

We are conditioned to blame our partners:

Ten years into their marriage, Ed and Siobhan's relationship broke up. Everyone was stunned, most of all the couple themselves. The constant stress they were under exploded into an emotional hurricane that drew in friends and family.

The public and family knowledge of their private life began to drive their destiny. A surge of support for Ed as the wronged husband isolated Siobhan emotionally and inhibited deep discussion of the conditions that had long alienated him. Out of respect for the pain that her mere presence now caused, Siobhan left the family home within a few weeks. She never moved back in.

It's not clear that the couple could have salvaged the relationship if they had tried. "We had so many background and personality differences," she said. "It was like we came from two separate worlds. We couldn't agree on anything without a big 'to-do'." Constant negotiation was necessary, but if there was time to talk, there was also usually too much irritation for Ed to tolerate. And then, opening a public window on the relationship seemed to close the door on the possibility of working through the disappointments, the frustrations, the betrayal.

Within a month, the couple was discussing a divorce. At least they both insisted on mediation, not litigation, and their solicitors agreed. A couple of months, and some time and determination later, they had an agreement. Only now that Ed and Siobhan have settled into their mostly separate lives, and their daughter appears to be doing well with abundant care from both her parents, are they catching their respective breaths—two years later.

We Irish value marriage more than people do in many other cultures, and it holds a central place in our dreams. Over 90 percent of young adults aspire to marriage. Despite fears that divorce would create a cascade of marital breakdown in Ireland, that has not materialised. As with Ed and Siobhan, sometimes marriages end before the partners know what hit them.

The Celtic Tiger did create a plethora of choices, including constant choices about personal and family life. The "what am I getting out of life" attitude resulted in an ongoing self-appraisal of how our personal life was going. We got used to the idea of always making choices to improve our happiness.

The heightened focus on options creates a heightened sensitivity to problems that arise in intimate relationships. And negative emotions get priority in our brains. There are so many opportunities to decide that a marriage is unsatisfactory. It would be one thing if we were living more satisfied lives than ever. We carry over into our personal lives the fast pace of decisions and actions we have everywhere else, and that may not be for the best.

Because our intimate relationships have become vehicles for meeting our emotional needs, and with almost all our emotions invested in one relationship, we tend to look upon any unhappiness we experience—whatever the source—as a failure of a partner to satisfy our longings. Disappointment inevitably feels so personal we see no other possibility but to blame our partners for our own unhappiness.

Much of the discontent we now encounter in close relationships is inflicted by the social culture in which we are imbedded - although we rarely interpret our experience that way. Culture—the pressure to constantly monitor our happiness, the plethora of choices creating an expectation of perfection, the speed of everyday life—always climbs into bed with us. An accumulation of forces has made the cultural climate difficult long-term relationships today.

Attuned to disappointment and confusion about its source, we wind up discarding perfectly good relationships. People work themselves up over the ordinary problems of marriage. They badger their partners to change, convince themselves nothing will budge, and so work their way out of good relationships. (celticspirit@eircom.net)