

PERSPECTIVES

weekender.

LOVE IN TODAY'S WORLD

BY TARNYA DAVIS

MY HUSBAND and I have known each other for 20 years this month. I'd like to say it's all been as loved-up as a newlyweds Instagram feed, but that wouldn't be true.

There has been lots and lots of joy, but also three houses, a renovation, four children in four years (a statistic achieved with a set of twins late in the piece), a degree, a death and a busy psychology practice have all played a part in our very occasional troubles.

Like many, we share common views on the fundamentals of politics and the importance of travel.

We also have differences, like our approaches to deadlines, where in the house it's acceptable to leave the car keys and how to put up a tent.

We come from very different families. One had the atheist nuclear family, two parents two children, one divorce and two remarriages. The other had two religious parents with seven children and till death do us part.

When it comes to working out how to sustain an enduring relationship, we bring two completely different formulas to cobble together for our own family.

Theodore Roosevelt said "Comparison is the thief of joy" and in this age of social media, comparison not only robs us of joy, it negatively affects our expectations of what our relationships will deliver for us.

For the first time, we expect our partners to be the one and only solution to all our needs. We expect our partners to be reliable, our intellectual equal, make us feel connected and cared for, be funny and our "best friend".

We also expect that we should continue to feel passionately towards each other, not only for procreation but for pleasure.

We also need all this to last twice as long, because till death do us part is a much longer commitment than it was 100 years ago.

The need for our partners to be everything for us, comes at the same time as we experience greater disconnection from our communities.

As psychologist and social researcher Hugh MacKay reports, we don't know our neighbours and we see family less often and so we expect our partners to be what the village was for us in previous generations.



How we raise our children has also changed.

Whilst there is boundless criticism for the helicopter parent and the tiger mother, parents give more time to their children while many are both working and are stretched in every direction.

Today's fathers spend more time with their kids than their fathers did, taking their kids mountain biking instead of going to the pub with their mates.

Evidence examining the time mothers spend with their children show that women who work outside the home spend around about the same time with their children as those who work inside the home, but have less time for themselves.

With all these competing demands on time, it seems that for many of us, our relationships have ended up like the pot plant left in the corner of the deck. When you bought it home, you imagined how it would flourish, perhaps offering a little shade in the heat of summer and give you lovely

flowers in spring. Never for one moment did you think you wouldn't take care of it. But then you got busy, forgot that it was there, other than the times you sat with a cuppa

for just a moment, between soccer training and finishing that report for work, and that's when you noticed . . .

Just as our culture has changed with regards to what we think of men and women's roles, and how a family looks with mothers and fathers and step parents in various combinations, so too is it time for us to reconsider how we think about relationships.

The "meant to be" relationship is perhaps a myth, and it's more helpful for us to start to understand that if a relationship is to work, it requires a shift in our thinking.

Loving your children means time with them, but it's also important for them that you invest in your relationship, not just for the survival of the family unit, but because this is how they will learn to have relationships themselves.

They need us to choose our partner at least some of the time, ahead of other competing demands.

We need to accept that we are able to learn how to manage relationships just as we do any other skill. We also need to accept there is no one person who can meet all of your needs and that all people are annoying, perhaps even you!

Psychotherapist Esther Perel in her book *Mating in Captivity* talks about our unrealistic expectations of modern relationships, where love relies upon our partners to be secure and dependable, but at the same time, desire, which we also expect from a relationship, thrives on novelty and mystery.

Perel's research shows we feel most connected to our partners when they are away or we witness their competence through the eyes of another. She points out love wants us to be close and also far away.

Finally, perhaps we can also begin to consider that a relationship ending need not always be a tragic event. Whilst the evidence suggests that kids do best with two loving parents, those kids with separated and harmonious parents do better than those exposed to conflict and hostility - whether their parents are together or apart.

Love isn't perfect and in words of Shakespeare,

"And yet, by heaven, I think my loves as rare,

As any she belies with false compare".

Happy anniversary x

Joanne McCarthy is on holiday.

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