

THE THREE ISSUES

Couples seem to have difficulties with an endless list of problems. For every 100 couples I meet I could lay out 100 different problems. To paraphrase Tolstoy, 'every couple are unhappy in their own unique way'. Or so it seems.

For many couples, after years of struggling with a complex of issues, problems can begin to feel unsolvable. The emotional string of one problem seems to get entangled in another, creating a relationship knot that cannot be undone. Attempts to unravel the entanglement seem to tighten the knot even further. Couples often arrive at a position of deciding to just leave the problem-knot alone because these attempts to solve their problems seem to actually make things worse. When they try to talk about it they end up fighting. It seems like there are 20 different problem strings tangled in a ball with no loose ends from which to begin. One problem just seems to lead into the next.

Problems include things like trust, negativity, an inability to talk without fighting, the emotional crust of bitterness and resentment, or loyalty to one's family. They include stress from work, money, or parenting; pressure exerted by one partner over the other; responsibilities not carried; the criticism and put-downs of one over the other; unvoiced depression, dread, or despair; guilt and self-doubt, anger and intolerance; trauma and grief, etc. The list can be endless.

Though each of the many problems tangled into the emotional knot of the relationship seem separate and unique – as if they each need some form of specialist attention – *there really are only three issues that couples struggle with*. The data from all areas of clinical experience and research consistently confirm that couples struggle with only these three things:

1. The level of control given and received.
2. The level of affection given and received.
3. The level of commitment given and received. (or mfreedom)

To maintain the analogy from above, the complex emotional knot of a relationship is in fact an entanglement of three issues. When people begin to understand this, complex relationship problems can be simplified. You can imagine how the entangled knot now looks if there are only three strings to unravel - and each string has a different colour.

Every problem presented by a couple is a cocktail of these three issues – control, affection, and commitment. This may seem outwardly simplistic but these three concerns exert the forceful intensity that is intimacy. In order to describe any relationship problem or solution one ultimately has to describe it in these three terms.

Lets look at these in more detail: The three concerns of control, affection, and commitment go from one extreme to another. Control goes from one extreme of dominating someone (total control) to setting them free (the opposite of control). Affection toward someone goes from actively loving them to its opposite of attacking and abusing them. Commitment as an issue goes from really wanting someone in one's life to, its opposite, of pushing someone away.

Now because each person gives different amounts of these ingredients to their partner, and gets different amounts in return, couples end up with inevitable conflicts and compatibilities.

If you have a problem in your relationship you will find, once you peel away the outer layers, that your problem has to do with the fact that you feel less free and more controlled than you would like; you feel less love and more rejection than you would like; or you feel less commitment and more indifference than you would like.

All of our problems in relationship boil down to the value and weighting we place on each of these concerns. Because of the unspoken values we place on these issues, they can cause small problems in lots of different areas. For now though, ask yourself these basic questions: Do you want to control your partner more than set him/her free? Do you show more affection or rejection? Do you express commitment or indifference?