

A good row can rescue a relationship

Being able to deal with conflict – and knowing when to make peace – is essential if you want to flourish as a couple. Anna Maxted learns how

As every fairy tale decrees, after finding your true love, you live happily ever after. There's no room for feeling distant, grouchy or, indeed, "really hating each other". But, says relationship therapist Sarah Davies – co-author with her psychotherapist husband, Matt, of *You, Me and the Space Between Us: How to (re) Build your Relationship* – times of hating each other is "ordinary". In 25 years together, they've felt mutual hate – and had their share of grumpy times. "Most couples have."

Yet it's not something we boast about. "Most people want to be in this happy bubble together," says Sarah. A quiet life sounds preferable to fighting and friction, but an artificial peace can slowly kill your love. If we're always a "samey-samey" stuck-together pair, instead of two independent adults unafraid to disagree, express discrete opinions, or do their own thing, there's no air, no friction, no spark.

Being permanently aligned can be cosy, but without conflict the relationship flattens. "Couples become flatmates, and sex disappears," says Sarah, who is 54. "Unless you can be a different person, there's very little chance for any erotic charge or excitement," adds Matt, 59, who is also a psychosexual therapist.

Whereas acknowledging problems and discord between you, broaching

difficult conversations, and finding mutually acceptable ways to resolve sticky issues and repair resentments is

what makes any relationship "honest, authentic, and alive". Knowing how to engage in conflict – and how to repair – is fundamental if you as a couple are to flourish.

However, that's easier said than done. Who fights cleanly? Rows can become cruel. We go cold. We see our partner as the enemy. We don't say how we really feel. We're defensive, or accusing. And we drift apart.

There is an art to relationship war – it does require some honour and resilience – and if we can master it, our battles and skirmishes can help us to better understand each other and ultimately bring us closer.

Why keeping the peace doesn't work

No matter how much you love each other, it's impossible to be constantly attuned. All relationships have problems. But it takes courage to address them and air them. "Sometimes, it can feel easier to just ignore problems and carry on and gloss over things, but then the relationship shrinks," says Sarah.

We tiptoe around each other. We don't

admit we're annoyed or unhappy, or that this isn't what we want – but not because we don't care. "Couples are often frightened of doing that because they fear the dissolution of the relationship," says Matt. "They fear that complaining or

talking about something really difficult is going to cause even more disruption."

But finding yourself at odds with your beloved is part of a natural, beneficial cycle that therapists call "harmony, disruption, and repair". We should regard feeling irritable with each other as sometimes inevitable rather than an indication of failure, says Matt. It's healthy to recognise it, to be able to say, "We're not quite in sync at the moment."

Indeed, he says, a third of the time in a relationship, we're mending our differences, "You're trying to get back into some kind of harmonious situation." He smiles, "I love that idea, even if you're sitting on a sunny beach, sipping a tequila, having a conversation with your partner, you're thinking 'How do I reply in a way that keeps this well?'" And, he notes, we're all aware of when we're making the effort to repair – or risking a blow-up.

It's also normal, and necessary, to have "space" between you. As Matt and Sarah describe it, it's helpful to see the relationship as a third entity that you both inhabit. You create its "atmosphere" together. If you're able to emo-



tionally “travel” towards each other by trying to understand your partner’s view, even if you are polarised, you can often find a middle ground. But that requires the recognition that you’re in this together – the “us” – rather than in a power struggle, where one wins and the other loses. (Meaning, you both lose.) When there is conflict, it’s how you tackle it that matters. If you can do it well, Matt says, “The disruption, and how the disruption is faced between the couple, and then the repair – that in itself builds trust.” You rightly feel, “‘We got over this, and we’ve found out more about each other, and survived another bumpy patch.’ That hard-earned intimacy is deeper and more meaningful. The harmony becomes more authentic.”

In a romantic relationship we need the thrill of friction, and to feel appreciated and understood for who we truly are. If you aren’t assertive, or autonomous, don’t dare to be different, always agree with your partner so as not to cause upset, you gradually lose parts of your identity – and resent them for it. The danger is, says Sarah, that eventually we try to find that lost version of ourselves (sexy, funny, interesting...) elsewhere. “It’s one reason why people have affairs.”

Conflict and your sex life

A sexy couple have “a frisson between them, a magnetism, that makes it possible”, says Sarah. With that in mind, Matt says it makes sense that, “Generally, conflict is better for sex, because to be sexy, you need to be two independent people. I know objectification is a dirty word, but you have to see your partner as another person.”

However, sexual tension is different to plain old tension. We’re unlikely to feel amorous if conflict is unresolved and we’re filled with rage and grief. “If there is emotional hurt and pain, it can be difficult for couples to have sex,” he adds. For most of us to be in the mood, “conflict needs to be cleared”.

One belief that commonly causes conflict but kills passion is that sex is a “physical need”. Matt and Sarah say, “It is unlikely your partner will want to join you in intimacy, love and sex when you express that as a need. There is

something passive and disempowered about needing your partner for those reasons.” It’s a turn-off. It’s about wanting to take, not give.

So, how do we remain separate enough to be exciting, yet come together? Matt says, “Sex doesn’t just happen in the bedroom. The sexiness, being sexy, happens way before any sexual encounter – in the signals you may be sending out, how you touch them, how you move past them, how you talk to them.” Sarah adds, “How you listen and show empathy.” If you’re in tune, it means, explains Matt, that “when an invitation does happen, it’s not just out of the blue”.

And yet this too can lead to friction – the unsexy sort. “There’s often a discrepancy in people’s desire for sex,” says Matt. And if you struggle with rejection, “that can lead to shame and conflict”. So if your partner is keen but you aren’t up for it, it helps to give context to your refusal, and to be compassionate, he advises. You might say, “I’m not really feeling it, but let’s schedule – let’s do it tomorrow morning or tomorrow night.” (Scheduling sex can take a lot of irritability, uncertainty and stress out of the equation, they note. And, importantly, it shows willingness.)

The rule on being responsible for your actions and emotions still applies. If you feel crushed by rejection, says Sarah, ask yourself, “If I say ‘How about having sex tonight?’ and he’s doing something else, can I tolerate my own feelings?” Identify the emotion, and soothe yourself, and it will pass. “‘Ah, yes, that’s shame, it feels awkward here, I can feel it in my body – I’m not the only person in the world to feel this way.’”

That thoughtfulness – towards yourself, and your partner – is invaluable. Sex can arouse complex emotions. Matt says, “There was a period where I would expect Sarah to initiate, and then suddenly I would, because I’d been waiting for so long, and then it would come out in completely the wrong way – like it was a demand.”

He realised that his longing for sex felt shameful, so he bottled it up, thinking, “I can’t ask, she’ll think I’m too demanding.” Once he understood this, he could be more proactive and meet Sarah in the middle. “It’s about being able to access your feelings.”

They are both touchingly, reassur-

ingly honest – in person, and in their book. Of course, cries Sarah, “Otherwise it’s as though we’re coming from a lofty position of this perfect relationship.” Matt smiles, “It’s always a work in progress.”

When we don’t fight constructively (that’s all of us, some of the time)

No one loves the phrase, “we need to talk”. It’s hard to express our disappointment or frustration with the person we love. It’s easier to distract ourselves from uncomfortable feelings by keeping busy, working, or drinking excessively – all of which create emotional distance between the two of you. Many people sulk or withdraw instead of being transparent and saying, “I’m not happy.” As Matt says, pulling away is a behaviour that indicates, “I’m not happy and I’m showing you I’m not happy.”

It’s often “a cry for help”, he says, a roundabout way of trying to prompt your darling to ask, “What’s going on, tell me?” It’s a childish manoeuvre – literally. When we turn cold and silent if we’re upset, this is often a strategy from our childhood “to manage the fear of not being loved”. It might be, Matt says, “The withdrawal or the sulking was a way to get the parent to say ‘ooh, poor little Matt’.” Trouble is, in adulthood it’s less likely to work on your partner as it feels manipulative – and hurtful.

Being unable or scared to verbalise what we want and how we feel to our partner in a clear, but self-aware and respectful way, slowly corrodes the relationship. For example, “Why don’t you ever call me at work?” is accusatory, resentful, and would goad most people into defending themselves. But underneath this lashing out lies the desire to love and be loved. It’s a clumsy, brattish way of saying, “I think of you in the day and would love it if you could call me sometimes.” But simply stating what we yearn for is so much harder, because in doing so we make ourselves vulnerable and we risk rejection.

Though hurling insults and huffing is the long way round to rejection. Relationships deteriorate when both of us are in prickly, self-protection mode. As



Matt and Sarah note, if our partner says, “you look nice”, instead of thanking them, fear and insecurity warps understanding and we assume they mean, “you don’t usually”. We miss the chance to be close.

We forget that we both carry equal responsibility for the quality of our relationship – that as adults, we have agency. Behaving like adults means facing problems together, not seeing each other as the problem, they say. But often, we make ourselves the victim, and blame our partner, showing criticism, anger or contempt. We punish them with what one psychologist cited in *You, Me and the Space Between Us* calls “normal marital sadism” (mean banter, unsympathetic reactions, pretending we don’t know what they want, freezing them out – you know the drill).

As Sarah says, “Communication is the bedrock of any relationship” – but it can also be the death of it. Why is it such a struggle to be honest and self-aware? Matt says, “These longings can feel quite shameful for many of us to admit to – ‘I want you to hug me and make me feel loved and this is how!’ Often, we’re taught to believe we should be independent.”

As we discuss how it’s common for one partner to turn grumpy (hoping for the other to swoop in to comfort and provide them with what they haven’t said they need), Matt says, “There have been times when I’ve felt myself withdrawing from Sarah and actually what I needed to say was ‘I would like attention from you.’”

But, as Sarah adds, making that shift requires “self-inquiry and self-regulation”. Why am I flaring up? What’s behind this habit? What is that sensation in my body, a heating up, or awkwardness, or tension, telling me about how I feel? And is that different to what I’m communicating?

As well as being a psychotherapist in training, Sarah is an “embodiment coach”. This work involves helping people to become more attuned to their body – for instance, tracking feelings and their physical impact and teaching how we can best use our bodies to help process emotion and thoughts.

She advises, “Feel your feelings behind your defensiveness.” If love is to thrive, communication must come from

“a place of vulnerability” rather than self-protection. “That’s the key that changes that dynamic – when one person is courageous enough to step forward and say how they’re feeling.”

Healthy conflict means taking responsibility

The “space between us” that Matt and Sarah describe is also about the fact that both partners need to retain individual identities within the relationship if it’s to flourish. That means knowing yourself and what you want and don’t want, and communicating that clearly, as well as taking responsibility for your actions and emotions.

For all of this, as Sarah says, we need to harness that superpower of “feeling our own feelings”. It’s surprisingly easy to control or avoid them. “We can swipe and drink and eat this and watch this.” That can get us through the day, but if we go through the years this way, “We’ve missed our own life because

we’re trying to gloss over everything”.

Often we dodge our feelings as we’re scared that accessing them will be unbearably painful (perhaps we were shamed or rejected for expressing our anger or sadness as a child). But being a stranger to our feelings cuts us off from our real selves.

To feel your own feelings is to be intimate with yourself, says Sarah – only then can you genuinely connect with your partner. “People do want to be intimate and have a sense of meaning and purpose and value this short little life. And our feelings are the key to that.”

Not feeling our feelings makes us frustrating to live with. It feels dishonest. Matt and Sarah describe the concept of “splitting”, which is “when you flatly deny the existence of an attribute in yourself and vilify your partner for it”. (If we can’t stand an emotion in ourselves, often we don’t love it in others.) So you won’t admit to your own struggles and scapegoat the other person.

Matt recalls one client who refused to admit he was anxious, ever, while his wife was so anxious. His forced calm amplified her anxiety. (It wasn’t

his fault – he’d been raised to think that men should be in control.) But when he confessed to feeling worried – on the occasion of getting a flat tyre in the middle of nowhere – “she then started to relax”.

The irony is, when we can admit to our feelings, flaws, mistakes, it takes the heat out of a spat or situation. Matt says, “You’re bridging that space between you and saying, ‘I understand how that’s upsetting you.’” It’s so valuable, because, Sarah says, “we all want to be understood”. Compassion and self-knowledge makes you more tolerant, and brings you closer.

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WANT BETTER SEX? TRY THE 'BOSSY MASSAGE'

THE PROBLEM
If we can't ask for what we want, not only does the relationship lose its zing, but, as Sarah says, "sex gets so boring". However, if you can attend to your feelings, says Matt, "we get to have more interesting sex".

However, it can

be nerve-racking to declare "What about something else?" or "I'm not so keen on that".

THE SOLUTION
The "bossy massage" is a 20-30 minute exercise in asking for exactly what you want and helps you realise what that might

be. It simply entails one person telling the other how they want to be touched.

The "receiver" can lie or sit and keep their clothes on. They give the "server" precise instructions. Not just "massage my back" but, for instance, "move your fingers



around the bones at the top of my spine". If the server is comfortable with the request, they oblige. If not, they can negotiate. They should also ask questions ("like this?") and the receiver can guide them. The receiver should be direct. ("Yes, I

want that again but with a little more pressure.")
Matt and Sarah say people often just go along with what's happening. "This is a powerful experiment in what happens when you are confident you are in control of what is happening to you."

ARGUING IN CIRCLES? TRY PLAYING 'SWITCH SIDES'

THE PROBLEM
On certain issues, couples just don't agree. "Sometimes polarities are never resolvable," says Matt. But there is an alternative to what Sarah calls the "hamster wheel" of those endless circular arguments where no one wins.

Only when couples abandon the "I'm right, you're wrong" position can a truce be agreed upon. So Matt and

Sarah play a game called "switch sides". You do have to summon all your adult powers of generosity and self-regulation - not easy when things are heated.

THE SOLUTION
You put yourself in the other person's position - literally. If your partner is standing by the kitchen sink, hands on hips, and you have your arms crossed by



the countertop, swap places and attitude. Then continue the argument as each other, using each other's words.

It won't work if you are mocking or resentful, but if done with goodwill, it can be surprisingly illustrative. "If your partner is arguing your view and you're arguing theirs, you're showing each other you do understand," says Matt.





▲ In touch: no matter how much you love each other, you can't be constantly attuned





▲ 'Reassuringly honest': Matt and Sarah Davies at their home in East Sussex

