

The Little Things

Interview with relationship counsellor, Stella

'The issues that happen aren't really big ones. It's the small things. It's the things that happen daily whereby you feel taken advantage of, disrespected, unloved. It's those little bricks.'

Celia: Most couples go through a stage where that original adrenaline rush of being in love gives way to little frustrations that can slowly build until suddenly you wonder where that first love went. It doesn't have to be the end though. My guest today is couple's counsellor, Stella. She's been through her own journey of falling in and out of love with her partner and knows what it takes to rediscover that love again.

Thanks for joining us Stella. Do you find that there are common issues that come up a lot?

Stella: I feel like the issues that happen aren't really big ones. It's the small things. It's the things that happen daily whereby you feel taken advantage of, disrespected, unloved. It's those little bricks that I talk about - the wall. That we all have a clean slate to begin with.

Celia: Give me an example of what the little bricks are.

Stella: He says something inappropriate in front of a friend, or she embarrasses him in front of his mates or he constantly throws all his clothes everywhere. It can be small things that really bother you.

I remember with my husband, I cleaned the floor for two hours, I had a big floor. And he walk in with his dirty boots. I'm like, 'You've just walked all over the floor.' And he's 'oh yeah, no biggie.' There was no sense of, 'Oh, I'm sorry, darl, I didn't mean to do that.' He'd just walked all over it, and I remember thinking 'He doesn't love me. He doesn't care about me.' It was a real stab in the heart for me.

So, it's those little things that you probably think in the moment are nothing, but actually I think they're little bricks on a wall that build up over the months and years. In the beginning they can't do anything wrong and after a while they can't do anything right! And I know for him, it's like, he will do the grass and if I don't sort of acknowledge that, 'Oh, wow, that looks lovely,' he feels like he's not appreciated. It's how we interpret what they do.

Celia: And what matters to you and learning what matters to the other person.

Stella: Absolutely.

Celia: It's so interesting. Isn't it? At the start, you can gloss over a lot of that stuff.

Stella: Well, you're too full of dopamine to realise. You're basically in a hypnotized state where you're in love and loved up and you've got all that. Yeah, absolutely. And then that wears off as we all know.

Celia: So, the little things. When is it that you notice that suddenly becomes the issue?

Stella: Well, I think that's when you've got a big enough brick wall. Because as these things build, and they might happen every day, but you don't say anything cos they're small and you don't want to cause problems. Or maybe you're the kind of personality that doesn't want to confront or have that difficult conversation. So, you let things go, you let things go. And then after a while the wall starts to get a bit bigger and then it's like you can't even look at them without this feeling coming over you of like, 'Errrr.' Like you're angry or frustrated or feel unloved and that's when the brick wall starts to build on both sides. Then you end up in a place where, 'how the hell did we end up here? And then all of a sudden, you're like, 'Hmm, I'm not sure if I even like this person very much.'

Celia: So where do you go with that?

Stella: For me, I talk about the table metaphor. If you want a stable relationship, it's a bit like a table. You have to have the four legs.

Stella: The first one for me is commitment. A lot of people think 'oh commitment means I'll be with you forever.' And to me, that's not what commitment is. Commitment is about committing to deal with anything as it comes up in the moment, and a lot of couples don't do that. They put it all under the carpet, and if they've got a habit of, you know, when a couple discuss something, all they do is end up arguing. Then they learn, no this is not safe, it's not safe to really talk about how I really feel.

Celia: Or it doesn't make any difference?

Stella: Well, yes, there's that but also if you're too hurting to hear it, you get very defensive. So, you feel like you're being criticised or always constantly nagged you and when your brick walls are already high, you can't hear anything, because you're going to be so hurt or wounded that you don't even have the ability to listen. And I think that resentment gets in the way of having that loving communication that you need to have to work things out.

Celia: So that's commitment. What's the second leg we need for a stable relationship?

Stella: The second one is honesty, but we're not talking about honesty out of your head because a lot of people think honesty is well, 'I'll tell you what I think.' It's not about blaming. It's not about pointing fingers. No, honesty is authenticity. I'll tell you how I feel. That takes a lot more courage because to open up your heart and actually say, 'When you did that, I felt really hurt' is vulnerability.

Celia: Do you have an example of how honesty plays out?

Stella: My mother had an alcoholic father. So, she always talked about alcohol as being evil. So, when I used to see my husband drink, I didn't realise it, but I'd feel very fearful and then that would impact the way I behave towards him. It took me a long time to understand that actually. It wasn't until I actually said that to him, I said, 'You know, when you start to drink, I feel fear and when I feel that way, I kind of act a bit weird. I get very controlling and I get a bit narky and I realised it's because I'm in fear.' And he was like, 'Wow, I didn't realise.' And so those kinds of conversations elicit trust within a relationship. I don't have to guess how you're feeling. You're going to be upfront and open and honest. And that's about creating that safe space. You have to feel safe in a relationship.

Celia: And that brings us to table leg three. Trust

Stella: Trust doesn't grow without honesty. For example, if you've been taught to be a people pleaser, you're just going to say yes, even to things you don't want to do. You can't trust someone, that's a chronic people pleaser, because they're just going to do what they think they should do, not that they want to do and they will build up resentment.

Now my husband's a great people pleaser, and I'm like, 'Please don't just say yes, because you think that's going to make me happy' because I will pay the price of that. You'll feel resentful, and then you'll take it out on me in a way that you probably don't even understand, but I will feel that resentment and vice versa. I was brought up to be one too. We all are to a certain degree and that's how we got through life growing up, you know, it's a survival thing.

Celia: And love can be really hard work. It can be beautiful, but it can be really hard work.

Stella: It's like, love is not a feeling, it's a choice. It's an act of will. You know, I choose to stay in this relationship because that is who I want to be in this world.

Celia: We've talked about the first three legs, commitment, honesty, and trust. Stella what's the crucial fourth leg?

Stella: The fourth leg is loving kindness. I might not agree with what you say, but I love you. So, I'm going to listen and care enough about you to hear your heart. It's a lot easier to connect to someone when they're speaking from their heart, as opposed to me telling them, 'Well, when you drink or, you know, you just kind of blah, blah, blah, blah, blah,' out of your head, you know what I'm saying? But can I tell you how I feel? That's another ball game, that takes a lot of courage.

Celia: And it takes a lot of understanding yourself too. And I was thinking that when someone's vulnerable with you, how much that connects you?

Stella: Yeah. Every time I have a couple in, if a husband starts to weep, I would say to the wife or vice versa, 'When you see your husband weep, how do you feel? Do you want to move towards him or move away from him?' Absolutely 99.9% of the time they go, 'Oh no, I feel more drawn to him.' They want to move towards him. You see, men have this belief that, 'if I get emotional, I'm going to be weak. Therefore, I'm not going to look very manly.' And it's the opposite for women. I don't think you could connect to anyone's "okay-ness." You can only connect to someone in their vulnerability.

And this is what I do, I create this safe space. So, people can say what's really going on. So, if you're frightened or you're walking around on tippy toe, because, you know, if you just say, 'Well, this isn't working,' they get all upset and defensive and you're like, 'Oh gosh.' So, you never do those crucial conversations about actually, 'I'm struggling here.' So, it is a very complex thing and nothing's ever the same, no two couples are alike. But I think basically we all need to feel loved, supported, worthy, listened to, heard, understood. We need to be allowed to feel what we feel. So, for me, it's about let's tear down that brick wall. Let's be honest about how we really feel.

I think a lot of couples come in and are feeling so hopeless and most of the time I say, 'What are you going to take away?' And most of them say 'Hope. Hope that this relationship can be repaired.' And I think that's the biggest thing. If you can give a couple hope, especially when you've been through it and out the other end and repaired what I would consider an unrepairable marriage. I felt like I was gone. I was gone. I did not want to go back to my husband. Sometimes we have to fall apart and we have to have a breakdown before we have a breakthrough. I think that's humanity. It's human-beingness. I love couples because I know what I went through and I know how much courage it took for us to work through it. And I would say the best thing that ever happened to us was our relationship falling apart. Because when we reconstructed it, we built it much more securely on solid ground than what it was before.

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