

# WHEN THE *honeymoon* IS OVER

After the initial transformation of falling in love, many couples reach the "conflict stage". Therapist Hilda Burke explains how to negotiate clashing egos

COMMON PERCEIVED WISDOM – fairy tales, popular music, films – give us multiple examples of the transforming power of love. The beast turned into a prince, the sleeping beauty is kissed awake into a living beauty. It all sounds wonderful, and so simple. However, the reality of what I have witnessed in my own life and, indeed, working as a therapist with couples points to a different kind of truth about love. Competent, sane individuals becoming unstuck, losing their bearings when they move deeper into a relationship.

As the initial honeymoon period ends, most relationships find themselves at the conflict stage. Characterised by disappointment, anger and frustration, typically, this is the point at which couples seeking therapy are entrenched.

At the heart of it is our ego – the need to be right winning out over the desire to love/be loved. We've come up hard against each other and our expectations of our beloved are clashing with the reality of what we're experiencing. When the couples' egos gain the upper hand, they become locked into the same argument loop again and again – circling each other, snarling but never really

listening or discovering what lies beneath, which is invariably unmet childhood needs that are resurfacing in the intimate relationship. So essentially when the couple is in conflict they're really just rehashing old grievances from childhood, which they probably couldn't verbalise or feel safe talking about as children.

It all sounds pretty awful and it frequently is; there aren't many love songs written about this crucial stage of love. While the conflict stage looks like it's bringing out 'the worst' in us, it can also hold within it the seeds of potential transformation. The key is to stay present with ourselves and aware when our buttons are being pressed by our partner. And this is where psychotherapy can play a huge role in supporting the couple to avoid the usual tendency of fight or flight. Taking a step back from the conflict of the relationship in the therapy room, can allow both parties the space to trace the real roots of their discontent, which inevitably stem from their formative years.

For a relationship to endure past the conflict stage, a significant change has to occur.

Crucially, the couple will have taken back their projections and



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assumed responsibility for their own selves. In short, they have become adults. If in the conflict stage, our partner holds a mirror up to ourselves and what we see upsets us so much that we avert our gaze, at the next stage of the relationship, which in my training was known as 'the union', we can actually look directly in that mirror and start to own what we see there. Instead of reacting to what our partner says, we take a step back, adjust our gaze and consider whether it holds some truth for us.

There is acceptance at this stage – acceptance of our partner and our selves. We've given up the struggle. That's not to say it's easy or that we won't ever raise our voices again. We will. But perhaps we're able to look at what we're reacting to so furiously with a curiosity to learn rather than automatically blaming our partner for it.

There is a realisation that the love, while offering us so much richness and potential for growth, is never going to be the be-all and end-all and that ultimately we are responsible for our own happiness, both inside and outside the relationship. The more we can do this, owning our projections, taking our share of responsibility for whatever happens, the less we will be inclined to

'blame' our partner. It's actually a liberating thing – it transforms us from the role of victim to being an equal and full player in our own relationship.

The potential for growth in a relationship is boundless. But to experience that growth, we are first confronted with the shadowy parts of ourselves and we have a choice – on the one hand to blame the other, project the unwanted bits onto them and/or end the relationship or, on the other, to take the longer, less travelled route. The latter approach entails letting our partner see beyond the mask we have fashioned for ourselves, facing up to ourselves, accepting the disowned parts that don't sit comfortably with our egos. This isn't easy work as our identities and the coping mechanisms we may have relied upon since childhood are being challenged. However, the pay-offs can be very far-reaching – only in terms of our relationship but also our self development.

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