

'Relate saved our marriage'

When it looked like all was lost for Rachel and Jon, they discovered refuge, advice and the space to talk at Relate Cambridge.

Elaine Taylor tells their story, which they want to share with other couples who may be at the end of their tether

Last year Rachel, 41, a designer, and Jon*, 46, a sales manager, had reached a stage where it seemed their 20 year marriage was at rock bottom. Over the years, their lives had become completely separate, and they were both preoccupied with other people, work, sport and projects. The relationship had lost unity, trust and understanding and they were both avoiding the situation until it got to a point that suggested they had no future together.

'We were in a rut,' says Rachel. 'We had forgotten who we were. Before I married Jon I was a goal setter and achieved a lot, but somewhere between raising two children, marriage and day-to-day life I had lost my sense of self. There was the feeling of being trapped, going round and round and not being able to break through, being in a negative environment and desperately wanting things to change.'

Easy to forget

Desperate to save their marriage, the couple decided to visit Relate for weekly relationship counselling. Jon and Rachel are both from broken homes, and know at first hand the impact of divorce on a family – certainly, when it came to seeking counselling, this was a huge motivation as they have two teenage daughters and were all too aware of the impact on them.

'It is easy to forget about your children and become wrapped up in your own feelings, in order to justify your decision to end the relationship,' says Rachel. 'We asked ourselves – did we stay together for the girls? No. Did they help us to stay together? Yes.'

At their counselling sessions, Jon and Rachel were able to talk openly and honestly – though not all sessions were easy and sparks could fly. 'The first few meetings were

crucial and gave us hope to carry on,' say the couple. 'Over the weeks we built up trust and respect for our counsellor, Nicola. Having a neutral, safe place to talk, as well as not feeling judged and being able to express our initial feelings were all important.'

Both loved the session when they talked about the positives – why they liked each other – and found it fascinating. During another session they looked at how little time they actually gave to each other and realised that everything had become so serious they had lost the ability to play and have fun in their relationship.

Hearing and understanding

'The most fundamental thing for me,' says Jon, 'was how Nicola enabled us to hear and understand the meaning of what the other said, and not what we thought we heard, as well as to always ask again. Following our sessions, we now constantly use the question "What's the purpose?" in order to stop us getting tangled in a web of "You are right and I'm wrong" scenarios.'

What happened after the counselling was just as important, though – it was the work they put in between their sessions with Nicola that really helped Jon and Rachel to grow and change. 'Sometimes we'd have a cooling-off period, sometimes we'd go to lunch and decide on further discussion,' says Jon. 'The important thing was we began to support each other, to recognise what the other needed – whether it was a cuddle, some space, or the chance to open up more.'

Going to Relate each week for some months gave Jon and Rachel continuity but was a commitment to a certain level of investment. 'It was a big thing – a choice to invest

in us every week over an 18-month period,' they say. For a year and a half they put fixing their relationship first, and believe they have learnt what makes them happy.

Since the counselling ended, Jon is proud to talk about going to Relate, and the effect it has had on their lives. He now puts Rachel first, allocating time to their marriage and backing up his words with actions.

Rachel says, 'I always wanted to believe a leopard – or even a leopardess – could change its spots and now I know it can. I love the changes we have made.'

Rediscovering each other

The counselling has had a big impact on the whole family. Daughter Sam, 16, says, 'The family have opened up to each other and we talk about our issues. We have grown as four adults and are more understanding of each other – I'm really grateful to Relate for keeping our family together.'

'It's really upsetting as a teenager to experience your parents arguing, and it's the worst feeling not knowing if they will stay together,' says 18-year-old Laura. 'I am so glad my parents went to Relate; I have seen them grow together as a couple again. We have all rediscovered each other and working together instead of against one another. I now look forward to coming home and knowing Mum and Dad will be in the same house.'

'We are both eternally grateful to Relate Cambridge and our counsellor Nicola,' say Jon and Rachel. 'We want to give them the credit for the help and support we received, and we want to tell other people that it's worth it, particularly people who feel it may be too late for them. Especially, we want to help people get over what they may perceive as being off-putting about having counselling.'

● For more information about Relate visit relatecambridge.org.uk or call 01 223 357424

