

Not enough in the tank: how to know when to quit

Reading this headline in the Times last weekend and hearing Jacinda Ardern announce her resignation as the youngest serving prime minister of New Zealand saying:

"I am human, politicians are human. We give all that we can for as long as we can. And then its time. And for me it's time".

This made me think how many couples I work with, especially in these difficult stressful times, who either make impulsive decisions to end a marriage quickly, or struggle for some time with whether enough is enough in their relationships and if it's time to quit.

It often comes as a shock when one partner in a couple hears their partner say they feel a lot of dissatisfaction and unhappiness in the marriage, when the other feels things are ok. These feelings are often dismissed as "it's just a phase we're going through - just like all our friends with young children and stressful jobs and who often have similar feelings."

Immediately what shows up is a different perspective and a disconnect. It is likely a couple at this stage will be living quite transactional lives, going to work and looking after the children where they believe their needs will be met. Their relationship has probably been this way for a couple of years. The unheard partner starts to question *'what is the point of this relationship if I don't feel heard and nothing changes'*.

Couples can be quite unaware just how detachment starts to grow between them, creating an on-going negative mind set of everything that's wrong with the relationship, bringing constant examples of "resentment stack-ups" of why the relationship isn't working.

Couples like this are in a very fragile place and probably often feel quite overwhelmed with just how precarious the relationship has become and how stuck they are in their gridlock positions.

When meeting couples on the brink, I tell them that I am not here to push them to stay together but to stand alongside them both where they are as I try to focus keeping the balance: managing one partners ambivalence and need for change, with the importance of uncovering the underlying issues that have contributed to their *'stuckness'*.

It's important at this stage that I try to reassure them that I understand their ambivalence about coming to therapy; how they have lost hope, but balancing that with

a strong sense of how things could change for the better if they have the courage to start connecting to their own feelings and perhaps moving forward with different behaviours and some renewed hope of change. We also discuss the possibility that therapy may not come up with the changes they are looking for.

Working with an Emotionally Focused Therapy (EFT) lens, I help couples connect and tune in to their emotional experience where once both partners feel heard and understood. I help them identify their own behaviour rather than looking at their partner's behaviour and to make sense of how this behaviour leads to emotional disconnection. For example: one client talked a lot about how he feels that his partner has, for years, put all her energies into her very stressful job and their two children and he gets the crumbs. This makes him feel very lonely and rejected in his marriage. His partner initially became very defensive and critical that he never offered to help her or make time for her - all she felt was he just wanted was to have more sex. Helping her tune into his emotion of missing her and longing for her, especially since he had come from a large family and didn't get much attention as a child, has been important for her but difficult for her to stay with her vulnerability and shame because all she hears is the same criticisms about her from her partner that she receives from her mother.

Couples on the brink are on shaky ground and they need to feel there is hope in how things can change and move forward rather than constantly going back into their conflicts and disappointments.

Checking in with couples as to what they think would be possible for their relationship can be a useful tool in shifting the gridlock, but equally there are partners who feel they have run out of possibilities and that then becomes the focus of our work.

There are many couples who after extensive time in therapy, decide for many reasons that they need to end their relationship. Ending a relationship, especially if children are involved, is always going to be painful and challenging but that doesn't mean it shouldn't happen.

Deciding to quit can be a sign of strength. Before you do that just ask yourself:

- Have I taken time to think things through about how I feel about myself?
- Do I understand the part I play in our distancing?
- Have we taken time to talk together about how we feel about ending the relationship and understanding why we think we need to take this step?
- Do we spend our time just focusing on what's wrong with the relationship, losing sight of what could work for us both?

Crucially, leaving a marriage should not be seen as giving up and quitting with all the shame associated with this. As Dr Linda Papadopoulos quotes in her article in the Times “we should call it recalibrating or changing direction.” **Dawn Kaffel**

If you would like to discuss things further or to make an appointment, you can call me on either **07976 403741** or **(020) 8959 9528**.

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