

Parent talk: Violent relationships

By Sheila O'Malley

We are bombarded with images of Rihanna's injuries following an alleged assault by her boyfriend, Chris Brown. Yet, we hear now that she has taken him back and it is difficult for people to understand this.

Why would a famous and confident woman return to a boyfriend who has allegedly beaten her up? Things may not be as they seem, though; there may be deeper issues to resolve.

Chris Brown has spoken candidly about the violence his mother endured from his stepfather. He described a feeling of terror and having no one to turn to; he bed wetted, which was a way of releasing his fear. Rihanna has spoken about her father's crack cocaine habit and the conflict it created in her home. All of this brings to mind the sayings "Birds of a feather flock together", and "Problems marry problems".

The origins of how you feel about yourself lie mainly in the early childhood years, where positive and affirming relationships result in moderate/high self-esteem.

On the other hand, frequent negative experiences can result in low self-esteem. This is because these relationships are the looking glass for the child to determine the self-image that forms.

Maturity

We know the parents' sense of self determines the wellbeing of the child. Parents can only bring their child to the same level of development and maturity that they have reached themselves. Later in life, your choice of partner is someone with a similar level of self-esteem to your own, because someone with higher self-esteem would be threatening.

Each of us comes into adulthood with our own emotional baggage, everyone holds some doubt about their worth and capability. The origins of family difficulties can go back generations, unless someone stops, reflects and takes the necessary actions to bring about change.

If all behaviour makes sense, then what lies hidden needs to be revealed. The most common challenging behaviours adults/parents show are: aggression, passivity, controlling, perfectionism, pushiness, depression, sarcasm, irritability, addicted to work, over-protective mother (not allowing a person do things for themselves).

Challenging behaviours arise from inner fears and insecurities and when used, are designed to reduce emotional and social threats to their wellbeing. The sources of these behaviours lie in our childhood experiences and are crying out for resolution.

Identification of challenging behaviours we use is necessary to their resolution. Challenging behaviours always have a protective and an alerting intention.

These parents' challenging behaviours become a threat to a child expressing feelings. The child either "acts in" (passive) or "acts out" (aggressive). Passivity to abusive behaviour from a partner shows a poor sense of self.

Research shows that physical abuse continues, as what you send out from yourself (I don't deserve any better/it was my fault/shame etc) is what you are most likely to get back. Tolerating abuse indicates you do not respect or value yourself.

Aggression may be seen as a protective behaviour; a person may be aggressive to prevent a re-occurrence of the abandonment he or she experienced as a child. Aggression is a means of forcing another to be always there with you.

However, the other person's passivity reinforces your aggression and provides you with the rationale "Nothing would get done here, if I didn't shout about it".

Opposites attract

Very often a man is aggressive with a woman who is behaviourally passive.

He may be repeating the pattern of his father and may have married a woman who behaves like his mother.

The female partner may be behaving like her own mother, who may have been involved with a man who behaviourally and emotionally resembles her own father.

Both parties have emerged from families of origin that were neglectful of their emotional welfare as they were growing up.

It's very likely they will repeat the unfulfilling relationships of their parents, but opportunity for change exists.

Conclusion

What is the cause of my challenging behaviour?

Early relationships.

What is the intention of my challenging behaviour?

To protect from hurt.

What is the solution?

Recovery of self.

Recovery of self

All challenging behaviours are an expression arising from abandonment; therefore we use these defences to prevent a repeat of our childhood experience.

If the cause is usually in relationships, then the cure is also in relationship. However, this time, an unconditional loving relationship with yourself. Parent yourself as you would parent a child, with love, gentleness, kindness and compassion. In other words, be the parent to yourself that, perhaps, your own parent was unable to be to you.

This will, over time, result in a more solid sense of self from where no one can demean you. It is an act of caring courage to admit to your vulnerabilities and seek the appropriate help.

I hope Rihanna takes time to reflect on what happened, learns from the past and seeks the right support she needs at this time.

Sheila O'Malley qualified as a parent mentor with Dr Tony Humphreys and gives courses/workshops and talks to organisations. Call 086 875 9086 or go to www.practicalparenting.ie for more information.

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