

Recipes for Relationship Success:

NAVIGATING QUESTIONS OF INTIMACY WITH YOUR CLIENTS

by Trevor Owen

There appear to be two ways in which people have sex.

Way One: Let's look at "Joe," who is the sort of a fellow who is sexually intimate with one person or a few people over a lifetime in the context of a long-term monogamous relationship(s). His relationships generally end as a result of separation, divorce, or death. Although losing a loved one in this fashion is particularly difficult, emotional and stressful, Joe is still able to feel and empathize with others. He still has the ability to connect with those closest to him and to support those dependent on him, like his children.

Way Two: The other way is reflected by "Billy-Bob," who is swayed by the Hollywood message that promotes sexual intimacy with any person that one desires. Since Billy-Bob is unable to invest emotionally in every sexual partner, sex becomes an act of release purely for physical needs, like eating, sleeping or breathing. His behaviour causes him to become an "emotional dwarf," unable to empathize or open up fully with others, which has an enormous impact on his ability to parent and to sustain healthy emotional relationships. An unfaithful person finds that his infidelity inevitably creates emotional distance between himself and his partner, which can usually be felt by the other partner even though there may not be concrete knowledge of unfaithfulness.

Fortunately, there is a solution for the downward spiral of shallow sexual behavior. If Billy-Bob seeks committed monogamy within marriage, he will eventually rediscover the ability to empathize and trust. He may have to seek forgiveness from those he hurt while engaging in shallow sexual behaviour, but reconciliation is often possible and always worthwhile.

Emotional Connection: To connect emotionally with someone else is always to risk hurt and rejection. However, to live with emotional distance from others results in loneliness and superficiality of life experience: one misses out on much of the best of what life has to offer.

Frequently, clients have claimed that they will "never marry again." I have sometimes asked whether, if I could find someone who would unconditionally love them for the rest of their lives, they would marry such a person. I add that they would also like the person in question a lot! Most of these hurting souls then nod that they would consider that sort of a person to be in a rela-

tionship with. Yet in our society it is fairly easy to have a relationship of an evening's duration and it is tough to find one that could last a lifetime. When such conversations occur, my intent is to reduce the bitterness these people are experiencing so that they do not erect undue emotional barriers to people with whom they could actually and positively connect to in the future.

Impact of Sexual Intimacy: Having sexual contact usually releases the hormones that influence a person's judgment, be it a Joe or a Billy-Bob. Sound advice from friends and family can be eclipsed by a hormonal rush that can take months or years to subside. By then the situation is often complicated by cohabitation or a child, which makes a bad situation more difficult (and expensive) to handle.

The importance of sexual boundaries and receptiveness to advice when forming new relationships cannot be overstated. Discerning someone's potential to be a mate is always a difficult task, but it is a task made more daunting the more one's emotions start playing havoc with one's judgment. Rather than rely on one's ability to keep emotions at bay in what is self-evidently an arena for emotions, caution and reaching out to friends and family is prudent. In almost every one of the thousands of failed marriages I have seen, my client has related how her parents had doubts about her prospective partner—advice she dismissed. Parents usually have a good idea of what will work for their children and, if asked (sometimes without being asked!), can provide sound insight as to the relationship's chances of long-term success. Close friends and siblings are usually not that far behind in their ability to discern a person's potential for being a good mate to their friend or sibling.

There is also the impact of new sexual partnerships on children. I vividly recall one case in which a woman who had the primary custody of two children appeared to change her sexual partners every six to eight weeks over the course of a few years. Each partner was "Uncle So-and-So" to the children. Introducing what turned out to be fairly short-term and superficial relationships to the children was confusing for them on a variety of levels. The term "uncle" really lost all meaning as someone who could be a significant and long-term member of the children's extended family. The children came to think that their mother's partners were all going to be short-lived and their ability to reach out emotionally to others, particularly to men, was negatively impacted. Protecting children from having contact with new romantic interests until it is clear that such romantic inter-

ests are serious and are going to be longer-term in nature is simply better for the children's emotional wellbeing. While complete foresight in such situations is impossible to achieve, one can still get rid of a lot of relational "chaff" and leave the relational "wheat" for the children to come to know.

Property & Support Concerns: Whether one gets involved in an unwise marriage or cohabitation there are legal consequences that can flow. Spousal support and sometimes child support can result from either situation if there is an income difference between parties. Obviously there can be property sharing consequences from marriages and constructive trust claims arising from cohabitations. So reminding your clients of these realities when they are tempted to plunge into another relationship after barely extracting themselves from the last one is simply being a good lawyer.

Biblical Perspective/Standard: God knew it all along. Biblical admonitions about sexual fidelity (e.g. Romans 1:24 or 1 Thesalonians 4:3-8) were not put there by a sexual killjoy, but by a Creator who knew that some of our deepest needs were emotional, particularly our desire to be known and appreciated by others. Emotional connection allows one to experience and provide love. Sexual connection might exist in and of itself but is best in the context of significant emotional connection. The classic expression that God does not so much impose morality as expose reality is revealing. The Scriptural admonitions to keep sex within marriage can be seen to indicate that the best and most frequent sex can be found within the boundaries of the greatest emotional and legal commitment. Certainly, my clients have related that they have more sex within marriage than outside of it - claims that are supported by the social science research on the diverse benefits of married life, including sexual fulfillment.

Even married couples should be advised, however, that outside forces may impact the health of their sexual relationships. For example, pornography can rob couples of their sexual desire for each other. The presence of children, who simply require a great deal of parental energy, can decrease the frequency of marital sex. By not resolving the emotional frictions that arise in any long-term relationship, couples may allow these problems to develop into obstacles that hinder sexual and emotional connection.

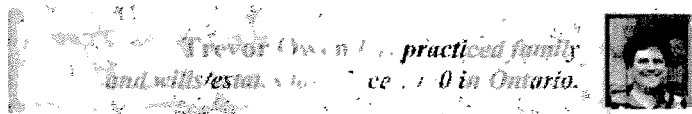
Many of these issues can

be resolved through openness and transparent communication, but, in some cases, barriers between couples are simply the result of poor choices in partner selection. Believers ought not make relational commitments unless they have a clear sense that it is what God wants them to do. Discerning God's will can be effected by the usual means of prayer, Biblical reflection, and the words of wisdom gathered from the person's community of supporters, such as parents, siblings, friends, and pastors.

Lawyer's Role: In advising one's clients, one should urge caution and prudence in dating. Clients should be alerted to the emotional impact of sex and the resulting inability to act objectively or use common sense. Provoking people to recognize solutions for themselves is the best response a lawyer can give, as it will cause them to consider the consequences of their actions and will reduce the lawyer's risk of being seen to impose a view upon the client.

Caution in dating, and in sexual intimacy particularly, saves heartache and minimizes clients' chances of returning to their lawyers for "repeat business" as they sort through the debris from yet another failed relationship. When parents avoid subsequent failed relationships they also benefit their children, who also have to live through the experiences. In short, it is simply prudent parenting and good stewardship to be more like Joe than Billy-Bob.

As in a court case, the best facts always constitute the strongest position. Advise your clients to get all the facts before committing to another relationship. ✚



Law, without obstacles

Go with Garfinkle, Biderman LLP. Practicing in most areas of the law, with emphasis on:

- Bankruptcy, insolvency & creditor's rights
- Real estate purchases, sales & development
- Real property & commercial litigation
- Corporations
- Business agreements, purchases & sales
- Employment Law
- Mortgages & mortgage enforcement
- Commercial tenancies

Deutschsprechender Anwalt:
Jeffrey A.L. Kriwetz
Partner

416-869-1234 ex.234
jkriwetz@garfinkle.com

1 Adelaide Street East,
Suite 801, Toronto, Ontario
Canada M5C 2V9

Garfinkle, Biderman
Barristers & Solicitors

www.garfinkle.com