

DOES WORKING AT YOUR MARRIAGE WORK? FIVE THINGS YOU CAN WORK ON AND FIVE THINGS YOU CANNOT

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For the last 20 years I have been interested in what it is that enables couples to have long-term, usually satisfying relationships, the sort of relationship that they would like to stay in. The first book that I could find that was written on the psychology of marriage was by Phillip Turman in 1934 and he said in his forward: *'Marriage is the most central of human institutions. No other touches the lives of so many human beings in so intimate a manner'*. Around the same time, Greta Garbo, the Hollywood actress, was alleged to have said: *'I advise you not to get married until you are at least 90 years of age, that way you will be unlikely to live to regret the decision'*. For me those two quotes capture something of the paradox that is marriage in Australia in 2004. Many people want a loving, long-term committed relationship with a partner and they seek that out, but for a substantial proportion of people, things don't go as they'd like. We constantly see examples of unsuccessful relationships reported in the media. This has led a number of social commentators to say that marriage might have had its day. Julian Hafner, a very well know psychiatrist, wrote a book just over 10 years ago that was entitled *The End of Marriage* and in it he explained why he thought marriage had passed its use by date and why it wasn't particularly good for people. One of the things that I think is important, is to recognise why people might come to that sort of conclusion and I want to challenge a few of those ideas.

An Australian author who wrote a popular book on marriage called *Conscious Marriage* said: *'Making marriage work may seem to conflict with how relationships should be – magical and romantic, but if couples learn how to make the magic then they create a better life together'*. On the other hand I've had people say to me often in therapy when I've been seeing couples: *'If you're really in love and you've picked the right person, it should just happen naturally'*. So these ideas that people need to work at their relationship or that it should just happen are interesting. I'm struck when I look at TV shows when they portray marriage at how negative and pessimistic most of the coverage is. I think of popular programs like *Friends* and how you see these young people having a succession of disastrous relationships and you don't see many people who look happy. In fact it has got to the point where marriage has got a bad name amongst young people.

The Australian newspaper in its weekend magazine did a feature article where they invited members of the advertising and marketing industries to develop some ads that they thought would promote the marriage brand to make it look more popular. Let's look at two examples that these advertising gurus came up with. I was struck first of all by the image of this rather large gentleman and the phrase *'Let yourself go, you're married'*. The sort of idea that once you've got into a relationship you don't have to worry about anything, you don't have to worry about how you look or how you appear to other people. It's a very comfortable relationship that you can just sort of wallow in. That seems to be the message. I thought that was kind of unfortunate. Here's one that takes quite a different

take on it and I thought it was both controversial and interesting. Two guys saying: *'What's so special about getting married?'* The small print says: *"Marriage is a symbol to family and friends how strongly two people can love each other. It's a strong desire for a lifetime of companionship, the reassurance of having someone there for you and to be always there for you and your partner. It's about being a solid team capable of taking on life's challenges. We'd give anything to say 'I do'. What's stopping you?"*

It's a very interesting quote I think because it's posing from a couple who are outside the legal framework of marriage, what they see are the advantages of marriage. Some of the things that they say in there are that it's an important social and legal ritual which has important religious significance for many people, it's a symbol of commitment and what they aspire to. That seemed a much more positive message about what marriage is supposed to be about. Two weeks later four different couples were portrayed under the heading of *'Endless Love'* and these were couples who had been married for 50 years of more and in each case the story was about where one partner died and the other died reasonably quickly afterward. In fact there is a lot of research evidence that suggests that if people have been married for a very long time and one partner dies, the other dies shortly after, much more often than you would expect by chance alone.

There was one particular story I found very touching. It was a story about William and Kathleen Dargie, two very well known Australian artists in their own right who were married for 63 years. The sketches you can see at the top of the slide were paintings that they did of each other when they were engaged and they gave them to each other as a wedding present, the young dashing William and the beautiful and charming Kathleen. We fast forward the 63 years of life together and Kath was dying of cancer and it described in the article how he was now old and frail and sitting in a wheelchair holding her hand for the last four days as she died. Then it is described how he went to the funeral and laid his hand on the coffin and asked his daughter in a somewhat puzzled way: *"Can Kath really be in there?"* His daughter drove him home and as they parted he said to his daughter *"I don't really think there's much for me now that Kath's gone"*. He ate his supper, went to bed and died in his sleep. One of the things that was striking in that story and each of the stories was how important this relationship over such a long period of time was to these people. That it had become so central to their lives; in a sense it was their life. They had a joint sense of identity.

There is a German researcher named Deiner and he does a lot of work on what makes people happy. A couple of years ago he wrote this very comprehensive review of about 700 scientific studies that had been done on what makes people happy and satisfied with their life. He went through and looked at the evidence that supported some of the things we might believe would make us happy. Now if you look at most newspapers, you'll see that if you were rich you should be happy. If you look at the back of *The Australian* magazine, you'll see that if you have a BMW you'll be more attractive to other people, you'll have a happier life and things will go well. That's what they tell us, but in fact the research evidence says that wealth does not relate to happiness. There are some really miserable millionaires and there are some really happy poor guys. There has been some interesting research for example on people who've won the lottery, with the researchers following them over 15 years and found that those people who've won millions of dollars in obscene ways without having to work for it are no happier than the rest of us and in fact they describe it as particularly disruptive in their lives.

So maybe it's not that, maybe it's the status of your job - no, afraid not. What about living in a great country like Australia, surely we must be happier than the rest of all those folks.

Apparently not, again the research evidence suggests that where you live is not a strong determinate of how happy you'll be. What about city versus rural. Now being a city guy all my life I always thought the wonderful things you get access to in large cities would make me happy, but now that I've spent more time in the country as I've got older, I've thought that having the tranquillity and beauty of natural surroundings – no, still doesn't do it. What about health. We all say that we should be grateful for our health and that we should look after it. That makes a little bit of difference but surprisingly people can accommodate all sorts of health difficulties. I've done quite a lot of research on how people adjust to cancer and one of the eye openers to me in the last 15 years is how often people after they've been through a life-threatening illness, they've been treated for it and even if the prognosis is poor and things are not looking good for them, they evaluate what's important to them. I was working with a woman recently who had just recovered from breast cancer and it was about 6 months after she'd finished her treatment, she put it to me like this, she said: *"Before I was diagnosed with breast cancer, my daughter rang me up and said why don't I go around and they will go to the park with the grandkids"*. She looked around the house and said she was a bit busy maybe they could do it next week. Now she has a very messy house, but she sees a lot of her grandchildren. That's what she learned from breast cancer. So health does make a difference, but only a little bit. Relationships and in particular your family relationships are, according to Deiner's research, the most reliable predictors of how well off people feel in their lives. I guess that's what brings us all here today.

I'm going to talk a bit more about the research that underpins some of the things I'm going to say and I need to acknowledge that a lot of that comes from North America and while much wisdom comes from North America, it is a different place. Of course Australia also has its own eccentricities, but I think we have enough in common as countries that we can generalise at least some of the wisdom that comes from the US and there's quite a bit of Australian research that's happening now. So let me tell you just a couple of things that we know about couple relationships. Research has shown that when people decide they are going to get married, they are engaged, they're excited, they're pretty happy in their relationship on average. There are a few people who marry people that they're not happy with, but they're the exception. But across the first 10 years, average satisfaction and happiness with the relationship goes down in a more or less lineal fashion.

If you're a pessimist looking at this, if you're in that 'early, overwhelmed by your hormones, walking into walls, can't think of anybody else, besotted' sort of stage, make the most of it because it's all downhill from there. However, there is a different way of looking at it. This has come from some of the work that we've been doing. We've been tracking about 500 newly wed couples that we recruited through the register of births, deaths and marriages, for a very long time now. Getting them to fill in our forms and do our interviews endlessly. What we've found is there are a group of couples that you might call at low risk for future problems. They start happy, and they stay happy and I put them in the blue. Then there is the red group with whom we can identify certain characteristics that put them at risk for having future relationship problems. They tend to go down over time. They're the couple who often will start to seek separation and divorce. It's a bit hard to estimate what the divorce rate is in Australia, but our best guess is that about 35% of marriages in Australia end in divorce. It's that group in the red line who are at risk for that.

So what we find if we look in Australia is that you have three different groups of outcomes. Almost everybody starts happy and somewhere in between 50 and 60% will stay together for the rest of their lives, will report that they're happy about that most of the time and on just about any index of health and well being that you mention, they are going to be better

off than the other group. In other words if you get married, you are in dire risk for happiness despite what the television tells you and that's important to bear in mind, there is good news about marriage. There is an interesting group of about 10% of couples who stay together despite being chronically miserable. I lived next door to one of those couples for about 4 years at one stage and it used to be horrendous the way they talked to each other and it went on and on and on. They're an interesting group in their own right and then there's the group that ultimately separate.

So what do we know about what differentiates those different groups. In our research, what we've tried to do is look at what I call risk factors, the things that make it more likely that things will go wrong, and resilience factors, the things that will help couples to sustain happy marriages in the long run.

Communication – we've done research where we've videoed couples who were engaged and planning to get married talking about things they disagreed about in their relationship. I have a group of long-suffering students at Griffith University who go into darkened rooms and watch videotapes of couples talking to each other for hundreds of hours. We score up the way they talk to each other and then we follow them for 5 years. What we've found was that the couples who were destined to be unhappy with more risk of separating talk to each other much more negatively than the couples who were destined to be happy. So there were difficulties in the communication that were evident before they got married. That predicted with a reasonable degree of precision how the outcomes would go. What was particularly interesting to us was that if we looked at how satisfied the couples said they were when they were engaged or how committed they were to their relationship at that point, the way they talked to each other didn't relate to that at all. In other words being poor at communication didn't stop them falling in love, it didn't stop them being committed to their relationship but what it did predict was that they were likely to have problems over the next 4 or 5 years.

In some more recent work what we've found is that particularly the people who have a lot of change in their lives and who have poor communication are at particularly high risk. If you have children, that changes your life. Whenever you go to a group of people and someone says: *'We're planning to have children, but it won't change our lifestyle'*, most of the parents go through this agonising thing, *'Should we let them know now or do you think we should just let them work it out?'* It changes your life, doesn't it? In many ways for the better but it's certainly a change. People who relocate geographically, people who have major changes in work responsibilities and who have poor communication find it tougher to negotiate. I've been interested in why some people early in their relationships have difficulties with communication. One of the places that you learn to talk to an intimate partner is with your parents when you're growing up as a kid. So we looked at the way in which couples communicated where there was a history of parental divorce and where there wasn't. What we found was those couples in which particularly the woman's parents had divorced, spoke more negatively to each other than couples where there was no history of parental divorce, the parents had stayed together and had more satisfying relationships.

One of the things that happen in a family that has conflict and divorce is that it doesn't provide the opportunity to learn these skills of intimacy, how to communicate and resolve conflict effectively. So one of the things we've done is designed programs to try to teach people those things.

The other area that I've been particularly interested in is working at your relationship, we call it **relationship self-regulation**. What we are really talking about is the extent to which each partner takes responsibility for making their marriage work, thinks about it and tries to do things to make the relationship better. That's a very important element in making relationships work well.

What I want to do now is turn to 5 things that you can't work on and then I'm going to talk about 5 things that you can work on that are suggested from our research. I'm going to focus on initially, **your partner's personality**. I was talking to a couple of colleagues who do quite a bit of work with couple therapy and we were telling therapists' stories as you do and one of the things that was striking to me was that almost every time when I ask couples that come in that have a problem in their relationship and I ask, "*What is the nature of your problem, why do you think your marriage is in trouble?*" they point at each other. It's the assumption that there's something intractably wrong with this person and if you just give my partner a personality bypass we'll have a much better marriage. This can become quite extreme. I saw a couple recently, the guy's name is Bill and he is in a high-powered professional job, Janet's been a Primary school teacher and is currently a stay-at-home Mum and they have three kids under five. They moved across from New Zealand to Brisbane about 6 months before they came to see me because there was a very special opportunity for Bill in his career. What they found was that their marriage was in serious trouble. When I asked Bill, he said: '*There's something wrong with Jane, you know. She's just not the woman I married. When I come home at the end of the day, sometimes she's still in her nightwear, the kids aren't ready, they're tired and grumpy, the meals haven't been done. She used to be such a competent person, what on earth has happened to her?*'

Janet had a slightly different perspective on the problem. She would describe how: '*When Bill and I first got together, we were equal, we were partners. We spoke to each other, supported each other, our relationship was the most important thing in our lives and we really put time into it. Now he's become a workaholic. He's focussed on himself, when he comes home at the end of the day he doesn't want to know about the kids he just picks, picks, picks about what's wrong. He has no understanding about what's going on*'. What was interesting to me about that particular scenario, is that it reflects a not uncommon pattern that I see with couples whose relationship is in difficulty. They assume that the problem is the other person and when you say it's her or it's him, you keep trying to get them to change. Bill would keep pointing out the 25 things that Janet hadn't done in the day that he thought she should, but for some reason she just didn't shape up. So eventually he gives up and because he gives up he doesn't work at the relationship and they get into this terrible downward spiral.

What seems to be important is to be able to recognise that these problems develop for a complex range of reasons. So imagine what it's like for Bill and Janet at the end of the afternoon or early evening, Bill comes home, Janet has been with three kids under five for the last 10 – 12 hours, one of them is still in nappies, all of them need to be entertained and looked after. What does she want when Bill walks through the door? She wants a break, she wants some rest, she needs someone to pick up the slack and give her the time to get out of her nightwear perhaps to wash her face, maybe to go to the loo because she just hasn't had the time to do it. Bill's working in a high-powered and pretty demanding job where people are constantly at him all day, every day. '*What do you think about this Bill? What should we do about this? Can you sign off on this Bill?*' He gets home at the end of the day after struggling through traffic and what does he want? He wants a break, he wants to go to his cave and play his guitar or watch telly or listen to

music, something like that. Their responses are perfectly understandable when you consider what they're going through. They've also moved away from family and friends, they don't have people to call on and talk to people about these things very easily. Yet, when they look at the problems, they think it's each other. So one suggestion is your partner's personality is not something that's easily changed, and it's probably not helpful to think about the problem in those terms.

A few other things that come up are **heavy drinking, use of drugs, gambling and violence**. Unfortunately, these problems are all too common in our culture. In a study that we've been doing with newlyweds that I mentioned previously, we found that about 20% of couples reported that in the first year of marriage there was at least one incident of pushing, slapping or shoving between the partners. It's a frightening statistic that it can happen that often amongst people early in their relationship. We also know that of all the couples that come along for couples counselling, in about 40% of occasions, the guy is drinking hazardous, harmful amounts of alcohol. So drinking and violence wreak enormous difficulty on relationships in Australia. Unfortunately, many people I see in therapy think that if they were just a better partner, if they just did something differently, then the other person would change. They take responsibility for their partner's behaviour and I think it's very important that we recognise there may be some small things we can do to influence people to try and get them to change or to seek help, often it's the drinker, the gambler, the violent person who needs to change. But by focussing on that and blaming yourself, that can often be a major problem for couples.

A lot of people focus on what has happened in the past in relationships and focus not so much on what they can do now. *Because he did that in the past, therefore there's nothing much that I can do.*

The last thing that I wanted to comment on is **when people do go for help with their relationships, often they leave it until very late. The chance of turning around problems in relationships seems to get worse the longer the problems have gone on.** It goes a bit like this – there's a phenomena I call the Hormonal Gloss. This is the initial phase of relationships when people have very unrealistic ideas about their partner. They think they won't snore, that they'll look attractive in the morning every time and that they are never grumpy. But then reality sets in and then people discover the fact that all human beings have failings. So that initial sort of overwhelming passion and unrealistic view generally fades. Some people when that happens think that means that's the end of the relationship.

One of the saddest cases that I ever saw was a guy Donald. He was 64 years of age. When he came to see me he was quite a wealthy man, he had a long history of something like 50 or 60 separate relationships that ranged between 6 and 12 months that he's had across his adult life. He described this pattern where he would meet someone new, fall hopelessly in love with them and think they were the one, this was his soul mate, this was the special person that he'd been looking for all his life. Then six months later he discovered that when they had a cold they were pretty grumpy and that they didn't look too good in the morning and they had a whole bunch of faults and then he noticed that there was someone else he'd met through work who was very attractive and actually was the perfect one and so he'd move to them. He came to me at 64 and said: *"I think I'm missing something here"*. Better late than never!

What he hadn't realised I think, was that **living with someone's faults is an important element of any sort of satisfying relationship and it requires effort**. If you make effort

then you sustain the passion and the commitment but if you don't make that effort, if you don't try to sustain the passion then the relationship starts to fail.

In Australia of all couples that divorce, about 20% will seek out some sort of counselling or therapy and almost all of those who do will do so when they are actively considering separating from the relationship. So as a couple therapist, I find that about 90% of the couples I see, at least one partner will say *"I'm not sure I want to be in this marriage any more"* at the time they're coming to therapy. What we know is that if we could get people to come earlier, it's much more helpful. One of the things that I've learnt is that I think it's important to focus early in the relationship and try and help people to build strengths. Another way of describing all this is there are some things that are unacceptable in a marriage. I don't think it's acceptable to be violent towards your partner, I don't think it's acceptable to gamble away the family's money in a way that seriously compromises the well-being of the family, but there's a whole lot of other things that irritate us and might cause us to have difficulty, and learning to accept the eccentricities of our partners is an important part of this.

I've been married for 26 years to Barb and the best decision I've ever made in my life was proposing to her. But she does have one irritating habit I have to say, maybe two, but this one I've been working on for a while. Barb is one of those people who, when we had children, she would carry out 7 cubic metres of stuff for the kids, which is very important, like nappy change stuff, drinks, food, entertainment all those kinds of things and I think it was around that time that she sort of got perhaps a bit addicted to stuff. So when we're going out there's a lot of stuff. When she goes to work she carries 2 or 3 bags of stuff. Now if ever you need anything in her collection of stuff, it's very handy. We all use her tissues or her moisturiser; she's the one with the sunscreen lotion. When she comes home, one of her interesting eccentricities is that she will find any horizontal surface and she will put her stuff there.

I'm the cook much of the time in our house and one of the things that used to really irritate me was that I'd cook the dinner and go to set the table and I'd have to move her stuff. Barb's stuff was always there. So I would say: *Barb, do you think that rather than leaving your stuff on the table, could you maybe take your stuff down the other end of the house and put it somewhere so that I don't always have to move it?* She would nod and vaguely agree and the next day the stuff would be there again. This used to drive me nuts and for 25 years I tried all sorts of things to get her to move the stuff and put it somewhere else. All of a sudden after 25 years of marriage (I'm a slow learner), I had this flashing insight – if the worst fault that you can find in someone after a quarter of a century of living together is that they put their stuff in the wrong place sometimes, you're not doing too bad.

Now that sort of thing amuses me, it's just one of those things, it's part of the package deal, if you're going to be with Barb then there's going to be a lot of stuff on the table. But it's interesting how often that process of things that really used to bug you can become trivial or unimportant. I've seen that a lot. Another example, I've seen a couple recently and Nick was constantly under pressure to go with Lois to the gym. Lois thought she'd gotten overweight since having the kids and she wanted to get back in shape, but she felt awkward going in front of the others by herself, so she wanted to have him go with her as moral support. Nick did shiftwork and sometimes just didn't like the idea of gyms, but the idea of going to the gym after a late night shift was not very attractive, so he'd always say that they'll do it, but they never actually got around to doing it. So they used to fight really badly about this. When I was talking to them about this, I asked her what was important about Nick going to the gym with her, she interpreted the message that he wouldn't go to

the gym with her as meaning he didn't really care about the way she looked, wasn't terribly interested in her as a person, wasn't really interested in working with her. So I made sure that Nick heard that and asked him to go away and reflect on what he might do that would help her to understand that he really did care about her in ways that were important.

He started thinking about that creatively and put some effort in and what he did was he brought home flowers a couple of times, arranged a dinner and organised babysitting for the younger kids. Two weeks later, Lois came in and she said: 'You know I was thinking I might go to the gym with Amanda, I think that would work fine'. There was no attempt any more to get Nick to go to the gym and it all disappeared. I think what was interesting, her acceptance of Nick not wanting to go to the gym worked much better because there was affection and positivity coming to her in the relationship. That's one of the messages I want to get to. **Your expression of affection, your initiation of adventure and fun in your relationship, the way that you communicate with your partner, how effective you are at supporting your partner with things that are important to them and the way that you manage other stresses in your life, all of those things are things that you can change.**

In other words, if you concentrate on your own contribution rather than your partner's, you are much more likely to make a difference. Let's consider these two – your expression of affection and your initiation of fun and adventure.

(Video presentation) *Early in our relationship, one of the things that we really both loved about each other were the little acts of kindness that we used to do for each other. He would wash the windows or clean out the vacuum cleaner and I would send him letters in the mail or tape his favourite TV show, things like that. Then as life got busy with the kids and the business we just stopped doing it as much because we had less time for everything. A couple of years ago we noticed the spark had gone out of our relationship a bit. To keep love alive all couples need to show love on a regular basis. There are different things that show caring for different people. For some people it might be getting a back rub is attention, for others it might be watching TV together and for others, going out on a special dinner. It really depends on your partner and what they prefer. You need to experiment and find out what works for your partner and of course different things will work differently at different times. If you're feeling tired, going out might not appeal, but having a quiet night together might. Therapist: Is there any special way that you showed your partner that you cared, little things that you did? Husband: Yeah, I initially sent her some email messages and cards and flowers and things like that and told her I loved her. Wife: I would put little notes in his lunch box. Husband: Little presents or phone calls during the day to say hi and how are you going. Wife: A surprise weekend away where one partner organises everything, which is great.*

Keeping novelty in your relationship is also important. Bringing home flowers is a lovely thing to do, but bringing home flowers on a Friday night year in year out can lose its special effect. To show real caring, you need to think of new ways to show caring. Some people have trouble coming up with ideas of showing caring. If you feel stuck, watch what other couples do or ask your friends for ideas. Trying new ways of showing caring shows your partner that you are thinking about them. Caring does not have to be big on effort or expensive. Some people think that caring means giving expensive gifts, but it's the small things that can often count. There are many things you can do to ensure your caring is meaningful. First, you can ask each other what acts of caring you'd like; second, if you like you can make lists and swap them with each other. Finally, when you do something new, you can check with your partner how effective it was and ask them for feedback.

That segment of video comes from a program called '*Couple Care*', which colleagues of mine and I developed it at Griffith University. We've now had something like 300 couples do our 'Couple Care' program and we are now up to our 4 year follow-ups with the couples going through the program. One of the things it tries to focus on is just giving some simple practical advice to help people be creative about the positive things they can do in their relationship. As was suggested in that brief segment of video, different things work for different people and part of it is being creative. What you do as a couple when you're first getting together and what you do when you're middle-aged are quite different. I wasn't a bad squash player when we got married but marriage seems to have ruined my squash over the last 25 years and I'm not quite as quick around the court as I was. One of the things that we suggest to people is to keep reinventing the relationship, to find new things that you enjoy doing together. There needs to be a balance of activities, things that you might pursue as an individual, things you might do as a couple and things you do as a family and things you do with friends. Thinking about the balance of right is important; some people find that if they do everything together as a couple then it can get kind of dull. On the other hand if they focus too much on individual activities, they don't have enough quality time together.

New things seem to be important – different things that you can both enjoy and we need to allow for some spontaneous as well as some planned activities. I suggest that one of the things if you want a quality relationship is to focus on making sure you're making your contribution with the right level of fun and adventure.

One of the things that psychologists have done for a long time, and I want to apologise on behalf of my entire profession for this, is to try and teach people to talk in particular ways. Some of you may have had the rather unfortunate experience to say: '*When you do x I feel y*'. There was a coal miner from Townsville who pointed out to me very clearly one day, he said: '*Real people don't talk like that mate*'. He was right. What we did work out when we had a look at what real people do say, and particularly the ones who communicate well, is that there is a couple of key things that people do to constitute effective communication. One is, **choose the right time and place if you're going to talk about something difficult. Without wishing to be too obvious, ladies, if the State of Origin is on, that is not the right time to raise your concerns about the lack of engagement in parenting. There are other times that are better. For the gentlemen, the fact that you're staring in the general direction of the person and awake, does not constitute active listening.** What is helpful is you need to be able to communicate in ways that show that you really are interested in what the other person has to say. I've worked with a lot of guys who've said, as they put their head back and rolled their eyes heavenward and said '*I'm listening*'. You may be hearing, but you're not listening because the person you are talking to is not persuaded.

There are a number of different sorts of elements to support. Here's one thing that guys often find really difficult. It took me 20 years. There are 2 important different sorts of support. Emotion focus support is basically when you want to have a bit of a whinge, talk about something that's worrying you and you just want the other person to listen. Women are often quite good at this, blokes don't get it. Often the woman comes home and says '*I'm having trouble with the boss at work, he's really doing this and that and*' The guy says '*Well what you need to do love.....*' Finally, my wife has trained me. She does not want me to solve the problem, I'm just supposed to listen.

One of the interesting learning experiences I've had was when we ran some focus groups with women who had recently had breast cancer and their partners and asked them what were the things that they found most difficult. When we spoke to the guys alone, one of

the things they said was: *'Whenever I spoke to her about it in the early stages just after she'd been diagnosed, she would start crying. I figured I was doing something wrong and upsetting her so I changed the topic and tried to cheer her up and tell her that it would be alright'*. The women would say when they were alone: *'It was really weird, he didn't want to talk about it, whenever I started to talk about it he would change the topic tell me it would all be fine and suggest we go to the movies'*. I didn't understand that. When we probed a bit more, what the guys were saying was: *'I can't solve the problem, I can't make the cancer go away, therefore I have nothing to contribute, there's nothing that I have to offer'*. What the women were saying was: *'You've got an enormous amount to offer, listen to me, hold my hand, be with me at this difficult time, that's what I'm after'*. If you're not sure about what sort of support your partner is after, ask: *'Do you want some suggestions or do you just want me to listen? If so, that's what I'll do'*.

To finish I'd like to talk about stress management and the ability of individuals to cope with stress. It does seem that the better individuals can cope with the demands in their lives, the better they are as partners. So the final suggestion of the things that you can work on is how you can manage your own stress.

To briefly summarise: **The things that I think you can work on to make a difference - Attention to the expression of affection to your partner, initiating fun and adventure for both of you, attending to your own communication, how you support your partner and how you can give the right sort of support and how you manage stress.**