

Coming to Terms with a Non-fairytale Beginning

Sometimes one or both people in a relationship struggle to come to terms with the conditions under which it was formed. Common examples are where:

- trust breaches occurred
- one or both people were already in a committed relationship
- one or both people were in a dysfunctional state such as drug-affected, unwell, or in some sort of crisis
- there was an unplanned pregnancy
- there were some other difficult situational factors such as an illness, injury or a death.

In such circumstances, meeting one another could have been experienced as fraught, upsetting, complex, controversial or shameful in some way, contributing to a sense of the relationship being somehow sullied or spoiled before it had the chance to develop. The memories or perceived impact of these beginnings could seem to be 'hanging over' the relationship creating a negative atmosphere and the potential for further damage to be caused.

Regret about the way the relationship was formed can be heightened by a wish that you and your partner had some version of a normal or acceptable beginning, or perhaps even a 'fairytale' one that you might have encountered in novels or movies – the type that many people grow up believing or at least hoping will happen to them. These sorts of regrets and fantasies are understandable as it is the nature of the mind to dwell on the past and create idyllic alternative scenarios.

What to do about it

Couples who feel that they missed out on a normal or fairytale beginning to their relationship, yet who seem to have come to terms with it do at least two things well. Firstly, they face the issue head on. As with so many relationship problems, the key is to develop insights into your own and the other person's experience. It's a good idea to encourage each other to tell the story, uninterrupted, of how your relationship was formed. This way each person can develop their understanding of what their partner is carrying with them. There's no need to try to persuade your partner that it wasn't that bad, only to let them know that you are trying to understand how it might have been for them.

Secondly, these couples give careful thought to how they present the beginnings of the relationship to people outside it. There are three options. The first is to keep the story

completely private. The second is to tell everyone the whole story 'warts and all'. The third is to agree upon a story that is somewhere between these two options.

An alternative approach is to tell different stories to different people depending on how well you think they'll understand and not judge you. The important thing here is that each of you is comfortable with how your relationship is being portrayed to others and that your story is consistent with your partners.

A narrative therapy technique

A narrative therapy technique that can be beneficial to couples who are grappling with perceived difficult beginnings to their relationship is known as 're-writing the narrative' or 're-storying the relationship'. This is a creative exercise that involves partners expressing how they wished they had met. You can make it as long and elaborate as you like. Just have fun with it. What happens for some couples is that these invented narratives can sit alongside the actual narrative. Over time, especially if you keep embellishing the story with each re-telling, the invented memories may become as compelling and important as your actual ones. I mean, memories are just constructions anyway!

For example:

'I'd like to think we were secret childhood sweethearts and when we finally 'came out', we resisted all comers who tried to break us up.'

Or

'We actually met at the Beijing Olympic Village after we'd both won gold in the gymnastics. We then retired and spent the next six months as professional dancers on a cruise ship in the Pacific before eloping in Vanuatu.'

Remember, just as many fairytales have tragic endings, many relationships that have a non-fairytale beginning end up being fantastic and fulfilling, perhaps even more so as a result of your overcoming the initial adversity together.