

The couples collective



Contents

- 3 Introduction**
- 4 Who is in The couples collective?**
- 5 Family and pressurised environments**
- 7 Top tips
- 8 When to see a therapist
- 9 Cost-of-living crisis and financial struggles**
- 11 How many affects relationships
- 12 Top tips
- 13 When to see a therapist
- 14 Social media**
- 16 Top tips
- 17 When to see a therapist

- 18 Sex, intimacy and sexuality**
- 20 Top tips
- 21 When to see a therapist
- 22 Commitment and open relationships**
- 24 How to ask for what you want
- 25 When to see a therapist
- 26 How to seek couples therapy**
- 28 How to approach the subject with your partner
- 29 How to find a qualified therapist
- 30 Further information**





Introduction

Relationship problems are one of the top issues that people come to therapists with. Therapists have reported that the COVID-19 pandemic opened the floodgates to relationship work as couples were confined to their homes, causing underlying issues to be brought to the surface. Our latest Mindometer survey of 3,000 of our members found that 57% of therapists reported an increase in clients presenting with relationship issues in the past year, while 29% of therapists noticed an increase in the number of enquiries for counselling services from couples.

Couples today are dealing with different issues compared to five years ago. While issues with communication, intimacy, finance and commitment are still there, couples now need to navigate the pressures of social media, effects of lockdown and the pandemic, sexuality and other socio-economic challenges such as the cost-of-living crisis.

The couples collective, formed by BACP therapists, has put together a comprehensive booklet that addresses some of these issues, and shares their top tips and guidance on how to navigate them.

The booklet provides a starting point to guide you and your partner towards steps which can improve your relationship, but by no means provides an exhaustive solution to all relationship problems.

Who is in The couples collective?

This booklet has been carefully co-created with highly experienced therapists. Together they are The couples collective. Each therapist has shared their one key piece of advice for couples.

We'd also like to thank BACP therapists Lara Waycot, Nicola Vanlint, Jenny Warwick and Sylvia Sterling for their contribution to The couples collective booklet.



Stefan Walters

BACP therapist at Harley Therapy

"Discuss your vision for how the relationship is doing and where it's headed. A shared vision is crucial to ensure that you both feel connected and continue to work towards a common goal. Love is a verb, and takes ongoing mutual effort."



Vasia Toxavidi

BACP therapist

"Try not to work against each other but rather work together when faced with a problem. Reposition this problem as an opportunity for you to do better and improve your relationship in the long term."



Emma Cullinan

BACP therapist at Kentish Town Counselling

"A fundamental aim of being with a partner is to be kind to each other - you want your relationship to be your grounded place, albeit with exciting moments thrown in for laughs and thrills. Living with any other human being will involve disagreements and the key is how these are handled."



Indira Chima

BACP therapist at The Counselling Living Room

"If I could only give one piece of advice, I would ask couples to ask themselves – Is what I'm asking of my partner reasonable?. It's a simple question but it's important to take a step back and put things into perspective."



Lindsay George

BACP therapist

"Come from a place of open mindedness and mutual respect. By doing so, you will continue to grow in your relationship and avoid some of the pitfalls, such as taking each other for granted."



Arabella Russell

BACP therapist

"We routinely service our cars and other goods. Why don't we give our relationship the same attention? Our emotional and physical wellbeing is informed by the quality of our couple connection. Tuning up that connection in couples therapy can lead to very powerful change."



Family and pressurised environments

Family and pressurised environments

The pressures of modern life can cause a wide range of potential disputes in your relationship. When you throw family into the mix, this grows tenfold. Different personalities within families can clash, placing a strain on the relationship and causing it to suffer.

Read on to find out about the most common causes of conflict, how to resolve them, and when it's time to seek therapy.

Most common causes of conflict

There are lots of reasons why conflicts can arise, but a main area of contention related to family and pressurised environments is often the division of chores and responsibilities within the family home. This argument usually arises when one person in the couple feels they're doing more than the other, leading to feelings of resentment.

Another point of conflict can be external pressures from other family members. People don't always get along, and that's OK, but it can become very taxing on a relationship if there's disagreement between partners and key family members.



Top tips

Clearly communicate when you need help.

When it comes to chores and responsibilities around the house, try not to assume that your partner knows when you're feeling stressed or overwhelmed. It's much more productive to clearly and uncritically explain what you're struggling with and how they can help you.

Maintain a united front.

When dealing with difficult family members it's important to keep a united front through open and honest communication, and teamwork. Lean on each other if a difficult situation arises and speak openly about the best ways to tackle that issue. Making these decisions together ensures you're both comfortable with the outcome and builds intimacy in the relationship.

Establish and maintain boundaries.

Whether these are boundaries around roles and responsibilities, or boundaries around difficult family members, it's important to discuss what you're both comfortable with in your relationship and stick to these principles.



When to see a therapist

When the attention goes off the relationships, that's the time to go into therapy, especially when everything turns to conflict. Therapy can help when things get too much, or your mental and physical health suffer. Going to therapy can help you establish what's going on for you under the surface and deal with those issues as a team.

“ My top tip for couples has to be learning to communicate well with one another. Appreciating and understanding the other person's point of view, their nuances and needs, means we come from a place of open mindedness and mutual respect. ”

Lindsay George
BACP therapist



Cost-of-living crisis and financial struggles

Cost-of-living crisis and financial struggles

Money can be one of the most difficult things for a couple to talk about. It's normal for people to have different relationships with money. Decreased income increases the potential for strain on relationships, as disagreements on how to prioritise spending create potential conflict. This can result in reduced relationship quality due to worries, and further anxiety on how we might make ends meet.

A couple may also have different perceptions of money. For example, one could be a spender and the other a saver. How we're brought up shapes our ideas and attitudes about money, and we take that over into adulthood. And when we don't see eye to eye on these issues, it can spell trouble.



How money affects relationships

Money plays a huge part in relationships in many unspoken ways. We all have unconscious ideas about what we want in a partner. For example, it could be someone in the same social class, or someone we can share nice holidays with. This is natural and doesn't make us shallow.

When there's a cost-of-living crisis, these issues around money can change which can throw a relationship off balance. You might not be able to do the things you used to do. A cost-of-living crisis can also bring financial anxiety into a relationship, bringing up a side of a person that you may not have seen before; for example, arguing about turning on the heating.

Also, the power dynamics in a relationship may change due to a cost-of-living crisis, making some people feel less in control. Worries over the costs and finances can arise, leading to conflicts or fractures in a relationship.



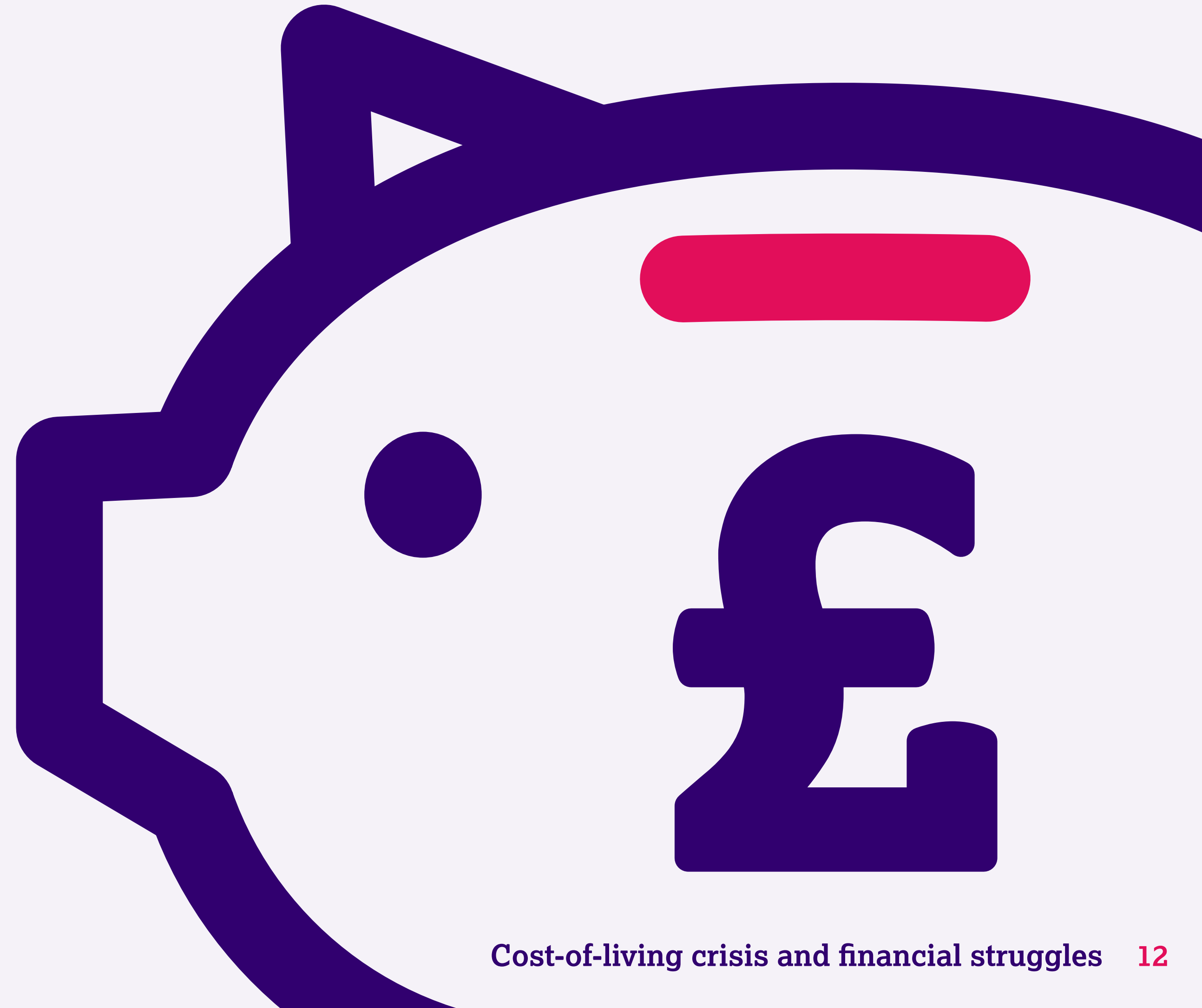
Top tips

Like many issues or points of conflict in a relationship, honest communication with your partner is important.

Share what frustrates you about your partner's relationship with money and spending, without being over-critical but by saying how it impacts you. Some people have a scarcity mindset, whereas others have a spend mindset. Once this is understood and brought into the light then an adult conversation can occur, and necessary changes can be made that benefit the relationship.

When it comes to the cost-of-living crisis, start talking about money and your plans over the coming months and years.

Make this the start of an ongoing communication. Try to save up for things together and work towards a common goal. If one earns more than the other, you could split things, such as the cost of a holiday, based on how much each person makes.



When to see a therapist

It might be time to see a therapist when you start to feel like money is causing additional pressure on your relationship, and it's starting to affect you. It's always best to see someone sooner rather than later and long before any crisis points.

If therapy helps to rebuild your relationship and can help you cope with other life pressures, then it's money well spent. We service many things in our lives like our cars, washing machines, household appliances, but we don't always think to service our relationships. You may be able to access free or low-cost couples counselling through charities, your work, or other organisations.

“ We haven't always had the best classroom of love. We're not taught about how to maintain a relationship at school so it can be very difficult for some people to navigate, and relationships are hard work. And therapy can help. ”

Arabella Russell
BACP therapist

Social media



Social media

While social media can bring people together, it can also come between them. It can cause jealousy, disagreements, missed connections and feelings of isolation that can affect your relationship. We're seeing more and more couples coming to therapy with disagreements over social media, but there are things you can do to minimise its impact.

How social media can affect your relationship

One of the main issues with social media in a relationship is when your partner is spending time on their phone while you're trying to connect with them. For example, when you're having dinner together or even when you're both watching a movie. Even though they're right next to you, it can seem like they're miles away. This in itself feels like rejection, let alone worrying about who or what they're so engaged with.

But social media can also cause jealousy on both sides, such as when partners 'like' pictures of other people or if other people express interest in your partner. Past experiences, values and beliefs mean that what we view as 'acceptable' can vary widely when it comes to social media use. This can lead to confusion, disagreements or an avoidance of communicating. Interactions on social media can take less than a second and yet can leave a partner feeling confused or betrayed.



Top tips

Agree boundaries and openly communicate how you want to handle the use of social media in the relationship.

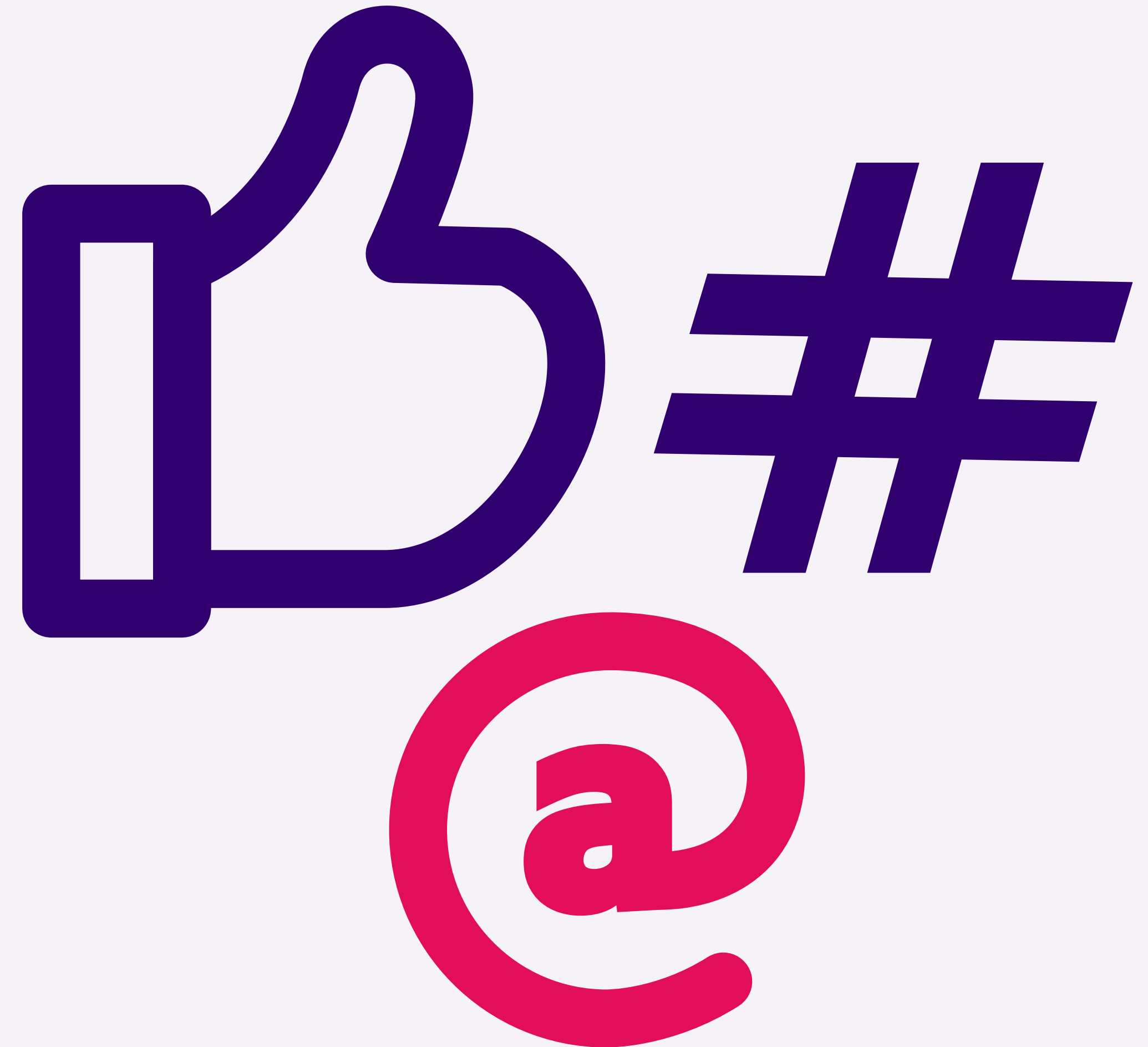
What are the expectations on both sides? You may have different views and so exploring these and actively listening is an important part of getting onto the same page.

If one of you feels uncomfortable about how the other is using social media, explore whether this is an issue outside of social media, at a deeper level.

Ask yourself why you feel like social media is impacting your relationship. Is it because of your own insecurities? Sometimes when you're feeling good within yourself, then you might not react in the same way.

Reflect together over how you can practise having a 'real life' connection over an internet connection.

If using social media creates a negative feeling in your own relationship through an increase in comparison - reflect on how helpful that is for you and, if needed, set some boundaries for how you want to engage with social media.



When to see a therapist

Going on social media isn't inherently bad. But when one person in a couple thinks it's fine to spend hours on their phone while the other feels rejected, or when communication breaks down, then it might be time to visit a therapist.

A therapist can help look into why one person might avoid connection and the other experiences abandonment. It could involve looking into personal histories and attachment styles.

“ I've had more and more clients come to me with issues over social media in the past five years. Younger couples in their 20s and 30s come in and disagree on the meaning of 'like'. Social media nowadays can become the 'third person' in a relationship and divide it. ”

Indira Chima
BACP therapist



Sex, intimacy, and sexuality

Sex, intimacy, and sexuality

A lot of couples struggle to talk about sex and intimacy compared to other issues. This is because some people tend to have feelings of shame and embarrassment around the subject. And if there's a lack of communication about sex and intimacy, then it can cause conflicts within a relationship.

How sex and intimacy can impact a relationship

We don't all view sex and intimacy in the same way. Some partners see it as a way of showing their love while others need to feel loved outside the bedroom to want to have sex. One of the most common issues around sex is the lack of it, most commonly this is from men.

Another issue could be one partner wanting to try something different but can't voice that to their partner. Likewise, how you want sex might change the older you get, as you might experience different ailments, challenges, and maybe erectile problems too.



Top tips

The foundation for a great, intimate relationship is good communication.

Be vulnerable and unafraid to express your needs. It's not easy to be vulnerable but it's at the heart of feeling connected to your partner. Consider what your relationship was like before you stopped talking and what made it like it is today. You don't have to be a sexual couple to have intimacy and feel connected in your relationship.

Be curious about your partner and ask questions.

Often couples lose interest in each other. When a relationship gets flat, it becomes more of a mundane routine, impacting intimacy. When communicating with your partner, be curious. Ask them what their day or week looks like. Can you begin to prioritise each other in order that you each feel more important and cared for? Can you adopt new habits that are conducive to a healthier version of you as a couple?

Be open and honest with your partner about what your desires are sexually.

If you don't want to do something, tell them. Similarly, if you are keen to try something new, try to find the courage to bring that up as well. If you do something you don't want to do, whether that be sexually or otherwise, this often leads to resentment which negatively impacts relationships.



When to see a therapist

When you sense something isn't right in your relationship, even if it seems small to you or if it's just you that's feeling like this, and you're struggling to resolve this between yourselves, it might be time to speak to a therapist.

A therapist may ask you questions like: When you first met, were you sexually compatible with one another? Were you happy with the quantity or quality of sex? Did you feel safe, secure, loved in a way that made you feel satisfied and connected with your partner? If not, why not? What can you each try to do differently? What got in the way of your compatibility as a couple? What can you do better as a couple to learn from this?

Having an opportunity to talk to an expert can lead to a huge change within a couple's relationship and for an individual as well, bringing clarity and ease to the relationship.

“ I use the saying 'inside out, outside in' to refer to differences around sex in relationships. Women approach sex from the inside out, whereby they need to feel an internal emotional connection with their partner in order to get sex on the outside. On the other hand, men feel intimacy through sex and then become emotionally intimate. ”

Vasia Toxavidi
BACP therapist



Commitment and open relationships

Commitment and open relationships

An open relationship is one in which one or both individuals agree to be romantically involved with people outside of the relationship.

A lot of times when people in relationships have feelings of longing, discontent, and loneliness, they often end their relationship. However, it could be that they just want an open relationship instead.

Sometimes when needs from a primary relationship do not entirely fulfil a partner, they might look for a secondary relationship to meet those feelings elsewhere. It's not that they don't want the primary relationship, it's simply because it might not be enough for them, and they need secondary attachments.

Recognising what kind of relationship you want

It's always best to identify what sort of relationship you're looking for before you meet anyone. When what you and your partner are looking for does not overlap, you may want to be swayed by your partner in an attempt to keep the relationship together. Often people agree to the other person's wishes before realising it's not what they want.



How to ask for what you want

We find it more difficult to ask for what we want if we think it will cause a rift or breakdown in a friendship or relationship. However, relationships aren't workable if people want different things. It's always best to be open about your needs and to have an honest conversation with your partner about what you're experiencing and how you can work together to move forward.

Having these conversations might not be easy. Disagreements don't have to end up in a screaming match, but it takes effort on both sides. If you're tempted to shout, ask yourself what this strong feeling is and how you can address it without landing it on someone else. Conversely, if you're on the receiving end, ask them what is happening as calmly as you can.



When to see a therapist

It's a good time to seek therapy when you have feelings of something being missing. And when you feel that you're adapting yourself in ways that are not true to who you are to keep a relationship going.

Also, it's good to seek a therapist early and not once you've had an affair. This is because by this point the primary relationship is so threatened and damaged that it will be much harder to maintain.

“ Keep in mind that the relationship style you think you want may not actually be good for you. For example, you might think a non-committal relationship is what you want because you find it hard to trust people, when actually you will need to work on trust issues in general and find someone you trust to have a committed relationship with. ”

Emma Cullinan
BACP therapist



How to seek couples therapy

How to seek couples therapy

If things have got to the stage where you can't talk to one another without getting upset or arguing, then maybe it's time to seek professional support in the form of a qualified couples therapist, who will make you feel more supported individually and as a couple.

It's important to understand what you were like as a couple in the beginning of your relationship, before things got in the way, and a relationship therapist will help guide you safely through this. They'll help you both re-establish yourselves as a couple and practise the skills you acquire in a safe, confidential space you feel comfortable in.



How to approach the subject with your partner

Approach the topic of therapy in a softer, warmer way, instead of it coming across as an attack.

You could turn to your partner and say, "I want to find out what I can do to help this relationship", or by leading with how you're feeling in the relationship, emphasising yourself and the reasons behind why you feel therapy may be beneficial; this is less likely to cause a partner to become defensive.

Avoid assumptions.

A lot of people assume that their partners will never commit to therapy without actually asking them. Give your partner the opportunity to say yes or no without pre-empted expectations.

Don't pressure your partner into therapy.

If it's something they don't want to do, listen to their reasons and respect their decision. They have to be willing to receive this external support voluntarily, otherwise it won't work.



How to find a qualified therapist

Ensure you choose a qualified counsellor. Choosing a therapist who is registered with a professional body, such as BACP, means they're qualified and work to set professional standards and ethics.

You can use our online directory to find a qualified therapist and you can filter to show the type of therapy you'd like, such as couples therapy, the location you're based in and whether you'd like the therapy to be online or face to face.

Do some independent research into the therapist by searching their social media or their website and ensuring they have robust qualifications. You need to find a therapist who you feel comfortable with and who is the right fit for you both as a couple. The bond you have with your therapist sits at the core of the therapeutic process so it's important it feels right. Be mindful that finding the right therapist can take time and it's OK to explore different options.





Further information

To find qualified therapists,
search the BACP directory [here](#)