

Sorting out the power from the glory

Back in the days of the white picket fence, when Dad went off to work and Mum was the full-time homemaker with several children, personal relationships were in many ways a lot simpler. Everyone knew their place.

Dad went off to the workplace and Mum cared for the kids. She made sure there was a hot meal on the table at about 6pm every night. The kids, freshly bathed and in pyjamas, would be on hand to greet Dad with his slippers and Mum would be ready to offer him support after his long, hard day.

Chances are that modern dads and mums reading this would find such a picture difficult to envisage. Today, both parents may well be working, and the idea of dinner on the table at 6pm with kids organised seems an impossibility, given our busy lives.

So what happened to change the way we relate to each other?

The short answer is the feminist movement of the 1960s, which led to a reassessment of how women were regarded by themselves and the rest of society. There has been a drive towards an equal relationship between men and women, and this means sharing the power between the two partners.

However, sometimes that is easier in theory than in practice. So what are some of the issues that can have an impact?

Our family backgrounds can have a huge impact on power and control issues in our intimate relationships. If one partner grew up in a family where the father was in control while the other came from a family where the mother held the power, they will have very different ideas on how to run the relationship. In fact, they are quite likely to end up in a power struggle.

And whether you were the oldest, youngest or middle child can also have an effect. For example, a marriage of eldest and youngest children is often an easier proposition than one between the eldest children from two households.

Another influential variable is the life stage of the couple. It's easier to have an equal relationship when both partners work and the couple have no children.

But if a woman leaves a paid position where she is a respected and effective worker and steps back to care for children for a while, the power balance can change significantly. Before, both partners may have been earning similar pay packets, now there is a huge difference.

Economically, the power has passed to the partner still in the workforce, and the relationship has slipped into the old traditional model of 40 years ago. For a woman, being assertive when she is conscious of her financial dependency can be difficult.

She may not feel confident of holding her ground in an argument when she can't afford to rock the boat because of financial dependency.

The good news is that if both partners are committed to working on their relationship, it is possible to sort out these power and control issues.

One of the keys to handling unequal power sharing in a relationship is to be assertive without being aggressive or defensive. Being assertive can make a difference to a relationship, because people can learn to identify and state the concerns they have.

Being assertive means being tough on the issues that are important to you, but courteous to your partner.

Sharing your thoughts on why you might react the way you do can do a lot towards sorting out power issues, but sometimes it just seems too hard. This is where counselling can help to unravel issues in a safe place without saying things to your partner that you may regret later.

Humans and relationships are far more complex than the advanced computer, but can bring us great joy. So it's worth sorting out the power and control issues.

Survival tips

- **Having an equal relationship sounds easy, but it is often hard to achieve**
- **Be assertive, not aggressive, when discussing power issues**
- **If anger and resentment seem to stop you talking, get an experienced couples counsellor to help you sort things out.**