

SOS Détresse

Definitive break-up or temporary crisis?

Most couples go through crises, though without thinking immediately of separation. But if the relationship is characterised by arguments, conflicts and denigration or if one partner is subjected to constant aggression from the other, then at a certain point the idea of separating will obviously arise.

Most couples will occasionally feel that love has disappeared. Our partner is like a stranger, we feel nothing when we see them and they do not arouse any feeling of kindness or affection in us. We focus on what disturbs us and do not notice the contribution they still make to our happiness in spite of the difficulties between us. A harmonious relationship is something we take for granted without thinking about it. We are disappointed and we turn in upon ourselves, we create a distance, both externally and internally. Perhaps we are already looking for a person who is completely different, to whom we are more attracted and who would hold out the prospect of a new relationship. Perhaps we are even in love again.

A situation of this kind does not necessarily point already to a separation but these signs show that the relationship needs more attention if a break-up is to be avoided. Many people separate too quickly, others stay together too long and suffer more than is necessary. Sometimes a separation is needed to escape from an intolerable situation. Sometimes the relationship is blocked as a result of the difficulties encountered. But it could be saved and much suffering could be prevented if the partners both made an effort.

Should I stay or leave?

Should I stay or leave? This can be a very tricky question. People veer constantly from one option to the other. They are tormented by thoughts such as: Can I tell my partner of my decision? I don't want to hurt them. What is keeping me in this relationship? Will I find a new partner? We have many shared memories - can I nevertheless bring the relationship to an end? Will I miss something if I stay? Perhaps we are going through a bad patch and our situation will improve once work becomes less stressful or when the children leave home, when the house is finished, when we've been away on holiday together ...

The decision to leave usually also means leaving behind something very familiar,

abandoning life plans and a sense of security and heading for an uncertain future. The decision is difficult mainly because of the many fears that are usually associated with it: the fear of making a mistake, of loneliness, of not finding another partner. Fear about financial difficulties and not managing to combine work and bringing up the children also plays a major role after many years spent as part of a couple.

The wish to leave often hides the idea, the hope, that things will work better with our next partner and that we will find in a new relationship what is lacking from the current one. This hope frequently turns out to be an illusion. We are too quick to blame our partner for our unhappiness and for the difficulties in the relationship without seeing our own contribution. If we learn nothing from our current relationship, we risk falling again and again into the same traps.

Relationships must be nurtured

Every couple goes through periods when living together is difficult. Ultimately, many relationships break up because they are not sufficiently nurtured, because conflicts are avoided in the hope that everything will sort itself out again. And at the same time, once life as a couple becomes an accepted fact, we no longer invest in the relationship. But just as every individual evolves over time, our relationship evolves too; it must mature with us and remain dynamic. So the two partners must always take an active role to ensure that the relationship is kept alive. This feature of relationships also means that corrective steps can be taken if the relationship is no longer a happy one.

Believing in change - and accepting what cannot be changed

There are several ways of saving a relationship. For a relationship going through a profound crisis to have a chance of survival, both partners must believe that there is potential for change. Are both partners willing to start again from scratch and to make shared commitments?

Are they ready to change?

It is important not to plunge too deeply into discontent. This could be precisely the moment to examine the situation more closely and to fight to save the relationship. Overcoming a crisis requires mutual loyalty and a minimum of respect, dignity and commitment if our efforts are to be rewarded. A degree of generosity is essential so as to accept the other as they are. If we acknowledge that certain facts and character traits are unchangeable, then it will be easier for us to invest in the areas where improvement is possible.

There is hope for the relationship if both partners - despite the difficulties - continue

to have shared objectives in life and if the relationship allows them to achieve their own personal and realistic goals (for example, wanting to have a child, choosing a career, role-sharing between the man and the woman, maintaining contact with their families, etc.). It is very positive if the couple still shares the same sense of humour and can still laugh together: humour can be an important way of defusing conflicts. If it is still possible to make up after an argument and if the desire for closeness and intimacy persists, then there is undoubtedly still a chance of saving the relationship.

Recognising the warning signs

Although every relationship and every couple are different, there are clear signs when a relationship is in such deep crisis that the couple cannot overcome it alone:

We are no longer interested in the other person's life. We no longer share their daily joys and sorrows (for example, we don't listen any more) or we leave them alone with their problems. Thanking or praising our partner belongs to the past.

There are virtually no more interests or activities that we enjoy sharing. A couple that is breaking up avoids physical intimacy and sexual relations, so their love life no longer exists and they each even feel disgust at the other's approach. Or else boundaries are crossed, one partner imposes their sexual behaviour on the other, who does not want it.

An extreme imbalance between autonomy and dependence emerges. One of the partners has sacrificed themselves totally for the other, and to protect the couple's shared identity, has renounced their own. For the sake of harmony and to keep the relationship going they have pushed their own needs into the background.

There is no consensus on the fundamental values and the important goals of life. There is no hope of achieving these life goals with one's partner or of living out important personal values and ideals.

There is no loyalty between partners: they are no longer partners but badmouth each other to other people (friends, family, etc.) or make them look ridiculous in front of others. Confidence fades. The couple and the relationship no longer occupy an equal place alongside other areas of life but are always pushed into the background.

There is a lack of esteem and respect. A minimum of recognition, courtesy and kindness towards the other is no longer guaranteed. Insults and denigration are common. The partner's privacy is no longer respected.

One or even both partners no longer invest in the relationship; there is no more commitment to it. One partner ignores the other when taking important decisions, promises are not kept, the partners devote no time to each other, there is no longer any wish to think about possible changes and there is talk of a separation.

These important points do not necessarily mean the end of a relationship but they constitute very clear signs that the couple's foundations are seriously threatened. In

this situation, it is very important to establish first whether a separation or divorce is the only way out of the crisis or if the difficulties could be resolved differently. The breakdown of a relationship can be very trying for everyone but especially for the children. A destructive conflict can cause much damage. In all cases professional help is recommended, alone or together, in this process of clarification. If it turns out that separation is the only possible solution, a therapist, mediator or adviser could help the couple to maintain mutual respect and thus prevent the separation causing serious hurt and hostility. In this way it is possible to prevent the partners, and in particular the children, from suffering unnecessarily.

No-go: violence and humiliation

If the behaviour of one of the partners wounds the other's dignity or threatens their personal safety, then this is the highest level of alert. If the relationship has deteriorated to that degree, then the chances of managing the situation alone are minimal and it is all the more urgent to turn to professional help such as a marriage counsellor or a relationship therapist.