

What New and Happy Couples can Gain from Relationship Counselling

Are you living that loved-up, argument-free life with your partner?

It could be the best time to get couples counselling.

"It's not about looking for trouble," explains Relationships Australia NSW CEO and clinical psychologist Elisabeth Shaw.

"But particularly if people are thinking about taking a next step — say, moving in together — an expert can help you identify things that might come up."

And she says couples in their early 20s aren't utilising therapy as much as other age groups.

Despite this, they have just as much to gain, even when in a relatively new and happy relationship.

She says even when we think we're good at communicating, we could be overlooking some trickier topics like money, family and religion.

Holly, 29, saw a couples counsellor with husband Greg before they got married eight years ago. She says it's helped them throughout their relationship.

We spoke to Holly, as well as experts, to find out why therapy might be beneficial even when things are going smoothly.

Why counselling isn't the 'kiss of death'

A stigma around counselling being a "sign of doom" means a lot of people don't consider it until they're in crisis mode, says Ms Shaw.

"If only people saw it as the way to not get into real strife! I've had many people say, 'Gee, I wish we had come earlier.'

"People put it off, and when you're an adult most of us see autonomy as the prize; the very idea we have to ask for help can in itself feel challenging."

Melissa Ferrari is a psychotherapist and counsellor in Sydney and says counselling should not be seen as the final "hail Mary".

"Like most tough challenges in life, the earlier you seek help the more likely counselling will be successful."

'We don't have problems, so what would we talk about?'

Holly says before counselling, she and Greg didn't manage conflict well.(Supplied)

For Holly and Greg, seeking premarital counselling was about getting on the same page and building strategies should issues arise.

"We got married at 21 and we'd been together since I was 17," Holly says.

"It was kind of just the done thing. I go to church and a lot of people in that community just did pre-marriage counselling."

She says before the sessions, she and Greg didn't handle conflict as well as they would have liked.

"We are both very non-confrontational, so we didn't have any strategies to address issues when they came up.

"We just wouldn't talk to each other for extended periods of time."

Holly says the sessions helped them build techniques for resolving conflict.

"I learnt really practical stuff that I still lean on all the time. It also helps with the expectations side of things."

Setting expectations from the start

Ms Shaw says setting expectations is helpful for new couples and can nip issues in the bud before they become harder to work through.

"I have seen many couples who've had expectations about how the relationship will turn out over time that they've never discussed. They thought the commitment would correct it.

"I've had couples further down the track say to me, 'Well, when we got married I just assumed you would stop seeing your friends so much, or stop drinking, or become more responsible with money.'"

Ms Ferrari says small things, like not putting the cap back on the toothpaste might seem OK now, but over time can begin to grate on us if the behaviour doesn't change.

She says counselling can help you address those more minor issues, as well as big life decisions such as whether to have kids, where to live, how big of a mortgage you will have.

"They can become significant issues if you are not on the same page."

How scheduling check-ups can help you down the track

Holly says introducing counselling into her relationship early on made it easier to seek help when they needed it.

"In our first year of marriage we were really struggling ... [so] we went back."

Ms Shaw says couples that have been to counselling in the past are more likely to reach out for help in the future.

"They see it as a healthy practice."

If there are no pressing matters to address, Ms Ferrari recommends scheduling an annual check-up.

"We do it for our physical health, our car, even our air-conditioning at home, so why not check in with a qualified professional for your relationship once a year?" she says.

"It will help unearth things that you need to be thinking of well in advance of those big life decisions you will make, such as kids, homes and careers."

A private counselling session start from \$198, unless covered by your EAP.

Ms Ferrari says if you can have tough conversations and support each other, you'll be better placed to make life's big calls together.