

### *Relationships in distress*

One of the greatest sources of pain in life can be when a loving relationship breaks down and two people who had found happiness together no longer get on. Trying to work out what went wrong and find a way to fix it is not easy, and when all attempts fail this can lead to frustration and even emotional exhaustion, all the more so if children are involved.

Often couples wait until the situation has deteriorated into bitterness and recriminations before they look for help, which lessens their chances of finding a way back to each other.

Many couples think that no one else has ever been through difficulties like theirs; they look at their friends and envy them their seemingly happy lives. In fact, it is extremely rare for couples not to have difficulties. Maintaining a relationship is difficult and demanding, and it is not surprising that at times we get it wrong.

### *Danger signs*

Relationships are as unique as the people who form them so there's no "one size fits all" description of the perfect relationship. However, there are some things that are common to relationships in distress:

- frequent bickering and / or disagreeing, often over small things
- arguing rather than discussing
- fighting, even in front of the children or other people
- criticising each other, at times to the children or other people as well
- opting out, e.g. finding reasons to be out rather than at home; not getting involved in couples / family life when at home
- looking for support outside the relationship
- using alcohol to blot out distress
- refusing intimacy

Some comments to watch out for: - "we'd be fine if you'd just..."; "you never listen"; "we never do anything together"; "it's all your fault".

### *What can you do?*

Couples in distress often complain of feeling tired a lot of the time, having no interest in life, or feeling bored. It's always useful to have a medical check-up when feeling like this – it's hard to be loving and kind if you're not well. If there are no medical problems and the difficulties persist, then the wisest thing is to look for professional help at the early signs of trouble in a relationship. This improves the chances of keeping molehills from escalating into mountains. In many cases, when couples face and tackle conflict together, they grow to know each other in new ways and end up having deeper and more loving relationships than before.