

Three romantic myths

Relationship therapist James Earl looks at the myths that can derail a relationship.



A good relationship should be fun, and enhance each partner's individual growth. In the search for a relationship like this, there are several unhelpful myths which can trip us up. Here are three of them.



2 It's good to mind-read! (Hmm... don't try this at home)

Tom asks Sally, 'How are you?' Sally replies, 'I'm fine.'

The answer is a little abrupt. Tom senses there is something wrong. 'Are you sure you're fine?' Sally says, 'I told you I'm fine!'

Tom says, 'Well now you seem cross!' Sally says, 'I'm cross now you keep asking!'

Tom's antennae are twitching – it has stopped being a simple concern about Sally, and become instead about his own anxiety. 'What's wrong? Is it something I've said or done?'

Now Sally has to cope with both her own mood and Tom's anxiety. No wonder she's cross!

Tom might have reasoned as follows: perhaps I'm wrong about Sally not being fine. After all, I don't really know how she's feeling. But assuming I'm right about her, then the subtext of Sally's somewhat abrupt response is actually 'I don't want to talk about it.'

Either way, I should take her first answer, leave her with her own feelings and not chase her.

We tend to think that either we CAN read each other's minds, or we SHOULD do so if we are in a truly loving couple. Genuine empathy, however, is giving your partner space. It's time to give up the romantic myth that we should mind-read.

1 It's good to merge! (No, it's really not)

Everyone in a couple has two identities: their individual self, and as half the couple. And these two identities are in tension.

A couple moves from me, to us and then back: from close, to less close; from autonomy, to intimacy, and so on. The most effective and happy couples are not ones where the individuals merge in their couple-ness, but where individual identities are retained and strengthened in the couple.

In couples that do this well, the relationship feels like a place where individual dreams and self-expression are supported by the other person, rather than held back. This is vital if we are to feel the relationship is a good place to be. This regulation of intimacy is evident, for example, in sharing time talking together – and then going out with our individual friends.

But the idea of two identities is also a state of mind: where each partner understands and enjoys the individuality of the other, as well as finding time for intimacy with them. If we spend time apart, there are several good outcomes. Firstly, morale increases – and this positivity can be brought back to the couple.

Secondly, the possibility of desire increases. It is difficult to desire someone that is always there! We desire across space. The potential for intimacy is enhanced, rather than threatened, by independence.

The romantic myth that love should fuse us into one is just that – a myth.

3 It's good to make love! (Maybe, but how about having sex?)

When we first meet, we 'just' have sex. But we change our language when we live with someone we love – we aspire to 'make love'.

This is not always a beneficial switch. The idea of making love adds an emotional significance which can take away from the light-hearted and playful nature of sex.

How many of us, if we are honest, find it easy to elevate the fondness,

security and warmth of love into the wildly erotic? The pressures of family life and the routines of domesticity play their part. Many couple's experience is that as love deepens, far from sex becoming more exciting and frequent, it becomes less exciting and less frequent.

If sex is all about expressing love, it can become a duty ('If we're not having sex, I don't feel you love me.'). And dutiful sex is – well, usually dreadful. If you catch yourself saying 'We should have sex' or, even worse, 'I'll have sex

to keep my partner happy', we are maybe on the wrong track.

Why not see sex as a 'play space', where we take time out from everyday responsibilities? It can be very freeing, if you have enough trust in your partner, to ask for what you want and express yourself sexually.

This requires a conversation about our individual sexualities (no different from our tastes in music, painting or food). And the romantic myth that sex is 'making love', is no help. jamesearl.com