

Transcript Talking Therapies Episode 30:

Is it time to breakup?

Suzy:

Hello and welcome to talking therapies, a podcast made together with Psychologies magazine and the UK Council for psychotherapy, or UKCP for short. I'm Suzie Walker, and I'm the Editor and Chief at Psychologies. Each month on Talking Therapies, we will be talking to a UKCP therapist about a range of topics. Figuring out when your relationship has come to an end isn't always easy. And in this episode, we are going to be unpacking the questioning that often arises to the surface when the end is looming.

Suzanne:

Obviously both people in the partnership are individuals. But what brings pain and opens up vulnerability can also build resilience, which you can also take into your next relationship.

Suzy:

That was UKCP psychotherapist Suzanne Worrica. Suzanne previously spent 15 years working in the mental health field before retraining as a psychotherapist. Her specialisms include childhood trauma, relationship dynamics and managing anxiety. In a study of 20,980 people in a relationship, 18% of UK couples admitted to arguing regularly or considering separation. When a relationship breaks down, it can be because of a number of reasons, many unsure if the conflict can be resolved. In this episode, UKCP's CEO Sarah Niblock will be chatting to UKCP psychotherapist Suzanne Worrica about relationships and how to recognise the end.

Sarah:

Suzanne, can we start with you telling us how you can recognise whether your relationship may be coming to an end.

Suzanne:

I think the first thing to acknowledge is that intuitively, one or the other of you in a partnership might know that your relationship is coming to an end. But it's difficult to face or own that ending. Partly the feelings are so painful around it, even if it is a mutual decision. And what maintains a relationship, the glue, if you like, is the strength and the quality of the bond, the attachment, how strong your commitment is to each other, how close you feel. And closeness can also mean how safe you feel in being close and being independent as well. And also, how intimate you feel with each other. Do you really know your partner on a deep level? Do you know their fears, their concerns, their desires? And that also includes sex, and sex is important to relationship, but it's not the be all and end all for some. I think one of the things that can destroy a couple or can signal that the relationship is coming to an end is where there's high conflict, there's a lot of conflict and repetitive conflict, it can be a real red flag. And, when you're having that argument that always feels the same. And you can't work out why it's always the same and you're stuck in it. It can really erode the quality of trust and security that you feel with each other. Normally, there's underlying issues there, so it could be around power and control, who you feel has the most power in your relationship, your closeness and trust, and also the respect that you have for your partner.

So, the arguments might be, what you might call kitchen sink argument, around money or sex, how much you have or don't have, children, how you parent, whether you want children and most recently, around the boundaries when you're working from home. But the underlying need for connection is always the same, those real needs and what you are really trying to communicate to your partner. So, for example, let's say a woman is constantly criticising her partner for not sharing the chores, I think that's quite familiar, probably to a lot of couples. But what she really might be trying to say is that she's hurt, that he doesn't value her and appreciate her, and then he in turn might feel inadequate, and instead of talking to her about it, he clams up and withdraws.

Sarah:

I'm wondering as you're speaking, this becomes so much an everyday life situation, doesn't it? And I just wonder whether in your experience, do people find it hard to recognise the signs that their relationship might be in jeopardy?

Suzanne:

I think it can be hard to recognize the signs because actually, partners may not want to end the relationship, they might want to bury their head in the sand about it and not face it. And you know, in particular, if you have children, you may not want to break up the family home. Or if, in some cultures, you're not just married to the partner, you're married to the family as well, so there might be a lot of shame and taboo in separating or beginning the process of separating. So I think that can be one of the reasons why people don't want to look at the signals. And I think there's quite a lot of other reasons, underlying reasons why people might think that their relationship is at end and that includes that one or both of those partners feel unloved, that they don't express enough appreciation or affection for each other and that leaves them feeling uncared for. You know, an appreciation doesn't have to be a grand gesture, it could be putting a meal on the table or being thankful for the way that your partner dealt with a situation. It could be something really small, but it helps your partner to feel appreciated and increases the bond between you.

Sarah:

Just in general, can someone stay in a relationship too long?

Suzanne:

I do hear people say that they wish they'd left their relationship sooner. But actually, when they were in the relationship, it might have been difficult to see what was wrong. Intuitively you might have a feeling that something's not quite right. But you're willing to put up with things like bad behaviour or it feels like you're stuck in this relationship because of family, your family want you to stay in there, or you've got kids. And also because of your own needs, you might say to yourself, 'I'd rather get some of my needs met than be alone, I'd rather get some kind of affection than be left alone and abandoned.' And actually, sometimes we've got no relationship to compare to because we've been in a relationship that long, or we haven't had relationships that we can look up to in our families of origin. So sometimes we stay too long because actually, we don't know anything different. And sometimes, a partner can hope and expect that their partner will change. So they might say, 'okay, she's not quite right now, but in the future, she might treat me differently, she might treat me with more affection' or 'she might love me more.' You're expecting that person to change in the future, when actually, it's more important to look at how they're behaving now, because that tells you what you need to know about what's going on in your relationship now, rather than hoping that something will be different in the future.

I mean, having said this, the pandemic has led people to make different and bold decisions about their relationship that they might not have made before. Living together under lockdown has really heightened feelings and emotions. I think people have seen their relationships in a different light and are not willing to put up with what they put up with before. And also recognising that actually, it's more important to leave the relationship and live the life that we want to, rather than stay in it and feel dissatisfied.

Sarah:

I was going to say we're much more aware of our own mortality, aren't we, and the fact that our lives are relative short. And yes, I hear this that people are saying, 'well, now life is for me, I need to achieve my goals and ambitions,' in ways that perhaps they might have just sublimated previously before lockdown.

Suzanne:

Yeah, exactly. I think it's really shone a light on what we really want from our lives. I also think that underlying anxiety that people might have held is dissipating. People are thinking, 'well, look, the worst has happened and I've survived and actually, I now want to thrive and I want to go and achieve my own goals and my own ambitions, that maybe my partner wasn't really invested in as much as I am.'

Sarah:

But it's so difficult, isn't it? We're living in times where many people will be absolutely financially hamstrung and will not have the freedom to be able to go and branch out of relationships that they feel have run their course. You don't have to talk about your clients for confidentiality reasons, but is that often a factor that's preventing people from taking the next and necessary step?

Suzanne:

I think that's a valid point and it is a real reason why people will stay in the relationship and put up with difficulties and challenges and bad behaviour because in some relationships, there is a power differential. We're talking about all sorts of couples here, we're talking about intercultural couples, we're talking about heterosexual couples, same sex couples, couples with different religions and power differentials operate in all of those different couples. One of the partners in a couple might be the one who earns the most money and so it might be still, even in the modern relationship, it might be difficult to get away.

Sarah:

Another thing that people often say, when relationships are on the rocks, is that it's like history is repeating itself. It's happened to them before and now it's happening again. How can you identify if you're bringing your past into relationship conflicts?

Suzanne:

I heard this term from relationship therapist, Esther Perel. She talks about the emotional dowry that we bring to relationships, that contains all the fears, the anticipations and the expectations and your emotional injuries that you bring from your past relationships and what you learned in your family of origin. What I mean by that is that the patterns that you see when you are a child and you are being raised by your caregivers. What kinds of relationships did you see between your parents, or between grandparents or uncles and aunts, for example? You bring those to your relationships, your new relationships. You also bring patterns that become entrenched from your old relationships, old romantic relationships. And these hurts and experiences can get triggered and reenacted when you're in conflict with your partner and they can become really fixed patterns of how you do conflict.

So for example, a historical trigger might be a woman who gets angry when her partner is sarcastic. She's reminded of her elder brother who used to humiliate her when she was a kid. When you're in conflict with your partner, and you no longer see them, but instead you see somebody in your family of origin, who made you feel small or unloved or who criticised you. When you see your partner in that way, you no longer see them and you no longer feel empathy for them, it's really hard to stand in their shoes and remember that's the person that you love. You're really with yourself and your old hurts and your old feelings of betrayal and anger, and you feel at that moment really distanced from your partner. And that's when it's really important to be able to take a step back and think to yourself, 'am I reacting from a past hurt? Or am I reacting in the now to this argument that's happening right in front of me?'

Sarah:

And this is why, when I speak to psychotherapists, they repeatedly say that in order to have a good relationship with someone else, whether it's a partner or a child or a co-worker, you have to understand yourself, you've got to be in a good relationship with yourself. And I guess that's one of the ways isn't it? It's having the ability to recognise those repeated triggers that lead to those repeated behaviours, I guess?

Suzanne:

Yes, I think it's really important to be able to come back to yourself in conflict, it's not an easy thing to do. It really requires you noticing what you're doing and being self-aware. And this is at the same time when your body is reacting in anger and actually your body is slightly ahead of your rational thinking. Your body is reacting first before your brain is saying, 'look, this is what's happening again, I'm being triggered.' But if you can catch yourself just before that moment, and take a step back and take timeout, then you're already winning. And I think it's right you come back to yourself first and your relationship with yourself so that you understand your triggers and what takes you back into the past, takes you back into your family of origin, so that you are aware, not just how you think and bring and reenact those past situations, but also what your body is doing. Check in with yourself. Is my heart rate going up? Am I breathing more shallowly? Is my breathing becoming more rapid? And that's when you know, 'okay, stop, I need to stop here and take a step back.'

Sarah:

I know that, Suzanne, you're talking about your body there and I know that you work in quite multifaceted ways. We've talked a lot about verbal communication but tell me more about how our bodies play a part in how we communicate. You've mentioned recognising those almost physical feelings of stress or anger. Are there any other ways that you focus on in your work?

Suzanne:

Picking up from what you just said, when we are in distress, particularly in conflict, we do send nonverbal cues to each other. On the outside, you may be looking a certain way. Inside, your breathing is changing. You might be going red in the face, particularly if you're feeling shame or if you're feeling angry. And at those moments, you're not able to tune in with each other and regulate each other. Or if you like, calm each other down, you're both triggered into a physiological response. That means you either want to fight or you want to take flight, you want to run away and in couples, sometimes that is what happens. One person will take flight, they will withdraw and go silent, and the other partner will want to fight and so they will pursue the person who is withdrawing. In conflict that's what I'm talking about when I mean that your body send signals to each other. The way I work is, as you say, I'm Gestalt trained, so that's really an experiential model that encourages the client to stay in the moment, the here-and-now moment. So for example, if a client is talking about an incident that is quite traumatic, but they're not talking about with any kind of emotion, I might pause the session and ask them to check in with how they are feeling.

And sometimes people will notice, 'oh my breath has changed,' 'my chest is tightening,' 'I've got a knot in my stomach.' And that may be the first time that they have actually connected their words with what they're feeling inside. And for me, your body and mind, they're not separate. I take a very holistic view of what is happening between your body, your brain and your mind and now we know more about how neurosciences is backing up the body, brain, mind connection. I really enjoy it when I see a client takes a real curiosity and interest in what's going on inside their body. Then they can, outside of the therapy room, go and gain more self-awareness and more mastery over what's happening inside their bodies and how it's connected to their words and feelings.

Sarah:

It's so good to hear you say that because I think that also highlights the fact that so much of the work of therapy goes on between the therapeutic sessions. People think once those 50 minutes in conversation with a therapist, and that's where it will happen, but what you're showing is actually it's the work that goes on in between that's incredibly powerful. I just wanted to, because people inevitably will be listening to this and will be thinking 'it's just too late, it's too far gone now.' I wondered, is it ever too late to re-enter your relationship when you think all is lost?

Suzanne:

I believe that there is always hope, if there is willing on both sides. The breaking point for each member of the couple might be different. They might have had years of conflict or actually years of avoiding conflict and so they might feel we've had enough. It really depends on what the deal breaker is for each partner and I'd really encourage people to talk to each other and take it really really slowly. Communicating what you really need and want in a relationship may not work, so you don't have to make promises to each other. In the way that we are starting to reconfigure our lives in this so called 'new normal,' we have a chance to look again at what's important in our relationships, and we can really ask our partner, 'can we rebuild this? Is there a bit of hope, something to rebuild a new foundation? Are you really going to be there when I need you? Or are we done? Are you able to hold my grief?' Especially as some people have really lost, there's been a lot of loss in this pandemic, so these are important questions that couples need to ask each other. And also, it's about... can couples forget those small issues that don't seem important anymore? Can they reconnect with each other in a new way? And most importantly, can couples communicate with each other? Because that is really the number one way of how you can reset your relationship and be in your relationship. You can't really have a secure or bonded relationship without communication.

Sarah:

I wanted to ask you how psychotherapy can help an individual or a couple understand their attachment or their relationship patterns that you've described so well?

Suzanne:

A therapist has many roles and they can be an interested and non-judgmental guide or a resource or a mediator and facilitator. Really, it's about how they can help you and support you to shine a light on the intricacies of your relationship to yourself, as well as to your partner and with the other systems that you interact with. It could be your work system, school system, all of those external systems that we value and interact within the outside world. Therapy can really help you to make sense of your attachment patterns,

what hurts and what behaviours that you're bringing into your current relationship and relationships with others, so that you can choose to do things differently and ultimately have more fulfilling relationships. We can also explore 'why might I be behaving in this way? And what's the fear that stops me from fully entering into relationship? Where might it coming from?' And in terms of couple relationships, psychotherapy might help you to re-engage in your relationship or to discuss whether staying in it is the best option and you might decide that you want to separate, with the help of a psychotherapist.

Sarah:

Yeah, I mean, I've spoken to other psychotherapists about the end of relationships and they're all emphatic that you really do need someone there beside you through that, and that's not something to necessarily take on on your own. Particularly obviously, if there's children and others involved. Can there be any positives in ending? People tend to talk about our language around relationships ending or if a relationship's failed or broken down, it's almost like a tragedy. But can it ever be a positive thing?

Suzanne:

With time and space, I think it can be really useful to look back and see what lessons you might have learned from it in that time between separating. Whoever decides to separate it's always painful and full of difficult feelings, including shame and guilt, and anger and for some people that stays for quite a long time. If you're able to, with space and time, look back and reflect, you might be able to learn something that you can take into your future relationships, whether it's positive, or as you say negative. And then there are couples who become friends, particularly if there's children involved, they might form a new relationship around co-parenting. Obviously, both people in the partnership are individuals, but what brings pain and opens up vulnerability can also build resilience, which you can also take into your next relationship. And being single or being separated there is more time to focus on the things that you want to do, the things that you want to achieve, on feeling independent and spending more time with the people that you want to spend time with, your family and friends for example. So for me, there's always a positive and there's always hope.

Sarah:

I think it's a lovely place to end this conversation. I've learned so much and I really enjoy talking to you because there's something about the way you don't just focus on the couple and each individual party, but you also look at them in the context of their whole lives, you're looking much more systemically out at where they work and how they live. And also, I think you've really shown the value in psychotherapy and helping us to understand how our histories also impact on our present and our future and how we can work to address those and hopefully create, as you say, a more resilient and positive future with the person we're with or perhaps on our own. But I think it's a really positive and hopeful message that you bring Suzanne, so thank you very much indeed for that.

Suzy:

That was UKCP psychotherapist Suzanne Worrice speaking to Sarah Niblock, the CEO of the UK Council for Psychotherapy. If after listening to that, you feel you could benefit from some talking time with a psychotherapist, then go to the Find a Therapist section of the UKCP website and have a look through. The website address is www.psychology.org.uk and look for the Find a Therapist tab. We'll also be discussing breakups in Psychologies magazine this month, or you can find it online at www.psychologies.co.uk. We'll be doing a podcast each month with some of the UKCP psychotherapists, so remember to like and subscribe to our channel to hear it first. It also helps others to find us too. So join us again next month. Till then thank you for listening and take good care of yourselves