

Fishing for reasons when old hurts resurface

By Ruth Ostrow

The wounds make us irrational, make us overreact and drive our partners crazy

I HEARD an interesting story the other day about a couple who almost broke up over a common complaint. I'll call the partners Bill and Anne. Bill loved Anne very much but felt the need to regularly go away on fishing weekends with his male friends. This for him represented a chance to clear his head, do some thinking and relax his body.

The problem was that his hobby made Anne extremely angry. She felt she was being left at home with the children. Even though he was a good father and husband, she resented his relationships with his mates because she said that any free time he had left over after working a busy week should be invested back into her and the children.

"I hardly get to see you as it is. Why do you have to go away so often?" she would cry.

Each time he left, she experienced deep pain in her belly that made her feel insecure, horrible, unnerved, abandoned. As if he were never coming back. She hated herself for clinging to him and wondered why she felt so needy.

Because of Anne's possessiveness, Bill felt the need to get away more, not less. But looking at her face made him guilty and remorseful. He was going away but feeling worse for it, sitting up smoking and drinking at nights with his mates rather than getting much-needed rest.

After almost separating, both of them ended up in a couple's workshop run by Diana Richardson, the relationships therapist from Italy, who was in Australia recently talking to me about sacred sexuality.

Richardson says that the basis of the couple's dysfunction was something that's familiar to us all.

"The problem was that Anne was not simply reacting to Bill's fishing hobby. What was coming up for her was an old wound from childhood. Every time he said he was going fishing, she was responding to the powerful emotions that would surface when her unfaithful father went away for prolonged periods.

"For Anne 'going fishing' meant potential loss and thus much more than what was really happening. Meanwhile Anne's needs triggered Bill's patterns from childhood. He had a lot of fear stored around having to please a controlling, smothering mother."

The point Richardson is making, and teaches in the workshops she runs from Europe, is that most people carry stale emotions from the past that live unconsciously in our cells, our memories and our guts. And often things we react to in the present are actually left-over detritus from the past. The wounds make us irrational, make us overreact, and drive our partners crazy.

I heard a story from another relationships counsellor about a man who'd go into fits of rage when his wife bought the wrong cereal. Which again boiled down to neglect issues with his mother. When people are coming from old emotions, the simplest -- "I can't see you until Friday" or "I don't like the way you wash up" -- can evoke a sense of abandonment, betrayal, or manipulation.

Richardson says that emotions are toxic and destructive and need to be worked through. However, she's a great believer in expressing feelings. "People think the two words 'emotions' and 'feelings' are the same thing. But they're not. Feelings are good, energetic, healing.

"They are happening in the here and now.

"Something real has made you angry or upset. And it's good to trust that boundaries have been crossed, or hurt has been caused, then express these feelings without blaming, or going into some overly dramatic story about the end of the relationship.

"If we don't express feelings, they too turn into emotions -- which are congealed feelings coming out in inappropriate and destructive ways."

Richardson says there are telltale signs that emotions -- rather than simply feelings -- are present within. "You suddenly feel separate from the person you're dealing with -- be it partner, friend, work colleague. You can't look them in the eye, you feel a knot in your solar plexus, and you feel collapsed, exhausted. Words of blame are used such as 'You always...' or 'You never...'"

And when a partner is happy one minute, and frothing at the mouth the next, it's obvious that some deeply emotional pattern has been triggered in them. "People think it's to do with 'now', but it's actually something that has not been expressed from one week ago, or 20 years ago."

She says expressing feelings can help shift stale emotions. "Afterwards you feel energised, radiant, lighter. Once you cry, you feel more loving."

She says healthy releasing is about telling your partner: "I'm feeling..." rather than: "You did this to me." It's about going off and howling in a corner, being physical by punching a pillow or jogging -- taking responsibility for letting go of grief or rage and then coming back refreshed, to sort things out.

Richardson warns that emotion can destroy love. To prevent this she offers this advice: "Be honest with your feelings. Be aware of when emotions from the past are surfacing, and don't dump them on to your partner. And above all, keep fights in perspective."

www.ruthostrow.com

© Ruth Ostrow

First published in The Weekend Australian SAT 04 JAN 2003