

Put out the garbage and make a fresh start

By Ruth Ostrow

RELATIONSHIPS are like rubbish tips, according to a friend of mine, who is a GP. People dump their stinky milk cartons, rotten fish and plastic bags full of week-old garbage in the centre of them, and then wonder why the relationship starts smelling bad, why suddenly there is a desperate need to move away from the detritus, why things start going off.

Martin Hartmann, who has just come back from time out of his medical practice on the NSW north coast and from his marriage, has been working on a book about his experiences with patients and couples who are not disposing of the waste in their relationships and who end up in his surgery in distress.

"I ask them: 'Are you regularly cleaning out the issues that come up between you or do you let things go unspoken, undealt with, so that there's so much shit around there is no room to move?' Dirty garbage is the cause of resentment, toxic feelings, hurt. And that's when relationships break down," he explains. Next thing they are in the surgery with a host of physical ailments that mirror their lives.

"I'm not pushing the New Age line that there's a clear causal link between the two. But I am saying that there are patterns in our behaviour that are reflected both in our relationships and our bodies alike.

"For instance, I see a lot of unhappy people develop arteriosclerosis, which is a hardening of the arteries. The plaque just builds and builds and if it's not cleaned up, people finally have strokes or heart attacks. Or there's a stiffening of the lens in the eye which erodes our vision.

"Both reflect a rigidity in the body, a lack of willingness to be open and experimental with life. Things begin to clog as we get older, the bowels, the prostate, we get gallstones. These are symptoms of the body not dealing with its own rubbish, and lack of flexibility in general."

Hartmann is concerned that he is increasingly seeing patients unable to move energy -- be it in their relationships or bodies -- to maintain a sense of holistic good health.

He believes that we need regular cleansing rituals to deal with the pollution: "You may need therapy just to identify the problem areas. For instance, you hear yourself say to your partner: 'It's a rotten day', but you may be thinking 'I don't feel loved by you.' You scream at someone: 'Get your own toast!' when you're saying 'I'm sick of looking after you, of taking responsibility for you.'

He says that once the core feelings are identified, it's then up to the couple to find a way of cleaning up. "I think too much therapy is like wallowing in the tip. Often people get stuck in blame or going over the same ground. What I'm suggesting is more radical. It's about bold moves. It's about newness as a way of shifting blockages -- leaving old jobs, trying new things, creating space."

Hartmann himself has just come back from several months of cycling around Europe. He just closed his practice, got on a plane and took time to reinvent himself.

"People accused me of having a mid-life crisis as if this explained everything. I just laughed and said: 'I'm having a midlife breakthrough, not breakdown.' This was a great opportunity to really examine life, let in new energy, ideas, and establish new patterns.

"The most significant shifts come from experiences outside of our known world." He says as a result of his adventures his relationship with his family has never been stronger.

"I'm not talking about people abandoning their commitment to marriage or to each other. I'm talking about having a commitment which is so strong and flexible as to be able to weather people going out and experimenting, exploring freedom -- an agreed freedom which allows both parties to grow.

"We have to create our own relationship rules, not live by other people's," he maintains. He says he is physically fitter than he's ever been, old aches and pains have vanished. Meanwhile, he has been talking to people on his travels who have also taken the opportunity to move stale energy in their relationships by taking time out, spending time alone, meditating, opening doors to fresh experiences, or even having a dalliance.

"People have a lot of fear around sexual freedom but often allowing in new people, new blood, can be positive to the partnership.

Old patterns can be recognised and finally swept away, insights gleaned, passion and creativity unlocked."

Hartmann despairs that many of his patients remain trapped in fear. "It's a rigidity that is paralleled in their bodies. People are stuck in Good Mother, Good Spouse or Good Provider. They're scared of being judged. But most of all they're scared of losing the good things in their relationship: of chucking out the baby with the dirty bathwater.

"It doesn't have to happen. If you are proactive not reactive, open in your communication, not waiting around for things to grow rancid, you can have good health in body and soul," he says.

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