



## **Mutual Disappointment – Surviving a Long Term Relationship**

At a recent clinical supervision session in Lewes, my supervisor and I were discussing the realities of being in a long-term relationship. By long-term, we were thinking about decades, rather than months or years, and in this context, we were together considering what individuals must accept about a long-term relationship and thus about themselves.

It is a relatively recent phenomenon in social and human development that we pair-bond for reasons of love (rather than status, wealth or lineage) and thanks to modern medicine and increased living standards, we live much longer than our recent ancestors. The former brings great expectations around what our relationship should offer us; the latter means that long-term relationships can last for many decades.

In working with couples, I often invite them to think about the purpose of their relationship. This may not sound romantic and idealistic. However, every human needs a purpose (generally multiple purposes) and every relationship requires a mutually held sense of purpose to bind the couple together. And with longevity and changes to social structure now meaning that the sole purpose has ceased to be to raise children, the objective of a romantic relationship is likely to change throughout the time the couple spend together. I will write more about the purpose of a relationship in the future. However, for now, let us return to the cheery topic of mutual disappointment.

There comes a point in most relationships where there is a realisation that the person we have chosen, the person we lusted after and loved – were willing to change the direction of our life for – is simply not who we thought they were going to be. I don't mean that we are struck, as is so often the case, with the shattering of a delusion when we see our idealised partner do something human for the first time; we must all go through that shift where lust wanes, and we accept our partner is a fellow human with his or her faults. No, mutual disappointment is something deeper. Perhaps it strikes when we realise on a more profound level that the person we picked, with whom we built a life and chose to have children, has not delivered us the life we had imagined. Thus, mutual disappointment is not about discovering that our newly acquired lover snores, or leaves the cap off the toothpaste. It is a reflection of our disappointment and mourning of how our imagined shared life with our partner simply is not the reality.

It all sounds terribly negative. However, I would suggest that mutual disappointment in a relationship need not necessarily lead to rupture and conflict, as it is, in fact, less about our partner and more about ourselves. We must come to terms with the reality of our lives and accept that many of our youthful dreams for ourselves, and the partner who would perhaps rescue us from mundanity, cannot be fulfilled. Nor should they.



We are all bombarded by celebrity lifestyles on a daily basis. Programmes abound promising instant stardom, wealth and fame, which judging by viewer ratings, have an almost manic appeal as vehicles that offer us a chance of being rescued from our lives, and thus death. But the vast majority of us slowly, often unconsciously, let go of many of the unrealistic dreams we once held for ourselves that protected us against the harshness of life. With that, have to accept our partners as fellow humans who have disappointed us, whom we have disappointed, and who themselves are disappointed with who they turned out to be.

Framed like this, holding mutual disappointment in a relationship, making sense of it and mourning it potentially offers an opportunity for a deepening of the reality of what the relationship actually is – a mirror through which to experience ourselves and a system in which we can be understood. That, or we can have a ‘mid-life crisis’, buy a Porsche, divorce our partner and keep on running from the inevitable – how the passage of time and the knowledge of our own mortality brings with it disappointment of what could have been, but what was not.

If you would like support in navigating the complexities of your relationship in our modern world, please contact us to arrange a consultation with one of our Couple Psychotherapists in either Hove or Lewes.

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