging each other and reassuring the partner of their love. This helped Angela to have the open discussions that she needed, while Arnold was not overwhelmed by the anxiety they caused because they were time-limited.

In this couple, the problems were partly caused by an inability to have 'good' arguments, and I will be covering the use of arguments as a way of helping your relationship in Chapter 6.

Is it right to ask for help?

In some families there is a tradition that they should never show weakness, and children should not cry or ask for help. This can lead to difficulties if the other partner has been brought up to show their feelings openly and has been in the habit of receiving much sympathy. The partner from the first type of family may begin to despise the other one, and the second partner may feel unloved and uncared for.

An outside career or homemaking?

Whether to work outside the home is another area of possible conflict based on the family traditions that each partner brings to the relationship. One family may have a rule that the wife should be the homemaker, while the partner's family may believe that women should seek a career for themselves and arrange for childcare from an early stage. This may cause difficulties, although sensible discussion between the partners will usually solve the problem. There may, however, be tension between the two sets of parents about this issue, and the couple may get conflicting advice which leads to further difficulties for them.

Close-knit families or a 'hands off' approach?

Some families are quite controlling of their children, expecting them to remain at home until they are well on in years, and wanting to have a say in their choice of partners. This kind of family is often upset when the son or daughter gets into a serious relationship, and may make it difficult for the couple to meet or get together. This kind of possessiveness means that it is only someone very persistent who is able to prise his or her new partner away from the family, and the new couple may have difficulty keeping their lives separate from the parents. On the other hand, some families are very loosely joined together, and the son or daughter may feel pressured by more demanding partners until they meet an easy-going partner who is quite like their own parents.

Household tasks

Another area of conflict based on the families of origin is that of the division of labour in household tasks. Many boys, even in today's atmosphere of equality, have not been in the habit of helping with domestic chores. As mentioned above, women are in most households more conscientious than men, and they end up doing more of the day-to-day work in the house. The influence of the families of origin may play a part in this problem too.

How to discipline children

One of the most common areas of conflict related to family of origin is the disciplining of children. Each partner feels that they know the right way to do this, based either on their own experience as children, or on trying to do the opposite to what their own parents did. Once again the parents of both partners will often be tempted to intervene and take sides

with their own son or daughter. It may take a fair amount of discussion and understanding for the couple to work through these problems, and they should eventually reach a consensus which they can jointly agree on, and which does not rely completely on wisdom handed down from their families of origin.

Cultural differences

In this multicultural society, we see more intermarriage and more inter-cultural relationships than ever before. I outlined some of the differences between cultures when I discussed 'pressures' earlier in the chapter. We are in a broadly secular society, in which there is growing toleration of difference, but in some couples the issues of culture can be a great source of stress. We cannot say that we understand all the differences between different cultures. It is important to emphasize here that no culture is seen as being right or wrong, superior or inferior. However, I think that a description of some of the differences between cultures that I have observed in clinical work may help to explain the stresses they may cause.

The South Asian pattern

In South Asian cultures, whether Hindu, Muslim or Sikh, there are a number of fairly constant features. Marriage is traditionally considered the responsibility of the family and society rather than the individual. Marriages are often arranged by the family. The wife, in more traditional families, is expected to go and live with the husband and his parents, and to be subservient to his mother (see the case of Ahmet and Aisha, above). Divorce is frowned upon, and is indeed less common in this cultural group. These rules are of course not observed by all South Asian families, and the

more westernized families act in much the same way as European families. Conflict can arise when partners from traditional families form relationships with either Western partners or with westernized Asian partners, and I have seen couples who have some quite serious difficulties in this situation.

The African-Caribbean tradition

The African-Caribbean tradition is rather different, with a family centred around the mother, while the father may not be resident with the mother and the children. The mother is often referred to as his 'baby mother' rather than his partner or wife. He will usually contribute to the finances of the family, but will leave the upbringing of the children mainly to the mother. Again, this is the extreme situation, and many African-Caribbean families these days conform to the European pattern.

African families

African families tend to be quite traditional and male-dominated, like the South Asian families, but without the expectation for the wife to live in the extended family. However, in many African families the parents may leave the upbringing of their children to relatives, even leaving them with relatives at home in Africa while the couple travel to the West for further education or training, or for career advancement.

Couples from different backgrounds

It is clear from the differences outlined above that there is a great potential for conflict in couples where they come from two different traditions. The assumptions that each partner

makes about what is a good relationship, or what is the right way to live and bring up children, can be very different even if they come from the same culture. This difference is certainly greater if they are from different cultures, and only by discussing the issues openly can they hope to come to an agreement. As a therapist working with couples and families, I have sometimes found it difficult to find a good compromise in such couples. The obvious difficulties arise when one partner is trying to live in a more Western way, which the other is resisting. It is important to respect the differences between them and to give both of them a good hearing. The main aim is the stability and satisfaction of the relationship, and who is right or wrong is much less important. It is also helpful to remember that these cross-cultural relationships can be very fulfilling, and that the problems they have are in principle no more difficult to solve than those that we see in same-culture couples.

Financial and social pressures

Financial pressures

Most couples experience financial difficulties, whether short or long term. As mentioned above, there may be a clash of ideals, with one partner wishing to 'live now, pay later', while the other prefers to live always within their means without borrowing money. It often emerges over the decision whether to take a mortgage for house purchase, or whether to spend on an expensive holiday. However, spending on gambling, drinking or compulsive shopping can raise equally thorny issues. Usually the couple manage to compromise on financial issues, but in some cases the dispute is severe enough to threaten the relationship. There is no 'right' way to handle money, and each couple will make their own

arrangements. Some individuals feel that it is helpful to keep some savings in their own name, however close and involved they are with their partner. This may not imply an intention to separate, and it may actually make separation less likely because the person feels more secure because of the savings.

Expectations fostered by the media

Pressures on the stability of relationships are also felt as a result of media publicity. There is at present a tendency to idealize marriage as an institution and at the same time to attack it. The media is full of stories about the infidelities and separations of celebrities. There are also regular features on how to improve your relationship, how to achieve a better sex life and how to live a fuller life. This carries the risk that couples who read about these things will look at their own relationship and conclude that, because it doesn't come up to standard, it is no good and they should separate. It hardly needs saying that you need to weigh these media pronouncements against your own experience, and not disparage the good things that you have in your own 'good enough' relationship.

How children affect the relationship

There are further pressures on those who have children. To have children is for some couples the main reason for getting together, and most couples would say that having children is a source of great satisfaction. However, the evidence is that couples with children are on average less happy in life than couples who are childless, although the satisfaction of bringing up children can certainly compensate for this. Children often test the parents in ways that they did not envisage, for

example in misbehaving, in causing the parents to discipline and control them, in school refusal, in drug taking or in developing psychiatric illnesses or antisocial behavior. I will come back to this topic later in the book, in Chapters 4, 6 and 11.

Sustaining a long-term relationship

This is a big topic, and the discussion of it will take up quite a high proportion of the rest of the book. At this point, however, I will simply list some of the skills that are useful for couples in sustaining a long-term relationship. You don't necessarily need all of these to succeed in maintaining the relationship, but each of them in my view has some value, and contributes to the ultimate success in staying together 'till death us do part'. It is important, however, to stress that there can be good relationships in which none of these things are present, and whatever your own situation, it is worth trying to improve things, by putting the ideas in this book into practice.

FACTORS WHICH CAN HELP TO SUSTAIN A LONG-TERM RELATIONSHIP (SEE ALSO CHAPTER 12)

- Being realistic from the beginning and working on problems
- Developing mutual interests
- Toleration
- Shared ideals
- Ability to negotiate and compromise
- Sexual attraction
- Both partners comfortable with the level of intimacy that they have

On the other hand, there are also some factors which are more likely than others to break up relationships, and again I will simply list these at this point.

WHAT FACTORS MIGHT LEAD TO SEPARATION?

- Affairs, especially if they lead to a new long-term relationship
- The resentment caused by an affair
- Drinking, drug taking, gambling, etc.
- Difficult or irresponsible behavior
- Negative influence of friends or family members
- Pressures from work, travel, etc.
- Getting hooked on the Internet (including porn sites)
- Conflict
- 'Growing apart'
- Retirement and the 'empty nest' (after children have left)

Any of the above factors may lead to a serious crisis in the relationship, but it is also possible to recover from almost any of them if the couple value their relationship enough, and in some cases, for example, working through the difficulties can strengthen a relationship and make it more stable and more satisfying.

The end of a relationship: bereavement, separation or divorce

The process of grieving

Every relationship must have an end, one way or another. In today's society the majority of marriages still last until the

death of one partner. The bereavement which results may be very different for different individuals. In most bereaved partners, however, there is a period of 'shock and protest', which may be accompanied by a sort of denial that the person is really dead. There is then in most people a period of emotional outpouring and yearning for the dead partner, in which the dead person is idealized and any past conflicts or differences ignored. The bereaved partner may also be irrationally angry with the dead person, for having died and 'taken themselves away' and not being there for support. Over the course of time, there is usually a process of putting things into perspective; the bereaved person takes a more balanced view of the dead partner, and 'reattachment' takes place. This may be reattachment to other family members, to friends, to a new partner or to outside activities.

Eventually the bereaved partner comes to terms with their loss, and gets on with the daily tasks of life. The whole process may last for months or years, and it often takes its toll on the health of the person who has been bereaved. Recent widows have poorer health than married women, and tend to go to their doctor more for minor complaints. They also have a higher rate of psychiatric illness, mainly depression. Widowers are more likely to neglect themselves in the year after bereavement, to drink excessive amounts of alcohol, to have more road accidents and to suffer more from heart disease and cancer. Again, these are problems which decrease over the years following the bereavement.

Prolonged or very severe grief reactions

Time usually heals those who are bereaved, although at times such as anniversaries (birthdays, wedding anniversaries and the anniversaries of the death), the feelings of loss and yearning are often increased. Sometimes, however, the

mourning process goes on for a very long time, perhaps many years, and it may become a full-blown depressive illness, needing psychiatric treatment. In other cases, the grief takes on different forms, such as a complete immersion in work or other creative activities. Some bereaved partners become involved very quickly in a new relationship 'on the rebound'. This may have a positive effect, although there is also a risk that the new relationship could be unstable because of the speed of its development and the fact that the bereaved person is not really at that time emotionally ready to make far-reaching life decisions. Other people after bereavement are determined never to replace the dead partner and decide to live solitary lives. There is no right or wrong way to behave in this situation, but it helps to be aware of the pitfalls which may exist for those who make hasty decisions.

Separation or divorce

An increasing number of relationships now end in separation or divorce (see Chapter 10). This may be a relief for one or both partners, and generally people who have been divorced are unlikely to go back to the same partner. However, the breakup of a relationship is never simple. Many individuals who have been divorced, especially if it was through the partner's initiative rather than theirs, experience the equivalent of a bereavement, and they may go through all the stages of mourning outlined above. The difference is that the ex-partner is not dead, but is alive and may have rejected them. It is harder to idealize them, as would happen if they had died, and the person who has been left may feel both extreme anger and jealousy towards the ex-partner, especially if the partner is in a new relationship. In many ways, a divorce can be harder to bear than a bereavement by

death, because there is less of the continuity of affection and love such as would be felt towards a dead partner.

Care of children

Following separation or divorce, there is also the problem of the continuing care of the children of the relationship, and the difficulty of two people who can't live together as a couple trying to cooperate on the delicate and vital task of bringing up vulnerable children. It is then that some of the skills outlined in Chapter 11 will be useful, including the role of the step-parent living with children whom he or she has taken on in a new relationship, and the problems of managing the interfaces between the ex-partner, the children and the new partner.

The health of divorced people

Divorced people, like those who are recently bereaved, have poorer health than those who are still married. Again this is most noticeable in the first few months after the divorce, but it remains so for a year or so afterwards. It underlines the advantages of working at a marriage or partnership while it is still viable, and hopefully this book will help some couples to improve their relationships and so avoid the problems of divorce and separation.

KEY POINTS

- Couple relationships can be very supportive and satisfying for the partners, but problems arise for almost every couple at some stage of their relationship.
- There is a wide variety of types of relationships, but the problems they have are often very similar.

- Most relationships today are held together by voluntary agreement rather than by culture or the law.
- Problems may arise when the couple need to make adjustments in order to enter the next stage in the family life-cycle.
- Financial and social pressures can play a big part in destabilizing a relationship.
- The influences of cultural background and of the partners' families of origin are usually quite strong.
- There are factors which lead to stability in a relationship and factors which lead to the risk of separation (see the Tables).
- There is always a need for toleration and negotiation.
- Couples should be realistic about their expectations, especially after the early stages of a relationship.
- Divorce can have a negative influence on health and wellbeing, but sometimes provides relief from intolerable stress.