



Heart & soul

Cate Mackenzie, our resident love coach, helps readers open their hearts to relationships they never thought possible



Really hearing each other

This month, Cate talks about how to improve the communication in your relationship

My husband, Paul, and I are happily and harmoniously married, but in our first year of living together we had many arguments and we both felt a bit lost in terms of knowing how to improve things between us. We ended up seeking help in the form of couples counselling and two couples-retreat weekends, where we learned to really listen to each other.

We also discovered 'bridging', a communication technique where two people sit opposite each other, close together. One person talks and the other repeats what they have heard. This exercise helps you really take in what the other person has been saying to you.

This is such a vital tool because when partners don't really know what makes the other tick, or understand the issues that are important, they can end up inadvertently hurting each other on a regular basis. And that's not going to help their chances of going the distance.

I'll give you an example of this from my own relationship. Paul kept suggesting that I relax in front of a movie while he stroked my feet. I honestly thought that he was just being nice to me because he thought

that's what I wanted. But it turns out I'd completely misunderstood the situation.

During our first couples retreat, Paul said that, for a long time, he had been asking me to watch a whole movie while he stroked my feet, as he knows I would like that. But he felt that I had ignored his suggestion and he was upset about this.

I was blown away. He really meant it. After that, I took his request seriously and agreed it would be a nice thing to do.

That proved to be a real gift to me, teaching me to slow down, be in the moment and enjoy our time together.

When Paul and I got married last August we had already learned what the other person needed in order to feel safe and secure,

and to lessen the risk of arguments. We decided to write some of these needs into our vows.

We can still have difficult moments, like all couples, but we have many more clues now as to what the other might need, or how we can come back to a place of peace within our relationship.

Tips for a harmonious relationship

- Avoid deep, intense conversations by text, email or even on the phone. Leave these conversations until you

are face to face and both calm and settled, and have ideally been in each other's company for at least an hour.

- Try to remedy a tricky or fraught situation as much as you can before it escalates. Give your partner the chance to explain why they seem to be acting rude, or being snippy or dismissive towards you. By gently asking what is going on, you may find out they are behaving like this because they'd taken offence to something you had done, or it may be totally unrelated to anything you've said or done.

- Give as much praise as you can. We always hear negatives so strongly, so we need to balance them with as many positives as possible. Tell your partner all the things you appreciate about them.

- Gary Chapman is a relationship counsellor and author of *The 5 Love Languages: The Secret To Love That Lasts*. His book outlines five different ways or 'languages' to express and experience love – words of affirmation, service (such as vacuuming or cooking a meal), gifts, physical touch and time spent together. Find out your partner's top two love languages and try to engage with them each day.

- Take breaks where it's just the two of you so you can open up and rediscover each other. See this time as essential maintenance, a bit like putting oil and water into your car. ■



WANT TO FIND OUT MORE? Cate Mackenzie is a love coach and couples counsellor with more than 20 years' experience. For more information about her work, visit catemackenzie.com