

Therapist Helen Mia Harris counsels couples about their relationships and resolves conflict. She talks to **Beverley Morrison** about love and loss, and her commitment to giving people the ability to change and improve their lives

A word of ADVICE

Love and relationships are at the root of many of life's joys and sadly, many of its disappointments and traumas too. Twenty years experience as a therapist has given Helen Mia Harris a unique insight into the way we live and love, and helped her develop an empathetic new approach to relationship counselling.

Her clients' testimonials paint a picture of a "wise and intuitive" person who really listens to what they have to say. One even dubbed her "the next Oprah Winfrey".

From next month, Helen, a BACP (British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy) registered therapist, who works from the Sevenoaks Integrated Health Centre, will be answering our readers' questions in a new monthly column.

"I am a specialist in adult relationship counselling and therapy," explained Helen. "I enable people to have a voice and truly express themselves... they encounter a deep, attentive response from me and a transformation occurs. Blocks are removed, anxiety is allayed and conflict is resolved."

Helen who has studied and worked both here and in Australia after her family emigrated there in the 1970s, moved to Sevenoaks in 2007. Married and divorced herself, she counsels both individuals and couples, covering every condition from depression, low self-esteem, worry and stress, to loss of motivation, lack of confidence and other negative emotions and habits.

This month she is launching a new workshop called Living Alone Together – The Ways We Love, which will look at our attitudes to love, addictive relationships and co-dependency. As a taster for the workshop, Helen is giving a free talk, in conversation with journalist Chrissie Masters, at The El Matador Restaurant in Sevenoaks on Wednesday, May 8.

"Our society or culture romanticises love and how we love," said Helen. "The workshop will look at how we get from where we fall in love to the point where it fades and turns to disappointment, then resentment and co-dependency."

Helen often starts a counselling session by asking couples how they met.

"Strangely enough, people love talking about how they first met and you see them melt before your eyes," she said. "You can never go back to that place but you can actually begin to experience another kind of love and acceptance of the person you fell in love with."

Helen has developed a unique approach to counselling, the Recovery Programme, which offers sessions running to 90 minutes – rather than the traditional 50 minutes – over several visits, as opposed to the years people often associate with therapy.

When I spoke to her I was struck by how her particular



understanding of love and loss was rooted in key experiences as a young person, particularly in Australia.

"As a child and young woman, I always had a natural instinct and ability to care for and help people," said Helen.

"This desire to help others became stronger as I got older, and combined with experiencing my own heartbreak in relationships, it strengthened my resolve to find a way to work and help people as a career. I went on to obtain a wide range of formal training in spite of having left school young with limited qualifications."

While studying at the New South Wales College of Natural Sciences in Sydney, Australia, in the late 1970s, Helen learned how massage could be used as a therapy for cancer patients. She worked in hospices with people close to death, and was struck by their honesty and transparency at the end of their lives.

"While I was massaging them I would be 'in their story', hearing perhaps from a regretful point of view about the dreams they didn't pursue and their regrets at leaving loved ones behind," said Helen.

"It was a very profound experience... but something really did transform these people because they were finally able to speak."

Her second key experience was working in a women's prison in Australia. Many of the women were imprisoned for "crimes of passion" – they had killed in a "split second" of passion, rooted she felt, in unhealthy, imbalanced relationships that led to powerful

feelings of jealousy, betrayal, obsession, abandonment or rejection. As in the hospice, Helen used storytelling techniques to help the women understand these powerful and destructive emotions.

What became clear from both these experiences was how the lack of love or inability to show love, causes so much heartbreak and regret.

When she returned to the UK in 1989, Helen continued her training at various institutes, including the Tavistock and Portman (NHS Trust), studying humanistic counselling, Cognitive Behaviour Therapy, psychotherapy and psychoanalysis. She has also worked in various clinical settings including Guy's Hospital as a psychotherapist and Marie Curie as a bereavement care worker.

"I'm committed to helping people gain a sense of clarity and a move towards emotional freedom and focus in their professional and personal lives. My approach is practical and simple and I know what I do makes a tangible difference."

For more information about Helen visit www.helenmiaharris.com. To reserve a place on the free talk at 6.30pm on Wednesday, May 8, in the El Matador Restaurant, 49 Sevenoaks Road TN13 1AR, call 07775 915379. The one-day workshop, Living Alone Together, at the El Matador on Wednesday, May 15 costs £100, including a light lunch. There is a 15 per cent discount for two people.

● You can write to Helen in confidence at inquiries@helenmiaharris.com – just add Limited Edition in the subject line.

Help and support from relationship expert Helen Mia Harris

DATING AGAIN

Helen Mia Harris frequently advises people who are nervous about dating again after a previous relationship has ended. Here are some of Helen's top tips:

- 1) A first date should be about looking forward – so try to keep off the subject of your last failed relationship and what went wrong.
- 2) It is easy to get carried away by emails and texts rather than arranging to meet – perhaps you're hiding your fear of meeting in person – nothing can take the place of face-to-face contact.
- 3) Try not to appear too needy and dependent – nothing is more attractive than a potential new partner who already has a sense of themselves and their own strengths and weaknesses.
- 4) Don't reveal too much about yourself on a first date, and remember less is more – be authentic and honest but remember to really listen and show interest, as well as talk.
- 5) Most men enjoy the challenge of pursuing a woman, so don't be too eager to please or suggest more meetings – you don't have to play games, just give it time to see if you are a suitable match.
- 6) If your first date is shy and introverted, try to respect them for who they are – it's easy to want to change someone's character to suit our own ideal of the partner we're seeking.
- 7) On a first date, try not to bring up money matters - if your past relationship failed due to rows over money, it doesn't mean the next one will.
- 8) Don't be too overpowering in the way you express your emotions – remember loving too much, too soon, can be a sign of love addiction or the beginning of a co-dependent relationship.
- 9) Many people, especially women, try to change their look or interests to fit in with what they think a partner wants – be yourself. Self confidence with a dash of vulnerability is always attractive to both men and women.
- 10) The best relationships all begin and end with liking ourselves first – if we don't believe in ourselves, no-one else will.



CASE STUDY

A couple in their 50s, Tunbridge Wells

"We visited Helen because we thought we had no way of saving our marriage which was falling apart around us once our children had grown up and left home," said John (not his real name).

"We seemed to argue all the time and appeared to have nothing to say or nothing left in common. Our only dialogue seemed to be sniping at each other. At other times, we stagnated in a world of silence.

"I am very grateful that we both did Helen's Relationship Recovery Programme, and had the counselling and advice that Helen shared with my wife and me. We have never done anything like this before, but I would certainly recommend it to anyone as now, if there is an atmosphere between us, we have found a way to 'handle' our conflict.

"This is very new to us both, but it seems to work. Helen seemed to have such a profound understanding as to what was happening to us and how we could resolve this and move forward."