



To Couples

She: “He never talks to me.”

He: “She never stops talking and over-reacts to everything.”

She: “He never helps out.”

He: “Every weekend it’s another honey-do list.”

She: “He should know what I want.”

He: “I can never figure out what women want.”

She: “He won’t let me vent and process my day. He always tries to fix things.”

He: “When I try to help, she says I’m controlling.”

She: “He yells.”

He: “She yells.”

You’ve seen the movie, read the book, or maybe you’re in this movie right now. If it all feels different from when you first met, you have probably progressed from the initial romantic phase of a relationship into the reality phase.

Prince Charming at age 45 may be paunchy, mellowed out, and less finely attuned to Cinderella’s every emotional hiccup. Cinderella at 45 may be nit-picky and nagging about upgrades she wants for the castle.

All couples eventually butt up against power struggles, past history, and the challenge of managing the stress of daily life—mortgages, children, jobs, in-laws—while trying to squeeze in a relationship. If only there were a manual that came with the wedding ceremony. Just like the parenting manual we would all like to see attached to the umbilical cord at child birth.

These days therapists have a better understanding of what makes for a successful relationship than ever before. Couples have actually been studied in labs (like rats) in simulated living conditions to analyze which micro-behaviors keep people together and which break them up. It’s not anger and “issues” that bring down a relationship—it’s how we handle the anger and issues. And if therapy uncovers a stickier problem (infidelity, substance abuse, a mental or medical disorder), then we all face it down and tackle it.

We no longer see relationships as the vehicle for getting “all” our needs met but rather more of an accommodation process between two people. Therapy can work on specific skill sets: problem solving, anger management, communications, conflict resolution, and bonding. Couples can role play “gentle entries” into conversations vs. blaming statements (“I” statements vs. “you” statements), process and work through painful attachment wounds, learn how to deescalate an argument and use time outs, and plan date nights and bonding rituals.

In couple’s therapy we try to make a relationship work (with some exceptions such as severe abuse), knowing that the divorce rate is even higher for second marriages, that we usually take the same maladaptive patterns from one relationship into the next, that we have to take kids into account. Knowing that all relationships hit the reality phase after the glow of initial fireworks fade. When Prince Charming, slightly balding, turns to Cinderella, sporting age lines, and says, “It’s your turn to let out the hounds. I did it last night.”