

SOS Détresse

Partners in crisis - Love in distress

« My own needs are unimportant in our relationship.

I'm living in a (gilded) cage.

In our relationship, we're constantly rowing and hurting each other's feelings.

Jealousy is destroying our relationship.

My relationship is making me ill!

I'm not sure my relationship still has a future.

My partner doesn't understand me and isn't caring towards me.

There's a communications blackout between us, we've nothing to say to each other.

I can't cope, and my partner isn't supportive.

We live in different worlds.

We've nothing in common any more.

I always feel in a towering rage against my partner.

My partner always seems to ignore me.

We haven't had sex for a long time. »

All couple relationships experience crises. Even at the beginning of the relationship, when love is still very strong, disputes and disagreements are not at all uncommon; not to mention those relationship crises which cause one partner or both to consider separating.

Couples may go through a stormy period for various reasons. **A change in their circumstances**, for example, may over time cause a couple to grow apart, not only because each partner may have different ideas and goals, but also because each individual reacts differently to major change. A crisis situation may develop when a

couple feels that their life together is being **increasingly dictated by external circumstances**. There is less and less scope for autonomous strengthening of the relationship and the way it is lived.

Such external circumstances may include:

- Financial constraints, poverty, lack of job security,
- One partner's serious illness and/or need for care,
- Death or serious illness requiring care of a child or of one or both parents,
- The kind of job held, plus the labour market's demands in terms of performance, flexibility and 24/7 availability,
- Living apart within a long-distance relationship,
- Migration, unclear legal status, loss of homeland,
- And positive occasions such as the birth of a child, a promotion at work, taking retirement

Precisely during the hard times, we **often lack the strength and ability to focus on our partner and give due consideration to his or her needs**.

A crisis may also arise when there is no longer any change at all, when living together has slipped into a largely bored and boring routine, because there is insufficient love, vitality and intimacy in the couple's relationship. Unfaithfulness will then be the clearest and most hurtful indication that the couple is in crisis. Sometimes **unspoken conflicts - tensions that over the years have become unbearable** - are what spark off the crisis. Individual needs have probably been neglected over time, and even consciously set aside in favour of maintaining a degree of harmony between the couple. One of the two partners is not living for him or herself, but rather only for the other. There are times when **a crisis is inevitable** in order to be able to exit from a constricting and oppressive relationship.

Can a crisis be the means of changing course?

A crisis **clearly marks the point when an ongoing situation becomes intolerable**. It indicates that **something has changed, either for the couple or for one of the partners, which is going to require both of them to adjust their attitude, ideas, behaviour and above all the way they relate to each other**.

So it is **very important to face up to the crisis rather than try to evade it**. Crises demand a great deal of strength and persistent effort and at times the situation may seem hopeless. At the same time, however, it offers the couple **an opportunity for a fresh start**. If they succeed in overcoming the crisis together, they will both emerge strengthened from it, which can only have the effect of deepening their relationship. Such a crisis is a potential source of personal growth for each partner, since it compels us to improve self-knowledge and to give proper recognition to our own needs.

What we don't want...

Regardless of the causes of the crisis, a very likely consequence of it is the creation, at some stage, of a vicious circle. One of the partners may feel somehow ignored or

slighted, and will respond with irritability, accusations and reproaches. The other partner will perceive these accusations as wounding and unfair, and will either withdraw or counterattack. If, at this crucial point, we do not take the trouble to talk things over, there is a very great risk we will just go on hurting and belittling each other.

If a couple does not tackle the crisis or seek a frank discussion, the relationship may founder, thus leading to a parting of the ways. The break-up is very harrowing for all concerned, especially for any children the couple may have. Unnecessary damage may be done. In some cases, however, separation is a necessary step towards release from an intolerable situation.

When fight and disagreements become very violent, insults may be exchanged between partners and physical violence may occur. Violence within partnerships is unfortunately common. It destroys families, relationships and especially individuals. **If, in your relationship, you are on the receiving end of blows, kicks or insults, if you always feel dominated, humiliated and controlled by your partner, this is no longer a case of relationship crisis. This is a case of you and your partner needing help urgently!** The subject of violence and abuse calls for particular attention, and is therefore dealt with in a separate article.

In any case, whether continual quarrelling or constant underlying tension is involved, we can be worn down to the point of illness by the repeated failure of our attempts to resolve conflicts, or to avoid them. **Unresolved conflicts in relationships can lead to** our seeking escape in alcohol, succumbing to depression or suffering from psychosomatic disorders.

How can we get back on track?

Our ability as a couple to deal well with crises will depend on **how we communicate, how we respond to each other, and on our listening skills**. The reason why we start to grow apart is that we often lay the blame for our own unhappiness and discontent at our partner's door. We make our contentment depend on our partner's behaviour and on our expectations of that behaviour. As often as not, we cast reproaches and accusations at our partner, instead of **simply telling him or her what we want**.

One useful course of action could be to talk about your relationship with someone neutral, for example a good friend, who may know yourself and your partner well. Friends can help us to see things **from a different angle**, and can encourage us to have a frank discussion with our partner.

Maybe **a call to SOS Détresse** can help you think more clearly. Here, you will find an attentive and sympathetic listener to your problems. Together with our colleagues on the other end of the line, you can see what kind of help you might need and could consider seeking.

Many couples believe they ought to overcome each crisis on their own. This approach makes the task more complicated than it is, and **may endanger their mutual love**. In situations that are bogged down in deadlock, where solutions have

been attempted but have either failed or led to further escalation, where separation may seem to be the last resort, **couple counselling or couple therapy** may be most helpful. These can help the couple understand where in their relationship there are unfulfilled needs, where the stress factors lie, and what ways forward might be envisaged. Underlying some partnership conflicts and crises are personal life histories and learned relationship patterns. In such cases professional help in confronting these may be useful. Therapy can enable partners to work on improving their communication with each other, and so to restore the contact and intimacy they desire.

In the worst-case scenario, when it appears clear that the best solution for a couple is to terminate the relationship in a civil manner, professional assistance can play an important support role in helping them to maintain a respectful attitude to each other, and **to avoid engaging in offensive or hostile behaviour**. Therapeutic support can ease a separation and prevent unnecessary damage being done to those involved, in particular to their children.

In the best-case scenario, the couple will successfully steer through the storm to a safe haven, and **finally rediscover each other in a self-affirming and loving encounter**.