

LIFE / HEALTH & FITNESS / HOLISTIC HEALTH

Teen couples counseling: Can you relate?

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This could be the beginning of something beautiful, like building healthy relationship skills.

Kurhan

Parents may think that a teenage romance is simplistic, fleeting or even silly. However, relationship problems will show up in adolescence which can be worked through. Even if the relationship ends, the ability to relate endures. Teen Couples Counseling is a new application of relational theory which an inventive local clinician is using with her clients.

Theresa Hubbard, a beautiful therapist inside and out, uses her innovative ideas within the scope of grounded theory, to help teenage couples develop healthier relationships. I had the opportunity to spend a morning with her, listening to her share her depth of understanding about counseling couples. The following story is hers to tell.

We spend an incredible amount of money on our children for sports, music, dance, whatever is their heart's desire. However, we don't spend money helping them to learn to have **great relationships**. Which is interesting because isn't that our heart's desire?

"He never calls me to check on me when he is with his friends. I don't think he ever thinks about me."
"Whenever I talk to her about an idea I have, she makes me feel like an idiot."

Sound familiar? Who would think that this is coming from a 15- and 16-year-old couple that I have seen in counseling. They have been dating for almost a year and have run into some relationship issues. Their parents are struggling to help them. Not a surprise since both of their parents have struggled outwardly in their own relationships. They feel helpless to help their children. They get defensive thinking that the "other" person is the one to blame for all the problems their child is having in the relationship.

So, at my encouragement of the parents, the couple has come to counseling. They really want their relationship to work. They really do. They had such a great time at the beginning of their relationship, and they want that back. That sounds familiar too.

When I talked to them about what their partner does that hurts so much, the preceding quotes and more similar disgruntled comments were shared. I explained to them that the things that their partner has done which hurt them, pushed against core values. Whether those values are the need to feel important, respected, smart, loved, social, etc. ... the list goes on and on. I can guarantee you that without some relationship guidance and the desire for their relationship to be about understanding and respect for each other's core values, the instances of hurting each other will continue to be a problem for them their entire relationship and beyond.

So what about the length of their relationship. We have talked about that too. How long do they think it will last? "Oh gosh, through high school, for sure." "We may make it through college, if we end up going to the same school." We talked about the likelihood of this happening.

They started to understand that this period of their life is about growth and change. That the person seen today may not be the same next week, next month or next year. That we don't "change" together as a couple. Not in the same way, at the same rate or at the same time. Adults have a huge difficulty understanding, believing and accepting this idea. Teenagers seem more open to the idea because they feel themselves changing so much and most of them are very aware of it. It can still be very confusing.

They are open to the idea that they may not be together for long because the person they love today possibly won't be that person two weeks from now. However, that doesn't help either one to start making all the right choices today. They want the other person to change first. They both think the other person has more problems, so the partner needs to work more on personal issues. I aim to help them to develop the desire for it (relating) to be better. For them to want and need to be in a relationship where both people inspire and support each other to be better people.

At the core of all relationships is the need to be wanted and respected. Sometimes we forget that for teenagers it is no different. We discount their relationships and tell them that what they are experiencing is no big deal. "Don't worry about it," we say. "You will date lots of people so just don't worry about this one."

Why not work on it now? What a great opportunity to work on discovering who is a great fit for us. Wouldn't it be great if we could do some of this relationship work now, when we aren't so set in our ways when the time comes for us to commit? Could it possibly help us down the road in choosing our committed partner if we understood more about our core values, how to respect each other and how the process of change happens in ourselves and in relationships?

What I love most about the opportunity to work with this teen couple is that they are exposed to things that they haven't heard before from someone who isn't their parent and they are really hearing it. It doesn't mean that they will handle this relationship perfectly, but they will have more information than before which provides an opportunity to live it while they are in the relationship with each other. Helping them in every future relationship when they choose to use what they have been given. New thinking for an old tradition, love.

Theresa Hubbard, MS, LMFT, LCMFT is a Marriage and Family Therapist in private practice in Liberty, Missouri and Overland Park, Kansas. She received her post-graduate degree from Friends University. Theresa is on the Executive Board for the Missouri Association for Marriage and Family Therapy and the Greater Kansas City Chapter of the Missouri Division of AAMFT. She enjoys helping her clients on their journey for a quality life experience. Many find her compassionate, non-judgmental and inquisitive approach helps them to ease the challenge of confronting their personal issues.