



10 essential questions to ask your partner that will take your relationship to the next level

31 July 2018

Fiona Shackleton, a Partner in the Family department at Payne Hicks Beach has supported research by the University of Exeter examining compatibility and the ten key aspects of a successful relationship. The full research can be found below:

(<http://socialsciences.exeter.ac.uk/law/research/groups/frs/projects/shackletonrelationshipsproject/>)

Asking ten “critical” questions before embarking on a serious relationship can help couples thrive, study shows

Asking ten “critical” questions before embarking on a serious relationship can help couples thrive, according to a new study backed by the prominent divorce lawyer Baroness Fiona Shackleton.

Long-term relationships last when they are built on friendship, respect, realistic expectations, shared interests and humour, according to the University of Exeter research.

Evidence from couples, as well family lawyers, mediators and judges has helped identify the ten key aspects of a relationship which other couples can use to reflect on to see if they are likely to thrive and stand the test of time. Continuing to ask the ten critical questions can also help couples build their relationship.

The questions are:

Are my partner and I a ‘good fit’?

Do we have a strong basis of friendship?

Do we want the same things in our relationship and out of life?

Are our expectations realistic?

Do we generally see the best in each other?

Do we both work at keeping our relationship vibrant?

Do we both feel we can discuss things freely and raise issues with each other?

Are we both committed to working through hard times?

When we face stressful circumstances would we pull together to get through it?

Do we each have supportive others around us?

Baroness Shackleton is an alumna of the University of Exeter and has been described as one of the “most ferociously brilliant” solicitors in the country. She has acted in divorce cases for famous clients including Paul McCartney and Liam Gallagher.

Professor Anne Barlow, from the University of Exeter Law School, who led the study, said:

“Of course every relationship is different, and it is important that couples build relationships that are meaningful to them, but we found thriving relationships share some fundamental qualities. Mostly the couple have chosen a partner with whom they are a ‘good fit’ and have ways of successfully navigating stressful times. These ten critical questions can help people as they decide if they are compatible with a person they are considering sharing their life with and flag the importance of dealing with issues when they arise as well as of nurturing the relationship over time.”

Baroness Shackleton of Belgravia, who is a Partner at Payne Hicks Beach, said:

“Wearing my “professional hat” - as a divorce lawyer for over 40 years - more than 50 per cent of the people consulting me about divorce have said they realised either before or very soon into their marriages, that they were fundamentally incompatible with their partners. “Wearing my “educational hat”, as a former school Governor, I am acutely aware that whilst there is much school directed education on “sex”, “drugs” and “alcohol,” there is little or none in relation to the most important decision a person makes - namely with whom you settle down and have children. Finally, wearing my “philanthropic hat” and seeing the untold grief children suffer when their parents separate, I felt it time to sponsor a project exploring just what makes a relationship successful and how best to maximise the chances of it succeeding, the idea being to present the resulting research in schools as an educational tool and pre-intervention measure. If as a consequence of this, fundamentally incompatible partnerships are prevented, it will have been money well spent.”

The experts interviewed ten divorce lawyers/mediators and two judges to ask them the key reasons relationships fail. They also interviewed 43 couples married for 10 years, or who had separated during this period, and ten other couples in same-sex and opposite-sex relationships, who had been living together, married or in a civil partnership for at least 15 years. They also went on to discuss the findings about relationship skills and the best way to learn about relationships at workshops with a range of young people aged 14-18 who are keen to help improve relationship education in schools in innovative ways at a time when the relationship and sex education curriculum is under review.

The lawyers and judges identified four common reasons for relationships to breakdown. The first two; incompatibility and unrealistic expectations could, and arguably should, be discovered before a couple agrees to commit to each other, The second two; failure to deal with issues and failure to nurture the relationship exposed a lack of relationship skills which could in many cases be addressed. Obvious relationship stress points will test any relationship and these can act as major triggers of breakdown. So how people cope with life pressures such as bereavement, an affair, financial difficulties or becoming a parent, particularly when the couple had different parenting styles, is key and requires good relationship skills. These can avoid loss of communication between a couple and help ensure the relationship is nurtured rather than lost.

The research was also conducted by Jan Ewing, a Research Fellow at the University of Exeter Law School, Astrid Janssens, a Senior Research Fellow in Child Health at the University of Exeter Medical School, who led the relationships education workshops, and Sharon Blake, the Shackleton Scholar at the University of Exeter Law School.

Dr Jan Ewing said:

“Thriving relationships were built on a strong foundation of friendship. Married couples and cohabiting couples expressed their commitment differently, but all those in thriving relationships worked at maintaining a good connection by talking regularly and being pragmatic and solution-focused in approach to conflict. They loved their partner compassionately, being aware of the other’s faults but viewing their partner as an intrinsically good person. They anticipated change and pulled together during stressful seasons. Most had built networks of family and friends to support them on their journey.”

The critical questions were put together based on key attributes and skills that drove thriving relationships across time for the couples they surveyed:

Choosing carefully: Many of the thriving married couples were ‘friends first’ with intimate relationships developing slowly. They had thought carefully about formalising their relationship.

Underlying friendship: This had helped couples through harrowing life events such as bereavement or an affair. Separated couples’ relationships often lacked a firm foundation of mutual friendship.

Being realistic: Couples in thriving relationships in both samples had realistic expectations of marriage and relationships, shaped by examples they had seen through the marriages of their parents or other family members. They knew it would not all be plain sailing, expected to have to work at their relationships and were open to professional help if needed. They had aligned values, hopes, dreams and expectations of the other and of the relationship.

Seeing the best: Partners in thriving relationships love compassionately and make allowances for the other’s shortcomings. Compassionate love can grow over time.

Working at it: Overwhelmingly, couples in thriving relationships accepted the need to ‘work at’ their relationships but such work is not ‘hard work’ provided couples are a ‘good fit’. Couples in thriving relationships were creative and intentional both about carving out time as a couple and about ensuring that each had time apart to spend with friends and pursuing individual interests. They showed they cared in the daily rituals and small regular acts of thoughtfulness that communicated appreciation in ways that were meaningful to their partner.

Being committed: Commitment to the relationship, but not necessarily to the institution of marriage, is a prerequisite of thriving couples.

Keep talking: Thriving couples carved out time to talk about the minutiae of the day or deeper level issues as needed and this open communication fuelled intimacy.

Building the relationship that suits you both: Couples in thriving relationships built the relationship that suited them, often defying cultural or societal norms to do so. There is no one ‘right’ thriving relationship.

Adapting to change: An ability to adapt to change seemed to stem from a strong team mentality and was essential to thriving relationships. When couples pulled together during periods of adversity, they often report a strengthening of the relationship as a result.

Building a support network: Close, supportive networks of family and friends enriched the lives of couples across the spectrum of family forms. Women, in particular, drew substantial support from their mothers, sisters and/ or girlfriends.

Ends

Click below to see the article in Business Insider UK on the University of Exeter Report, in which Fiona Shackleton features, first published on 30 July 2018 and reproduced with kind permission
<http://uk.businessinsider.com/10-questions-to-ask-your-partner-to-take-the-relationship-to-the-next-level-2018-7?r=US&IR=T>
