



Breaking up – hard on your health

Healthy relationships means healthy people and clinical psychologist **Prof David Indermaur** says it's time for serious investment in this part of our lives.

The question of how and why being in a relationship is associated with so many health benefits for men is now attracting serious research interest with this connection now widely accepted as a key predictor of health and longevity. Conversely, relationship distress is strongly linked to health problems both for adults and their children. The basic message is that relationship health is fundamental to physical and mental health (especially for men).

One implication of this is that it's worthwhile investing in relationships. This often means re-investing in an existing relationship rather than breaking up in the hope of finding a better one. One of the big relationship myths is that the ideal partner is out there waiting for you.

Any 'user guide' for relationships would warn that the falling-in-love stage is almost always followed by the power battle stage, which is the biggest test. If a couple can successfully traverse this minefield, the 'gold' of deeper love and harmony can be claimed. At this point both parties have a sense the relationship is their choice and in their best interests.

Medical practitioners can help their patients by pointing to the evidence on the health-relationship connection. This may be a revelation for some or for others a confirmation of what they already know. Importantly (especially for men) it may



serve as the wake-up call: a reminder and an inducement to improve their current relationship or get out of a destructive one. In all cases, it is important to follow-up consciousness-raising with helpful information or advice, perhaps from a psychologist who can talk through the issues and link with further resources.

Working towards a healthy relationship is healing and helpful in many ways. There is both a science and an art to good relating. –There is also much evidence that, for those suffering a range of physical and psychological maladies, the presence of a supporting partner can be of great benefit. Including the partner in various treatment plans can greatly assist the effectiveness of treatment.

Men spend thousands on their 'toys' but often neglect investing in their most beneficial and meaningful asset – their relationships.

Encouraging men to see their relationship as a vehicle that can take them much farther than they imagined, might be helpful.

Probably the biggest obstacle in our society is the archaic cultural belief that relationships are not to be enjoyed but endured. Such a belief robs us of the great benefits that come from good relating.

In the worst cases, one partner's self-esteem becomes so cruelled as to be invisible. Unfortunately, research many years ago established how the subjugated party in an abusive relationship is essentially trained to be helpless ('learned helplessness'). Medical practitioners are often the only professionals in a position to be able to reach out to those suffering in this way and help them re-establish a belief in themselves and to take action to reduce the harm.

The key for men is to establish a sense of responsibility and pride in the quality of their relationship. Old cultural beliefs that see men as a tragic-heroic figure, contained by females (mothers, wives) that have separate value structures, maintain the man in the position of the eternal child. By aligning healthy relationships with a healthy masculinity – one where the man feels powerful enough to take some responsibility for improving the relationship – would obviously be a step in the right direction. The new generation of men are much more alive to these possibilities.

These quick pointers might assist when helping a man with suspected relationship issues:

- Challenge the belief that if the relationship is not working it must be because he has chosen the wrong woman.
- Challenge the belief that good relationships happen spontaneously and if effort is required, the relationship is fatally flawed.
- Use appropriate metaphors – e.g. the relationship is like a car – it carries you both, it needs regular servicing and maintenance and it has to work for both of you.
- Suggest some things for the man to do to enervise the relationship – e.g. doing things that actually 'work for her', whether this means gifts, acknowledgements, quality time or physical affection.
- Seeking professional help is not a sign of weakness – psychologists or counsellors are non-judgmental relationship consultants. They are service providers and when carefully chosen can be a useful ally to relationship growth. ●

Competing interests: none declared. David is an Associate of the Hart Centre, which has a network of relationship therapists throughout Australia

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