

BY STACEY MILLICHAMP



CAN YOUR RELATIONSHIP SURVIVE THERAPY?

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Many people who arrive in my consultation room are there because they are struggling with a key relationship. This might be with children, parents, siblings or friends but, more often than not, it's with a partner or spouse. In the initial few sessions, clients will refer to these challenges, yet also be protective of those closest to them. Relationship pain, anger and confusion are expressed, whilst simultaneously defending the relationship against any potential criticism that might arise during therapy. Why is it that we find it so frightening to explore one of the most challenging parts of our lives, that of our interpersonal connections and attachments; namely, love?

The human psyche is filled with polarities and, therefore, conflicts. Our need to individuate and become strongly outlined within our own uniqueness competes with our need to belong. Perhaps you feel there is a lone wolf inside of you that conflicts with the familial, tribal part of you that hopes to fit in, to be protected and loved. As children, most of us learn that to belong we must conform, and adhere to the rules of the tribe we grow up in. Those rules can be passed on to romantic relationships and the new family tribes that we create. Even though we hope that we won't continue old patterns of behaviour, our childhood rules have an eccentric way of worming their way into the systemic tunnels

of our adult lives creating feelings of disappointment and dissatisfaction in our current relationships.

Therapy can help to untangle the ghosts of our pasts from the reality of the present, yet often we are afraid that entering therapy will threaten our relationships if we look too deeply at our true feelings. In order to create a new tribe with our partners, we are likely to have compromised and parked complaints along the way, because relationships require an ability to understand and negotiate other people's needs. But what do we do with the stockpile of unspoken me-ness; the things that we have not said or done in order to keep the peace? This stockpile is what brings so many people into therapy, particularly when our loved ones behave in ways we do not like, despite the compromises we have made for them. In other words; "I've done what I thought I had to in order to be loved and protected, why haven't you repaid me by being who I wanted you to be?"

Herein lies the crux of the matter; when does our capacity to compromise for a loved one become a desire to control them? As we enter therapy and begin to explore our secret stash of unspoken feelings, we unearth the voice of a more authentic self, which we often fear will push our partners away. As a partnership progresses, the psyche often mobilises an internal police force to keep our grumbling voices at bay, censoring what we say and do, to ensure that our partner continues to accept us. Our inherited tribal set of rules of what is appropriate behaviour controls the surface of our lives, whilst our hidden unconscious stirs up a revolution to challenge and potentially overthrow the rule-bound status quo. The very same rules we have laid down for ourselves

in order to be loveable can begin to trap us and alienate us from the person we are with. We feel misunderstood and imagine that it is they who are the cause of the frustration and disappointment that we feel inside. War begins internally, until our unexpressed thoughts and feelings inevitably spill out into the relationship; blaming our partner for not understanding what we need, punishing them by withholding intimacy and creating distance until there is a chasm where there used to be closeness.

To unpick this domino effect in therapy, we must embrace our own complexities and end the internal warfare. We need to listen to the parts of ourselves we fear will not be acceptable to our partners; the places where we compromise too much, hide our voices, and give way too many times. That may create waves in any significant relationship, but without excavating the bones we have buried away from the eyes and ears of those we love, we risk losing them eventually through feeling that they don't really know us, simply because we haven't given them the chance to. Being fully ourselves with a partner will always be a risk, because we open to the unknown which we can't control. But it is a far greater risk to continue hiding what we believe is unacceptable and unloveable, leaving us feeling unknown and lonely. If we make ourselves vulnerable, let down our defences and venture into unknown territory with the people we love, there are no guarantees except that the outcome will be more authentic than fraudulent. Ultimately, both the need to belong and to be freely ourselves can co-exist, rather than waging war with each other. Perhaps feeling truly loved and belonging with someone has to include the sense of being known by them, rather than hiding our true selves for fear that we must sacrifice who we really are in order to be loved.

TV CLEANS UP ITS ACT ON MENTAL HEALTH



Mental health depictions in some of our best-loved TV soaps and dramas are becoming more authentic, prompting people to seek support, according to new report 'Making a drama out of a crisis' launched by **Time to Change**, the anti-stigma campaign run by **Mind and Rethink Mental Illness**. The report comes as *Coronation Street*, TV's longest running soap, is about to see popular character, Steve McDonald, coming to terms with being diagnosed with depression.

Mental health is being covered more frequently than ever in television shows, such as **EastEnders**, **Hollyoaks**, **Home and Away** through to US dramas including **Orange Is The New Black** and **Homeland**. Research shows that narrative is now more focused on the damaging stigma someone with a mental health problem faces and the harmful effects of exclusion.

Coronation Street Producer, Stuart Blackburn reveals: "I've told the writers that Steve's DNA hasn't changed. His head might be taking a battering at the moment, but he still has the same wit. We've got to find a way to tell the truth about this, warts and all, AND entertain the audience - we won't get through to them if they're turning off." Last month's Mind Media Awards celebrated the best examples of reporting and portrayal of mental health across print, broadcast and digital media. BAFTA winning screenwriter and judge **Peter Moffat** said: "Drama can make a huge difference in the struggle to get people thinking about mental health properly and without prejudice. It doesn't need to be polemical or campaigning, it only needs to be truthful. *Homeland* has set the standard for complex and honest writing about mental health and we all need to follow its lead."

Director of Time to Change, Sue Baker concludes, "The media have the ability to shape and form public opinion. Through their work, writers have the ability to breakdown stigma and discrimination through exploring issues and bringing them right into the nation's living rooms."

See www.time-to-change.org.uk for more information.