



## Love, commitment and desire in the age of choice

Throughout history, the institution of marriage and our understanding and expectations of committed relationships have shifted with the socio-political and economic tides. Where once marriage was primarily an economic arrangement to maintain patriarchy and secure lineage, by the end of the 19th century, new ideas about romantic love were emerging. Whilst love was not yet understood as a precondition for marriage, it was now considered that marriage was a viable arrangement in which it might flourish.

The social and cultural revolution of the '60s saw sex liberated from reproduction with the advent of the contraceptive pill. With the rise of feminism and the gay movement, sexuality was redefined as a property of the self and sexual expression as a fundamental human right.

The age of individualism has coincided with an erosion of the old structures and traditional institutions of extended family, community and religion. In the West today, the couple has become the central unit in our social organisation.

Disconnected from many traditional resources, the modern couple is thrown back upon itself to sustain the emotional connection and protections once provided by much larger social networks. A tall order, therapist and author Esther Perel suggests, to find all of this located in one person. We are freer than ever before and yet, paradoxically, also more alone.

Romantic love and desire is now the cornerstone of commitment in modern relationships. Definitions of commitment are largely organised around assumed notions of monogamy. As Perel reminds us, where once monogamy meant one sexual partner for life, it is now understood as one person at a time. In modern marriage, the new monogamy principle contains an implicit commitment to no longer pursue sex with others.\*

The demands on the modern couple are immense and complex. How do we reconcile a need for safety with a need for adventure, and can we find them both in one person? Can we desire, Perel asks, what we already have?

Consumer ideals of personal satisfaction, happiness and fulfilment drive and perpetuate the myth of "the one" perfect partner with whom we might find completion. Seductive as the notion is, it perhaps does more to fuel dissatisfaction and disappointment, as the statistics on divorce might reflect. Indeed, the consumer principle depends upon dissatisfaction, and inevitably and conveniently, peddles the cure. In the digital age, we are drowning in an ocean of relentless choice and the tantalising promise that opportunity and fulfilment could be just one swipe away. Our anxiety is rising in proportion. What impact does this have on modern relationships?

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It is so often the case that couples come to therapy as slightly diminished versions of their true selves. Indeed, relationships can feel so burdensome at times, so filled with worry and responsibility that there may be little space to connect to a sense of ones self at all. Loneliness in the presence of another abounds.

Couples therapy can offer a refuge for couples to pause and reflect, to consider and understand the cultural constraints, constructions and contexts of modern love. It can support people in an understanding of their personal emotional histories and how they inform and shape the people they have become. In our original family, we learn how to feel about our bodies, our gender and our sexuality. In couples therapy, we can explore the impact of then on now.

Whatever else love is, it is a story, and one we might be wiser for reminding ourselves that can be reviewed, re-visioned and retold. Perhaps it is time to cultivate new conversations about love and desire, to set them within an ecological narrative that acknowledges complexity and nuance. One in which we might learn more and fear less the natural tension that exists between the erotic and the domestic and the contradictory longings of modern relationships, such that we can remain alive to our partners, our selves, and our world.

\* I speak here in very broad terms and acknowledge newly emerging paradigms in sexual identity and relating. To be explored in future blogs.

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