Relationship Dissolution 12

Predicting relationship dissolution – are the fates of relationships sealed before they begin? – the power and limitations of relationship maintenance strategies – consequences of relationship dissolution – the impact of divorce on children – moving on and letting go – relationship therapy – summary and conclusions

> You've been messing where you shouldn't have been messin', and now someone else is gettin' all your best . . . You keep lying when you ought to be truthin', you keep losing when you ought to not bet, you keep saming when you ought to be changin', now what's right is right but you ain't been right yet . . . These boots are made for walking, and that's just what they'll do. One of these days these boots are gonna walk all over you . . . Are you ready boots, start walking . . .
>
> Nancy Sinatra

You have finally found someone to love. You have traversed the fraught mating market, and invested considerable time and resources in a budding relationship, including integrating your partner into family and friendship networks. You have overcome the inevitable difficulties along the way, such as jealousy of attractive rivals and learning to trust each other, and you are still together and relatively happy a year down the track. This is a feat in itself – around 65% of newly minted dating relationships don't last the year out (Fletcher *et al.*, 2000b). But, you are now ready to take the next big step.

Fifty years ago, that step would have been marriage, but in western cultures the majority of couples now live together before or instead of marriage (Cherlin, 2004), although the rates vary considerably across countries with Scandinavian countries leading the way. To give a few examples, the proportion of those cohabiting prior to

marriage is above 90% in Sweden (Andersson and Philipov, 2002), 78% in Australia (Hayes *et al.*, 2010), and 66% in the USA (National Center for Family and Marriage Research, 2010). Moreover, many cohabitating couples have children. In the US, for example, more than 40% of cohabiting couples have children. In short, **cohabitation** has become a long-term option (replacing marriage) for many people. Regardless of whether the step is to live together "in sin" (as it was quaintly termed in previous generations) or to get married, this decision represents a serious relationship investment for most people.

What are the odds of romantic relationships ending in dissolution? The figure that is bandied around in the zeitgeist for marriage is 50%. Actually, the only countries that even approach this figure are Belgium and the USA (OECD, 2011), and the divorce rate in the US seems to be have been coming down over the last decade or so (Heaton, 2002). The probability of first-time marriages ending in divorce is closer to 35% in other western countries like New Zealand, Australia, Canada, and the UK (Bascand, 2009; Bramlett and Mosher, 2002; Jain, 2007). Countries like Mexico, Italy, Greece, and Turkey, have lower divorce rates again, but, like almost everywhere else, the divorce rates in these countries have also markedly increased since the 1970s (OECD, 2011). The world record for the lowest divorce rate is the Philippines (close to zero), but this is because it is the only country in the world in which divorce remains illegal (with a few exceptions made for Muslims). Some representative figures for different countries are shown in Figure 12.1, using crude divorce rates per 1000 population in 1970, and the increase in 2008.

The odds of successful, lasting cohabitation are even slimmer than those of marriage. Over half of non-married couples who live together break up within two years and about 90% dissolve within five years (Bumpass and Sweet, 1989). The ties that bind couples together when cohabiting are just not as strong as when marital vows are made, although the explanations for this fact are contentious (as will be seen later).
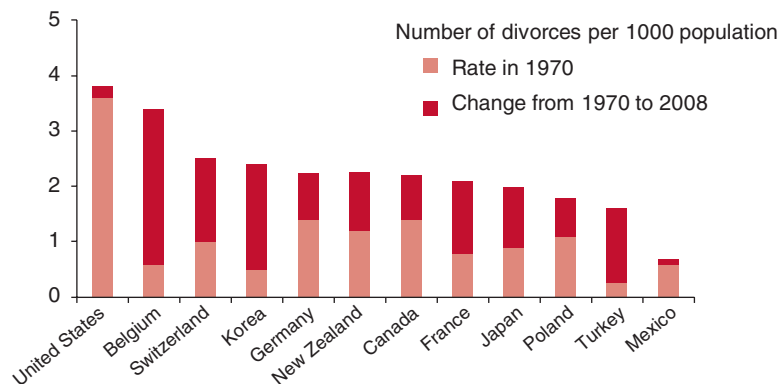

Figure 12.1   The increase in crude divorce rates from 1970 to 2008 across 12 countries
Source: Based on data from chart "SF3.1.E: The increase in crude divorce rates from 1970 to 2008" from OECD (2011), OECD Family Database, OECD, Paris. www.oecd.org/social/family/database

The growth over the last 60 years in divorce rates, cohabitation, and the increasing numbers of sole parents and blended families, have together generated fears that the standard family structure is in tatters, and that traditional values are going the way of the dodo. However, a historical and cross-cultural overview suggests there is nothing unusual about current relationship dissolution and divorce rates around the world. Marriage, in one form or another, with its rights and obligations, is a universal (Fletcher, 2002), and so is divorce or separation (Fisher, 1992; see Chapter 7). Hardly surprising then that separation, divorce, and heartbreak are regular themes in pop songs and the media (illustrated by the lyrics of Nancy Sinatra's 1966 signature hit, at the beginning of the chapter).

The earliest known study of divorce, by the noted Egyptian historian al-Sakhawi in the fifteenth century, reported that for about 500 women in Cairo, 30% of marriages ended in divorce, and women married more than once, with many marrying three times or more (see Rapoport, 2005). During the nineteenth century in Japan, in rural villages divorce and remarriage were commonplace. One analysis of registers in two rural villages in Japan revealed that more than 66% of marriages ended in divorce before individuals reached the age of 50 (Kurosu, 2011). However, women married very early in life in this cultural setting, and as the level of investment in children and the extended family expanded after five or six years of marriage, the probability of divorce sharply reduced. Finally, divorce rates in hunter-gatherer cultures are comparable to those found today in urbanized, industrialized countries. For example, an analysis in 1970 of 331 marriages in the Kung! San, a hunter-gatherer culture living in Southern Africa, found that 39% ended in divorce (Howell, 1979).

In all these cases, much like current-day western societies, these cultures were relatively tolerant of marriage break up, and the social and legal sanctions against divorce were muted. It is, of course, easy to find examples throughout history and today where the divorce rates are much lower, some of which we have already cited. Culture can bend divorce rates and separation strongly both directly (through legal and social sanctions) and indirectly via mating norms and rules, the amount of economic power granted to women, economic conditions, and so forth. However, such analyses do not explain why divorce and relationship dissolution can be so variable within countries and cultures. In this chapter, we examine the predictors of relationship dissolution and divorce primarily within western cultures, for the simple reason that most of the relevant research has been carried out in such countries. On the other side of the coin, we also discuss what pulls couples together and helps maintain long-term relationships. We then turn to the consequences of relationship dissolution for the adults involved and their children. The chapter ends with an examination of the effectiveness of therapeutic approaches to help couples sustain and improve their intimate relationships.

Predicting Relationship Dissolution: What Drives Couples Apart?

We have summarized the factors that research has shown predict relationship dissolution in Table 12.1. This is, of course, a laundry list. It does not tell you the relative

Table 12.1   Predictors of relationship instability and dissolution

Greater risk of relationship dissolution

Socio-demographic variables	*Relationship-level factors*
Younger age	Premarital cohabitation
Unemployment	Perceived lack of similarity in attitudes and values
Low income	Many relationship problems
Low level of education	Infidelity and betrayal
Not religious	Hostile communication
Ethnicity	Stressful conflict interactions
Gender	Aggression and violence
	Poor communication
Relationship history	Poor support
Parental separation	Lack of (or fluctuating) commitment, love, and trust
Parental conflict	Low sexual satisfaction
Children from prior union	Negative illusions
Premarital parenthood	Poor coping with external stress
Prior marriage	
Individual differences	
Accepting attitudes toward divorce	
Neuroticism	
Attachment anxiety and avoidance	

importance of each factor, nor does it tell you how they are linked together in a causal chain. We will build a more detailed picture in this section that explains why and how these variables work together to put couples on a path toward relationship dissolution or longevity.

Socio-demographic variables, relationship history, and individual differences

The factors listed under these three particular headings in Table 12.1 have one thing in common – they are part of the baggage that people bring with them into new relationships. Let's list them briefly. Being married young, with no job, little money, and low levels of education all increase the chances that marriages will end in divorce (Kitson *et al.*, 1985; Kurdek, 1993). Couples who are not religious or differ in their religious orientation are more likely to divorce (Kitson *et al.*, 1985), and in the US, more African American marriages end in divorce compared to other ethnic groups (Bramlett and Mosher, 2002). Childhoods involving parental conflict and divorce predict subsequent divorce in adulthood (Amato, 1996, 2010). Remarriages end in divorce more than first-time marriages, and bearing children prior to marriage

increases the risk for divorce (Heaton, 2002). Having more accepting attitudes toward divorce (as a way of solving relationship problems), and being neurotic or having an insecure attachment orientation may also increase the chances of later divorce. Finally, in countries that are relatively egalitarian, and where women have economic power, women tend to make the decision to terminate both married and dating relationships more often than men. In the USA, for example, in 70% of marriages that end women make the decision to divorce (Amato and Previti, 2003; Brinig and Allen, 2000).

Why are these factors associated with divorce or separation, and how are they linked? Remember Claire from Chapter 5. Claire was a participant in a longitudinal study, which has continued to track her and a large sample of other people since the mid-1970s. She is a good illustration of how some of these factors are tied together and why they might predict divorce or separation. Claire was bright, but her troubled and unpredictable family background led to her dropping out of school and having problems sustaining a steady job. She also developed an **anxious** and **avoidant attachment** orientation, and had a succession of short-term sexual relationships from an early age. In short, Claire's kind of background will tend to produce a double whammy in terms of both adopting a short-term mating strategy and a tendency to be at the wrong end of the clutch of socio-demographic factors associated with divorce and separation (being young, unemployed, having low education attainment, and so forth).

Research supports our conclusions about Claire and also suggests why some of the other factors listed above (and in Table 12.1) predict divorce and separation. For example, African Americans are more likely to get divorced than white Americans partly because they have lower incomes, education, occupational status, and more premarital births – all risk factors for divorce (Orbuch *et al.*, 2002). Strong religious beliefs are associated with lower chances of divorce because religious folk (compared to non-religious folk) tend to have stronger moral objections to divorce and more firmly held traditional family values. And, as we documented in Chapter 9, neuroticism and insecure attachment lead to greater dissolution because of the ways in which these individual differences negatively influence the way couples interact and manage their relationships, and erode levels of relationship investment (e.g. Kurdek, 1993).

As we have already noted, children of divorced parents are more likely to divorce as adults. Studies by Matt McGue and his colleagues report that genes are responsible for about 50% of the tendency to get divorced (McGue and Lykken, 1992). Although this estimate likely inflates the actual contribution of genes (see Fletcher, 2002), this work and other research (e.g. D'Onofrio *et al.*, 2007) indicates that genetic inheritance predisposes people to develop negative personality traits, such as neuroticism, thus increasing the probability of marital breakdown. Consistent with our analysis in Chapter 5, children of divorced parents are more likely to develop insecure attachment working models (Crowell *et al.*, 2009), and to experience anger, aggression, and dysfunctional communication in their adult intimate relationships (Crowell *et al.*, 2009). Parental conflict, even in the absence of divorce, also predicts poor efficacy and management of relationship conflict and subsequent drops in satisfaction in both married and dating relationships (Amato and Booth, 2001).

Finally, how do we explain the tendency for women to make the decision to terminate marriages much more frequently than men, at least in cultures that grant them the power and economic clout to make such decisions? Paul Amato and Denise Preveti (2003) argue that this can be explained by women (more than men) monitoring their relationships more closely, initiating discussions about problems, and being more sensitive to problems in the relationship. In short, women are more likely than men to adopt the role of relationship manager.

Are the fates of relationships sealed before they begin?

The bottom line of our analysis is that the distal factors that people bring with them into relationships – such as age, family history, and attachment working models – influence the chances of divorce or separation via the effects they have on proximal-level relationship processes such as communication and relationship evaluations. Which raises the question, how powerful are these distal factors? If you enter a relationship with a deck stacked with negative or positive indicators, is the fate of your relationship already decided?

Benjamin Karney and Thomas Bradbury (1995) analyzed 115 longitudinal studies (representing some 45 000 marriages, mainly in the USA) using a **meta-analysis** to sort out what predicted divorce (a meta-analysis averages the size of the effects across several studies and, thus, increases confidence in the results). Their review showed that although socio-demographic variables, relationship history, and individual differences predicted divorce, the effects were relatively weak, ranging from zero to 18% increased probability of divorce (note we have recalculated the correlations they reported into percentages). Possessing an unstable, neurotic personality had the biggest effect, producing an increased chance of divorce of 16% for men and 18% for women averaged across several studies. However, the effects of other personality variables were quite a lot lower, ranging from zero to 11%.

In contrast to these distal individual-level variables, dyadic factors that capture what is happening inside the relationship – such as perceptions of relationship quality, sexual satisfaction, and communication – proved to be considerably more powerful predictors of divorce. Averaging across studies, for example, lower levels of relationship satisfaction or more negative conflict behavior was associated with a 23% to 30% increased chance of divorce. A recent meta-analytic review of non-marital romantic relationships showed the same pattern, with relationship-level factors being four or five times more powerful predictors of dissolution than individual-level factors such as attachment working models (Le *et al.*, 2010). Figure 12.2 shows the impact of some representative factors, based on multiple studies, on relationship dissolution in non-marital romantic relationships. As can be seen in the figure, the most powerful factor was the absence of positive illusions (see Chapter 8), which was associated with a 23% probability of dissolution (we calculated this figure based on the effect size reported in Le *et al.*, 2010).

Taken together these findings suggest that the baggage people bring into their relationships does not wholly determine the fate of relationships. Although individual-
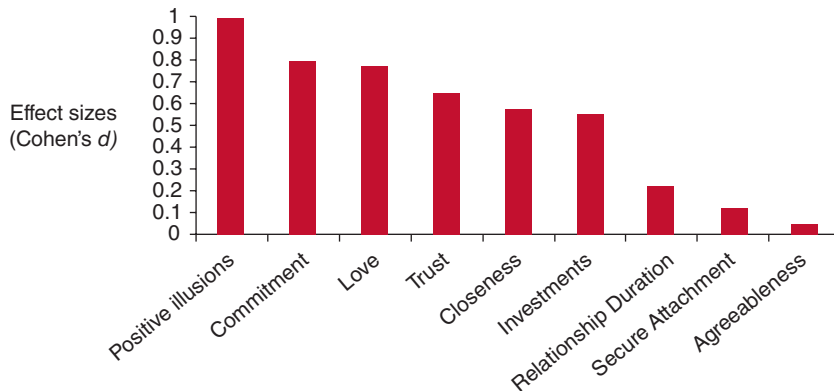
Figure 12.2 Representative examples from Le *et al.*'s (2010) meta-analysis showing effect sizes for predictors of relationship dissolution in non-marital romantic relationships

level distal factors – such as age and personality – shape relationship dynamics and behavior, they leave plenty of room for relationship processes to take over and mold the future course of the relationship. We now move into a discussion of these proximal relationship-level processes.

Relationship-level factors

A term sometimes used to describe pre-marital cohabitation is "trial marriage." Actually, many couples move in together for economic reasons, convenience, or because of an unplanned pregnancy (Sassler, 2010). Still, it remains a plausible hypothesis that couples who live together for a period of time and then marry may lower their chances of divorce or separation. Unfortunately, research has typically found the opposite pattern; namely, that couples who cohabit before they marry are more likely to divorce and have lower relationship satisfaction (Brown and Booth, 1996; Hall and Zhao, 1995; Heaton, 2002).

These findings have sometimes been trumpeted in the media as proving that living together prior to marriage is a bad idea and leads to divorce along with various assorted ills of modern society. However, an alternative plausible explanation is that the two samples in question (those who live together prior to marriage and those who don't) are different. Indeed, research has shown that the two samples are quite different – couples who cohabit prior to marriage are typically less religious, younger, less well-educated, and have lower commitment to the relationship (see Kulu and Boyle, 2010; Soons and Kalmijn, 2009). And, as we have seen, these are all risk factors for divorce. When such factors are controlled for, many studies report that the link between cohabitation and divorce diminishes or disappears (e.g. Kulu and Boyle, 2010).

Some recent research in Australia has even suggested that the link between cohabitation and marriage breakdown is in the process of being reversed for younger couples,

with those married in the 1990s being *less* likely to divorce if they cohabit prior to marriage (e.g. Hewitt and de Vaus, 2009). These latter findings highlight the point that the normative and legal structure of sexual relationships has been undergoing rapid change. In many western countries today, cohabitation represents a viable, legally recognized alternative to marriage for both heterosexual and same-sex couples that involves similar benefits, processes, and consequences. Thus, it has been argued that as societal values change, and cohabitation becomes the norm, the advantage that marriage confers on individuals in terms of wellbeing and health, compared to cohabitation, will gradually disappear (see Soons and Kalmijn, 2009).

A good example of a dyadic variable is the extent to which partners possess similar values and attitudes. The belief that higher similarity is good for relationships is a popular one, and there is some evidence that dissimilarity in attitudes is associated with greater probability of divorce (e.g. Karney and Bradbury, 1995; Kurdek, 1993). Other studies have also found greater similarity in personality to be related to higher relationship satisfaction (e.g. Luo *et al.*, 2008). However, overall, the evidence is mixed, and methodologically rigorous approaches to assessing similarity find weak or even non-existent links between similarity in attitudes or personality traits and perceptions of relationship quality (Dyrenforth *et al.*, 2010). A more consistent and well-replicated finding is that couples who *perceive* themselves to be more similar are happier with their relationship (see Chapter 8). Given the existence of the commonly held belief that similarity between partners causes good relationships, perhaps perceptions of relationship quality push around perceptions of similarity, rather than vice-versa.

One of the more obvious relationship-level factors is simply the number and seriousness of problems that couples face. Infidelity, jealousy, drinking, spending money, moodiness, and failure to communicate all increase the risk of divorce and dissolution (Amato and Rogers, 1997). People's own accounts of why they divorce also suggest that infidelity is a major cause, along with violence, drinking and drug use, not getting along, continual disagreements, and, finally, growing apart (e.g. Amato and Previti, 2003). Problems concerning the division of labor have also become commonplace as women in relationships with children have entered the workforce in large numbers and expect more egalitarian sharing of household responsibilities (deGraff and Kalmijn, 2006). And, as we have discussed in other chapters (especially 3 and 9), blaming the partner for the source of such problems is a corrosive attribution that compounds conflict and, as an unfortunate bonus, impedes post-divorce coping and adjustment (Amato and Previti, 2003).

In a nutshell, the inevitable life issues and tribulations that couples encounter take their toll on relationships, particularly if they produce high levels of stress and are managed poorly. Janice Kiecolt-Glaser and colleagues, for example, have shown that greater levels of stress hormones, like epinephrine and norephinephrine, during conflict interactions predict greater dissatisfaction and probability of divorce in newlyweds, as shown in Figure 12.3. (Kiecolt-Glaser *et al.*, 2003; see Chapter 4). Handling conflict and problem-solving interactions is a nuanced and delicate business that can all too easily end up in character assassination and spiraling levels of negativity, aggression, and withdrawal (see Chapters 9 and 11). And, we reiterate the point that such
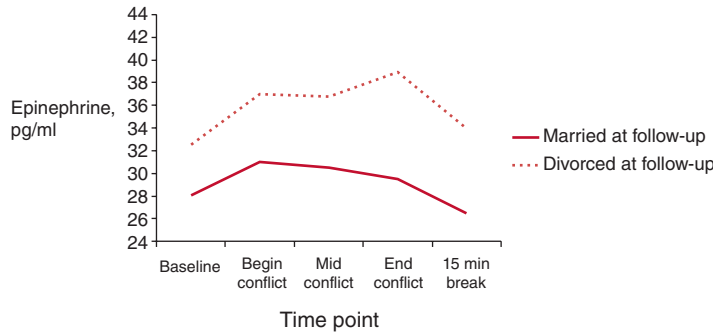
Figure 12.3 Epinephrine production in conflict discussions predicts later divorce
Source: From Kiecolt-Glaser *et al.*, 2003; © 2003 American Psychological Association, Inc.

interdependent responses increase the probability of divorce and break up, well over and above the contribution of the individual differences and socio-demographic factors described previously.

External stress also plays a role. Daily hassles, such as work stress, increase problems and negative interactions within the relationship, undermine satisfaction and intimacy, and sap the resources that people need to deal with relationship problems (see Chapter 9). Low income is therefore (not surprisingly) a solid predictor of relationship dissolution and divorce (Conger *et al.*, 1999). However, if couples can effectively and positively support each other, and successfully cope with such problems, this promotes relationship satisfaction and stability (Sullivan *et al.*, 2010; Chapter 9). Finally, family and friends can be a curse or a blessing for intimate relationships. When close others disapprove of the relationship, and when couples are not embedded within supporting social networks, this increases the likelihood of break up. In contrast, being integrated within a larger supporting network of friends and family promotes relationship wellbeing and provides a stronger base when couples face difficulties (Sprecher *et al.*, 2006).

To summarize, the way couples work together to cope with the inevitable challenges that life throws up determines both relationship evaluations and the longevity of the relationship. Perhaps the most powerful proximal-level determinants, which we have only touched on thus far in this chapter, comprise evaluations and commitment to the relationship. We now turn to discussing this class of factors.

Love and investment

The surge of passionate and romantic love at the beginning of relationships is rarely sustained over time and, in the typical relationship, dwindles over the first few years (Sprecher and Regan, 1988). Companionate love – involving feelings of commitment, intimacy, and deep affection – generally shows slower declines and is critical to keep relationships going over the long term (see Chapter 7). Lower overall levels of love and trust, and higher rates of deterioration across time, independently predict increased

chances of relationship dissolution (Kurdek, 1993, 2002; Le *et al.*, 2010). Lower sexual satisfaction also reduces overall relationship wellbeing and longevity in both non-marital (Sprecher, 2002) and marital relationships (Karney and Bradbury, 1995) (see Chapter 10).

These facts will probably not strike anyone as much of a revelation. Indeed, all of the factors we have discussed that predict dissolution also typically influence levels of satisfaction, and drops in satisfaction almost always precede break up, at least for the partner who decides to end the relationship. However, perhaps less obviously, there is one central proximal-level evaluation that trumps relationship satisfaction in predictive power; namely, commitment. People who are committed to their relationship intend to remain in that relationship, are psychologically attached to that relationship, and are oriented toward the future of that relationship (Arriaga and Agnew, 2001). High levels of commitment predict relationship stability over and above satisfaction (Le *et al.*, 2010), suggesting that satisfaction is but one component that influences commitment (Bui *et al.*, 1996).

The principal role of commitment, and the factors that promote or undermine people's motivation to keep their relationship intact, are embodied in the **investment model** developed by Caryl Rusbult (Rusbult, 1983; Rusbult *et al.*, 1998). The investment model is based on interdependence theory and the principle that commitment will be enhanced (and relationships will continue) to the extent that the perceived benefits associated with the relationship outweigh the costs (see Chapter 2). These costs and benefits are captured by three postulated causes of commitment – satisfaction, quality of alternatives, and investment size (as shown in Figure 12.4).

Satisfaction level Satisfaction signals how rewarding the relationship is in comparison to expectations. People are less satisfied when their partner and relationship fall short of their ideals and more satisfied when their relationship compares favorably to their ideals (Chapter 3). And, there is good evidence that satisfaction influences the likelihood of break up because it increases or reduces commitment (Le and Agnew, 2003).
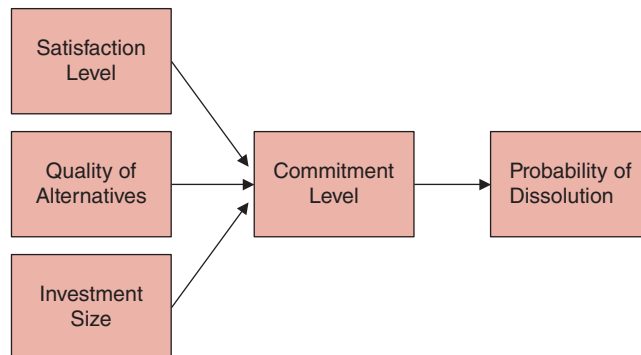

Figure 12.4   Rusbult's investment model
Source: Adapted from Rusbult *et al.*, 1998

When relationship rewards are inconsistent and people's satisfaction fluctuates wildly, this also undermines commitment and can eventually lead to break ups (Arriaga, 2001).

Quality of alternatives Commitment is also shaped by how the relationship compares to the quality of perceived alternatives. Alternatives are usually relationships with other attractive partners. For example, the risk of divorce is greater when the workplace is stacked with eligible members of the opposite gender (Scott *et al.*, 2001). Even people who have stable, happy relationships, and who realize they have a range of high-quality alternatives available, may become less committed and more likely to terminate their relationship (Bui *et al.*, 1996). When people have few alternatives they are more likely to remain committed (something is often better than nothing) . . . that is until the relationship becomes so acrimonious and dissatisfying that not being in a romantic entanglement can seem like Nirvana.

Investment size The amount of time, effort, psychological energy (emotions, identity, etc.), and economic resources invested in long-term relationships are typically huge and thus also influence commitment and likelihood of separation. The formula is simple: the more investment in the relationship, the more people have to lose, and thus commitment is boosted and the probability of separation or divorce decreases (Le and Agnew, 2003; White and Booth, 1991). Consistently, across countries and cultures one of the major determinants of the divorce rate is the economic power possessed by women. Divorce rates are higher in countries where economic interdependence is low and women do not need to rely on marriage for financial security (Barber, 2003).

Why is commitment so important? A strong orientation toward the future of the relationship means that when relationship difficulties are encountered – like conflict and infidelity – people are powerfully motivated to overcome hurt and anger and strive to repair their relationships. Even when the known risk factors that people bring with them into relationships are absent, relationships will nevertheless still falter and break down. And, perfectly happy relationships can all too easily run into trouble. In the next section we change tack and instead of asking what spoils relationships, we ask what sustains happy, well-adjusted relationships. Most of the answers to this question have already been provided in previous chapters. Here, we summarize and integrate this material.

The Power and Limitations of Relationship Maintenance Strategies

The concept of relationship maintenance refers to the volitional and automatic strategies that partners use to preserve and sustain long-term, satisfying relationships. When relationships are jogging along, a web of routine maintenance interactions, that may be close to invisible, help retain intimacy and connection in everyday life. These may be as mundane as talking over the day's activities, hugging or displays of affection,

"Marry me, Bridget—I want to spend at least a couple of
years of the rest of my life with you."

Figure 12.5   *Source:* © 2009 Liza Donnelly and Michael Maslin

offers of help, having a good laugh over something, and the micro moments of
intimacy and respectful understanding that occur regularly in healthy relationships
(Stafford and Canary, 1991; see Chapter 7). The maintenance of relationship engage-
ment and positivity means that when couples are faced with the inevitable conflict or
disruption of external events, they have a solid foundation available to help weather
the trial.

Of course, even in the most harmonious relationships irritating behaviors occur,
and negative perceptions and attributions leak through. This is when the principal role
of commitment kicks in. Research stemming from Caryl Rusbult's investment model
(see Figure 12.4) has shown that commitment motivates important ways of behaving
and thinking that help to maintain relationships over time. These are depicted in
Figure 12.6.

When partners are hurtful, for example, it (usually) helps to inhibit the immediate
impulse to retaliate with hostility and mean words and instead try to resolve the situ-
ation in a calm, forgiving and supportive manner – a process termed **accommodation**
(see Chapter 9). Accommodation can be a tough ask. It takes a concerted effort to
transform the desire for revenge into looking after the wellbeing of the relationship
and it requires a good dose of motivation. Thus, accommodation is strongly predicted
by commitment, and it keeps relationships on a positive and even keel (see Chapter 9).
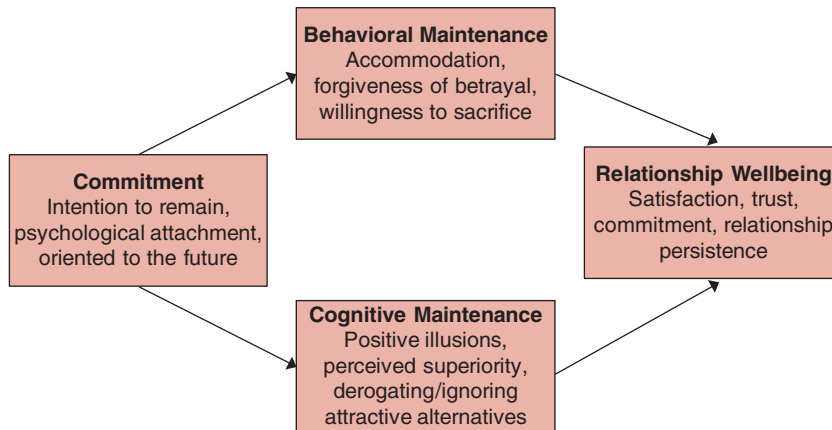
Figure 12.6   Commitment and relationship maintenance
Source: Adapted from Rusbult *et al.*, 2001

Committed intimates are also more likely to overcome the painful emotions and desires for revenge that accompany partner betrayals, and they show more willingness to sacrifice their own desires and goals to benefit the partner. Both forgiveness of betrayal, and the willingness to sacrifice, boost relationship well-being, and thus reduce the risk of dissolution (Bono *et al.*, 2008; Van Lange *et al.*, 1997).

In previous chapters, we have discussed the central role played by relationship cognition. Indeed, the evidence shows that maintaining good, healthy relationships is facilitated by charitable attributions for your partner's questionable behavior (Chapters 2 and 9), and maintaining a sunny and optimistic view of your partner and relationship or what we termed positive illusions (see Chapter 8). Committed partners also tend to perceive their relationship as being superior in relationship quality and future happiness compared to other people's relationships, and this tends to preserve satisfaction and reduce the risk of break up (Rusbult *et al.*, 2000). Finally, as described in Chapter 7, committed intimates downplay the attractiveness of tempting alternatives thus maintaining commitment and satisfaction.

Despite evidence supporting the benefits of these behavioral and cognitive tactics, they can only go so far in the face of a grim reality. In a program of research James McNulty and his colleagues (see McNulty, 2010) have repeatedly shown (using state-of-the-art longitudinal designs tracking newly married couples) that more positive expectations and attributions, and more forgiveness, effectively maintain satisfaction among spouses facing infrequent and minor problems. However, exactly the same optimistic recipe predicts worse outcomes among spouses facing frequent and severe problems. For relationships in trouble it turns out that adopting a grittier but more realistic approach helps acknowledge, address, and resolve problems over time, albeit with some costs attached (see Chapter 9). Holding onto positive expectations when the relationship continues to deteriorate, and forgiving a partner who continues to

transgress, exacerbates problems and ultimately undermines self-respect. In short, if partner and relationship judgments stray too far from the cold, hard reality they adversely impact the relationship and the individuals within those relationships (see Chapter 8).

Criticism, scorn, and withdrawal, as we have seen, are relationship killers if they become a regular feature of intimate relationships. But single events can be equally toxic when they represent a betrayal of a central, perhaps assumed, norm about love and intimate relationships. Punching your partner, spending all your partner's money on a gambling addiction, or having a clandestine affair with someone from the office are not good ideas if you want to retain a stable relationship. Not surprisingly, the associated shattering of trust and relationship security also makes forgiveness difficult to say the least.

Can relationships survive such crises? Yes. Some couples manage to traverse the minefield created by such betrayals and find the balance between the perpetrator making amends and the forgiveness of the victim to rebuild relationship satisfaction and personal wellbeing (e.g. Bono *et al.*, 2008; Fincham *et al.*, 2007; Lawler *et al.*, 2003). Often, however, couples are unable or unwilling to climb such a steep mountain. Trust is often never restored, and the relationship slides into separation or divorce. Infidelity, for example, is one of the most commonly cited causes for divorce (Amato and Previti, 2003).

The long-term consequences of a shattering of trust is illustrated in a diary of divorce published in *The Telegraph* (an English newspaper) in 2011 in five parts by Penny Brookes who left her husband after 25 years of marriage and five children (see Brookes, 2011). This first entry starts with an unexpected phone call:

> My life changed in a split second one evening in January five years ago . . . "Is that Penny? . . . Why don't you open your eyes? . . . your husband and Anna . . . You have to get a divorce". I recall being propelled back to the age of 12 when my parents had told me they were splitting up. Trembling I rang my husband . . . I bombarded him with questions and – for the first time in 19 years of married life – I shouted at him . . . Then he started on me. It was my fault. We hadn't had sex for years . . . I hadn't shown him any affection . . . I put my work and children before him . . . My weight dropped to under eight stone from nearly nine. I lived on sweet tea . . . Breathing was difficult . . . Meanwhile my husband swore he hadn't seen Anna, but by now I was on red alert. Hating myself, I checked his mobile and rang an unknown number. "Is that Anna?" I bluffed. "No she's at the gym" . . . Shaking, I confronted him. Then he confessed he still had feelings . . . he went outside with his mobile. "What did you say?'" I asked when he came back. "I said I wasn't leaving my wife," he replied. Only then did it sink home this had been a real possibility . . .
>
> It had been nearly four years ago since I had any peace of mind . . . but instead of getting better it was getting worse . . . And, so we carried on . . . I still felt tired and ill. I lost concentration during my weekly tennis game. I forgot things. I had hideous dreams . . . My husband sensed something was up. "What's wrong?" he would ask. I retorted that I still felt upset about his affair. "But that was years ago, can't you forget it?", he said . . . Then one night . . . he asked if I could see any future in the relationship. I took a deep breath and whispered "No" . . . I felt terrible, awful, wicked. But I could not go back. (© Telegraph Media Group Limited 2006.)

This raises an important point, which we have thus far danced around. The tenor of our discussion has been that separation and divorce are bad, and staying together is good. But is staying in a toxic, miserable relationship a "good" outcome, even if it can be managed? Probably not, especially when violence and serious psychological abuse are involved. On the other hand, relationship dissolution is hardly a trouble-free process (as Penny's diary attests to) and it can have devastating effects.

Consequences of Relationship Dissolution

Most of the research examining the consequences of relationship dissolution has focused on divorce. People rate divorce as one of the most stressful life experiences, and, compared to people who remain married, divorced folk are lonelier, more prone to suicide, and less happy. As we noted in Chapter 4, divorced people also suffer more serious health problems and die earlier (Bloom *et al.*, 1978; Kiecolt-Glaser and Newton, 2001; Rogers, 1995; Sbarra and Nietert, 2009). A recent meta-analysis of longitudinal studies by Sbarra *et al.* (2011) found that adults who were divorced at the start of the included studies were 23% more likely to be dead from all causes at a follow-up assessment! In this section we expand on the prior brief treatment of the health consequences of losing a partner or relationship dissolution offered in Chapter 4.

Admittedly, it is difficult to assess to what extent the problems associated with divorce are caused by relationship dissolution *per se*. As we previously noted, poor personal wellbeing is also a precursor of marital dissolution, being associated with ongoing marital problems, stressful life events, and personality factors that influence both psychological and relationship health (Mastekaasa, 1994). Nevertheless, longitudinal studies reveal that psychological wellbeing decreases at separation (e.g. Booth and Amato, 1991) and life satisfaction remains lower three years later (Lucas, 2005). Again, we quote a portion of Penny's diary to give a flavor of the emotional and psychological difficulties that are part and parcel of going through a divorce, but also to show that people can and do recover from the grief of losing a key intimate relationship.

> I had been gone for precisely four weeks, two days. Every morning I woke up at 3am, gripped with fear. What had I done? Then I had to make myself remember what it was like to wake up at 3am on the edge of the bed, next to my husband, feeling totally and utterly trapped . . . The following week, I actually had to check my diary to remember how many days I had been on my own. I joined the local sports club and started swimming on Sunday mornings . . . Finally I slept without a torch in my hand . . . It was finally time to say goodbye to my lovely house. Even though I had left some five months earlier, I was not prepared for the pain of wondering through the empty rooms after my husband had departed with his removal van . . . My friends came in to help me clean for the new people . . . Standing in the hall I said goodbye. Goodbye to my old life. Goodbye to the family I had fought so hard to keep together. Goodbye to false pretences. Hello to being true to myself. Hello to uncertainty. (© Telegraph Media Group Limited 2006.)

Not all relationships end because of divorce. Over 50% of marriages end because one spouse dies. The loss of a spouse through death is traumatic and, not surprisingly, is associated with increased depression and dissatisfaction with life (Lee and DeMaris, 2007) (see Chapter 4). Men, in particular, can become socially isolated, lonely, and depressed, probably because they have fewer intimate relationships to call on outside of their marital relationship (Hatch and Bulcroft, 1992). Relationship quality also partly determines the severity of the loss. People who are more dependent on their relationships suffer more, as do those whose relationships were warmer and more intimate (Carr *et al.*, 2000). People also often continue to have a relationship with their partner beyond death, talking to them on a regular basis even years later (Carnelley *et al.*, 2006). It also seems that the commonplace phrase "dying of a broken heart" is not merely a metaphor – bereavement increases the risk of mortality, particularly within the following six months and particularly for men (Stroebe *et al.*, 2007). Nonetheless, the majority of the bereaved adjust over time and many form new relationships that help to protect them from the poor outcomes associated with relationship loss (Bonanno *et al.*, 2002).

Similarly, despite the distress experienced during divorce, people are generally resilient and as time passes they usually recover (Booth and Amato, 1991). However, people who have low incomes and women, especially those who have not been in the work force, face greater economic hardship and this makes adjustment more difficult (Booth and Amato, 1991; Hanson *et al.*, 1998). The level of distress also depends on the reasons for separation. Infidelity, in particular, seems to exert quite a toll, particularly if the aggrieved party is left by the unfaithful partner (Amato and Previti, 2003; Sweeney and Horowitz, 2001).

There are also protective factors that help people adjust. Those who decide to end the relationship, and possess better pre-existing coping skills and support networks, show better recovery (Amato, 2000). Indeed, because women are more likely to end relationships, and men have fewer intimate support networks, men typically have a tougher time (Braver *et al.*, 2006). Men also tend to have less contact with their children, which exacerbates post-divorce distress. Indeed, divorce is much more fraught across the board when children are involved. One reason is that couples with children typically need to remain in contact to negotiate and manage custodial arrangements. These interactions can be hostile and this kind of unhelpful conflict can last for years (Adamson and Pasley, 2006). Which raises the question of how divorce influences children's wellbeing.

The impact of divorce on children

In response to the high divorce rates, and increasing numbers of single-parent households, concern has been increasingly voiced about the impact that relationship dissolution has on children. Most research has focused on how children from divorced families differ from children in intact families – not surprisingly this body of work shows that divorce negatively impacts on child and adolescent adjustment. Divorce has been linked to poorer academic performance and lower educational attainment, more

problematic behaviors like aggression, substance abuse, early sexual activity, lower emotional wellbeing and self-esteem, and higher depression (see Barber and Demo, 2006 for a review).

The reasons why divorce undermines children's wellbeing are varied, and include economic difficulties associated with single-parent families (Barber and Eccles, 1992), difficulties with joint decision-making and parental regulation, especially during the developmental trials of adolescence (Barber and Demo, 2006), and a weakening of the psychological resources needed to parent effectively (Amato, 1993). However, it is generally accepted that the primary causes of children's divorce-related distress (or lack of it) are linked to parental conflict before, during, and after the divorce.

Prior to the divorce, and regardless of the parents' relationships with the children, when the parents' relationship is in bad shape, children experience emotional and social difficulties, including depression, behavioral problems, and poor quality friendships (Davies *et al.*, 2006). Conflict between parents is particularly distressing if the children perceive they are the cause of their parents' disagreement and unhappiness (Stocker *et al.*, 2003). Thus, when conflict in the marriage is nasty and recurring, children are better off if the parents separate (Amato, 1993).

However, and this is a large however, if the marital battleground merely shifts to the post-separation context, especially if the children are used by the parents to get at each other, this does not bode well for the children's wellbeing (e.g. Vanderwater and Landsford, 1998). Thankfully, most couples eventually manage to get past this stage and establish more friendly and routine interactions around their children (Adamson and Pasley, 2006). When they do, this leads to improved outcomes for children, including less depression and fewer behavioral problems. Indeed, meta-analytic studies indicate that the overall negative impact of divorce is relatively small in magnitude, and many children cope surprisingly well (Amato, 2000; Amato and Keith, 1991).

Moving on and letting go

Relationship dissolution can and does have positive consequences. Some relationships are unhealthy, and some are downright dangerous. Getting out of such relationships reduces stress and depression, and provides the opportunity to develop a more rewarding life (Amato and Hohmann-Marriott, 2007). Despite the initial devastation, many people report benefits of divorce (up to 90% in some samples). This is not just because of the relief experienced after deciding to end a relationship which has become toxic. Even unwanted divorce or relationship dissolution can lead to personal growth, improvement in self-efficacy and self-esteem, and developing closer relationships with friends and family. People also often report greater autonomy, new leisure interests, and more success at work (see Tashiro *et al.*, 2006 for a review). Of course, individuals also cope with relationship dissolution via rationalizations and denial, and retrospective reports of growth are probably positively biased. Nonetheless, these shifts in perceptions are an important indicator of recovery and help people move on.

The degree to which people can turn divorce into a positive experience differs across individuals and situations. We have summarized the major factors involved in Figure

Factors Predicting Recovery from Relationship Dissolution
- Secure, optimistic personality - Financial security - Good social networks and support - Acceptance of loss - Letting go of love and anger toward ex-partner - Accomplishing identity change - Managing conflict over children - Entering new sexual relationship

Figure 12.7   Recovery from relationship dissolution

12.7. Some studies have found that men experience less personal growth in the aftermath of divorce, although the effects tend to be inconsistent (Amato, 2000). As noted above, women are more likely to leave relationships and men tend to lack the rich networks of social support that women tend to cultivate. Friends and family play a huge role in coping with stress and grief and help to ameliorate the loss of identity that occurs when a pivotal intimate relationship ends. Those who feel utterly alone after a relationship breakdown, and have no other close relationships to fall back on, face an uncertain and possibly bleak future unless they can replace the lost attachment figure.

An attachment perspective (see Chapter 5) suggests that the process of coping with relationship dissolution is similar to the sequence of reactions to attachment loss in childhood (see Hazan and Shaver, 1992): **protest, despair, and detachment**. After the initial shock of a partner's death, for example, the bereaved typically exhibit protest behavior characterized by high levels of anxiety, rumination, and compulsions to be near the partner, often visiting and talking to the deceased at their favorite places or gravesite. In the aftermath of a relationship break up, individuals often oscillate between withdrawal and contact, sometimes struggling to re-establish the relationship until eventually accepting it is over. When the loss is finally accepted, despair can follow, and may continue until people finally wipe the attachment slate clean, ready for new intimate attachments to be forged.

However, there are massive individual differences in the pace at which these stages are traversed. Some feel strongly attached to their ex-spouse for years, even decades, after marriages have ended, along with continued angst and depression (Sbarra and Emery, 2005). The more people hold onto feelings of either love or hurt and anger, the less able they are to adjust over time (Frazier and Cook, 1993; Sbarra and Ferrer, 2006). Not surprisingly, those with an anxious attachment orientation – preoccupation with acceptance and fear of rejection in uneasy concert with a longing for closeness – have the most difficulty letting go (Sbarra, 2006). People who are secure, in contrast, grieve and express their anger and pain, before (relatively) successfully detaching from the prior relationship.

A central component of the recovery process involves identity change. As relationships develop, partners are integrated into the individual's self-concept and the self

expands (see Chapter 7). When relationships dissolve, the process is slammed into reverse and people are forced to redefine who they are, as "we" returns to "me" (Lewandowski *et al.*, 2006). The subsequent lack of clarity in the self-concept magnifies the pain and sadness associated with relationship loss (Slotter *et al.*, 2010). Nonetheless, as we noted, this period of adjustment also provides opportunities for personal growth and development.

Most people eventually enter new relationships. In the USA, 85% of people eventually remarry. The median length of time between divorce and remarriage is three years, and the likelihood of remarrying or cohabiting within 10 years of divorce is 70% (with estimates for Europe even higher; Ganong *et al.*, 2006). Although a new family situation poses difficulties when children are involved, developing new relationships helps people recover from divorce (Wang and Amato, 2000). New connections, or even the potential for future relationships, seem to be particularly helpful in promoting anxiously attached individuals' detachment from their ex-partners (Spielmann *et al.*, 2009).

In sum, as seen throughout this book, intimate relationships are a central source of psychological and physical wellbeing. When entering relationships, people typically experience euphoria, passion, and self-expansion. Once established, the love that flows from a secure base is a key ingredient in happiness and fulfillment. But, the positive emotions experienced throughout relationship development are matched by the intense distress and turmoil experienced when relationships fail. Although the norm is one of resiliency and eventual recovery, relationship dissolution is often a crushing blow, and predicts poorer psychological and physical health, even for those who bounce back.

Not surprisingly, then, when good relationships go bad, most people do not give up easily and will use a variety of behavioral and cognitive tactics to hold onto what they have. Some couples seek professional help in an attempt to save their marriage or relationship. Indeed, the presenting problems associated with seeking professional help from psychologists are frequently linked to relationship issues, such as depression (Swindle *et al.*, 2000). The common problems that couples bring to relationship therapy involve the familiar ones we have previously discussed, such as communication issues, power struggles, lack of loving feelings and affection, domestic disputes regarding finances and children, infidelity, sex, and violence (Whisman *et al.*, 1997). Moreover, as we document, the most popular approaches to relationship therapy target relationship processes that are critical to relationship functioning and happiness.

Relationship Therapy

One of the founding quacks in the relationship field, Dr James Graham, established a lavish erotic therapy center in London in 1781, advertised as improving sexual relations and fertility. It became a fashionable destination for aristocrats of the day. Believing that sexual attraction was electrical in nature, Graham invented the magneto-electrical celestial bed, which was large, ornate, and decorated with fresh flowers along with a

pair of live turtle doves. While the couple had sex, oriental aromas were released, electrical pulses were produced, and music wafted from a hidden organ (no pun intended), matching the increasing intensity of the couple's movements.

You won't be able to find a celestial bed today, but sex and relationship therapy is much bigger business than in Graham's day. A mountain of self-help books advertise recipes for maintaining or repairing relationships, often described in terms of steps or secrets with the numbers ranging anywhere from 3 to 100. There are books for men and for women, for teenagers and for older folks. Many focus on specific themes, such as money, sex, and communication, along with quirky topics such as how to stop pets getting in the way of true love or how to iron a shirt. And, of course, there are always TV shows, with gurus like Dr Phil, to help sort people out. This blizzard of information makes it difficult for the consumer to sort the wheat from the chaff, and avoid the modern-day versions of Dr Graham.

In the following section, we briefly outline some major approaches to relationship therapy, link these to core processes we have considered throughout the book, and evaluate their success. Our treatment is necessarily brief, but it may assist those seeking help for their relationship to make more informed choices.

Traditional behavioral couples therapy

In 1979 Neil Jacobson and Gayla Margolin published a pioneering development of couple therapy, which integrated social exchange principles (such as those outlined by interdependence theory, Chapter 1) with social learning theory. In their account, relationship satisfaction is driven by the balance between rewards and costs in a relationship (social exchange) and relationship dysfunction was thought to occur when partners' behaviors become more punishing than rewarding. A key element of this behavioral approach is understanding how damaging behaviors are rewarded, and rewarding behaviors punished, according to the way they are responded to by the partner (social learning).

This focus on observable behaviors, and dyadic patterns of reward and punishment, were the impetus for the bulk of research examining conflict behavior, which we outlined in Chapter 9. The dyadic interaction patterns described in that chapter illustrate how damaging behaviors can be rewarded. Take the demand–withdrawal pattern. When Mary gets upset and angry, George disengages and leaves the room. However, if George's withdrawal causes Mary to suppress her negative emotions in later interactions (and ask George for forgiveness) in order to preserve closeness, his behavior will be rewarded and so he will be more likely to adopt this tactic in the future. Thus, although withdrawal tends to exacerbate problems, and often leads to dissatisfaction and divorce over the long haul (see Chapter 9), George's dysfunctional behavior is maintained.

Traditional behavioral couples therapy focuses on identifying the specific behaviors that produce dissatisfaction and the ways in which these behaviors are maintained. Problematic interaction patterns are targeted by developing constructive communication skills, such as listening and perspective taking, and then these skills are applied to

resolving specific problems. The problem-solving skills targeted for improvement are consistent with those that research suggests are successful in resolving conflict and sustaining relationships; these include directly targeting the problem, reducing blame, generating solutions that incorporate change by both partners, and maintaining positivity (see Chapter 9). Couples are also encouraged to exchange more positive, loving behaviors to enhance closeness and make relationships more rewarding (the type of daily maintenance and intimacy-generating behaviors discussed previously in this chapter and in Chapter 7).

Cognitive behavioral couples therapy

Cognitive behavioral couples therapy extends the traditional behavioral approach by acknowledging to a greater extent the role played by cognition in the initiation, maintenance, and outcome of the behaviors exchanged in a relationship (Baucom and Epstein, 1990; Epstein and Baucom, 2002). In prior chapters (especially 3 and 9), we showed how the appraisal and interpretation of relationship events shape the meaning, response, and ultimate impact of those events. A biting or dismissive remark is more of a mountain than a molehill if the receiving partner attributes it to selfishness rather than a stressful day (attributions), believes that good relationships will always be conflict-free (unrealistic expectations), attends to acidic comments but fails to recognize loving ones (selective attention), or believes that partners should always be cherishing no matter what the circumstances (inflexible standards).

Cognitive behavioral couples therapy targets these unhelpful cognitions and attempts to generate more forgiving attributions, more reasonable expectations, less selective attention, and more positive relationship beliefs. The goal is to make couples more aware of their automatic thoughts and expectations, assess the validity and consequence of those beliefs, and revise maladaptive cognitions through conscious clarification and evaluation. This process builds understanding across partners and, by increasing the veracity and generosity of their perceptions, reduces the degree to which partners react with hurt, bitterness, and hostility. Recognizing that cognition and behavior are entwined, interventions for modifying damaging behavior (as in traditional behavioral couples therapy) are also assumed to generate more positive and adaptive relationship cognitions and emotions.

Integrative behavioral couples therapy

Integrative behavioral couples therapy is further extension of traditional behavioral couples therapy. Based on their clinical and empirical observations, Neil Jacobson and Andrew Christensen (1998) argued that targeting behavior change is not always helpful, particularly for couples who, despite being committed to maintaining their relationship, face irreconcilable differences. Integrative behavioral couples therapy integrates behavioral strategies for change with promotion of acceptance and tolerance of differences in personalities, views, values, and communication styles. It does not encourage acceptance of dissatisfying and harmful behaviors as such, but instead promotes

acceptance of personal differences that lead to clashes across partners, such as George's autonomous need to work things out on his own and Mary's desire for connection and collaboration.

The overarching goal of integrative behavioral couples therapy is to help couples accept and understand each other while motivating them to make needed improvements where possible. In addition to communication and problem-solving training, it promotes acceptance by highlighting how specific problems arise from differences between partners, encouraging understanding of the other's perceptions and mutual responsibility (**empathic joining**), and helping couples distance themselves from specific problems by intellectually dissecting the issue without accusation and blame and then tackling the problem together (**unified detachment**). For example, by understanding how their demand–withdraw pattern stems from different autonomy–connection needs and coping strategies, George's withdrawal should become less hurtful and Mary's demanding less threatening. Acceptance and understanding should also reduce the pressure for either George or Mary to dogmatically maintain the correctness of their own approach, fostering a closer connection, and, paradoxically, a more conducive environment for change.

Emotion focused couple therapy

Emotion focused couple therapy draws on attachment theory (see Chapter 6) to understand and treat relationship distress (Johnson, 2004). The therapist's job is seen as providing a secure base for exploring the attachment-related needs and insecurities at the root of the relationship difficulties. The initial focus is on shifting destructive interaction cycles imbued with harsh and angry affect by helping partners recognize and express the vulnerable attachment-related fears that underlie their negative responses. Clarifying that Mary's demands and conciliations are driven by intense separation anxiety, and that George's withdrawal is triggered by feelings of guilt and failure, should help George and Mary understand each other's inner experiences and the cause of their dysfunctional interactions. It is thought that sharing such vulnerabilities should help George and Mary become more emotionally engaged, compassionate, and responsive to each other's needs. The ultimate goal is to generate a healthy, secure attachment bond from which couples can collaboratively approach problems, safely share and regulate their emotions, and trust in each other's love and support.

Does relationship therapy work?

Reviews of controlled trials show that these kinds of therapies produce similar levels of effectiveness in improving targeted domains of relationship functioning, including emotional acceptance, more forgiving and generous cognitions, and more constructive communication (Snyder *et al.*, 2006). The primary marker of success is whether couples become more satisfied. Around 70% of couples demonstrate improvement in levels of satisfaction by the end of treatment compared to control groups who have not received therapy (Shadish and Baldwin, 2003, 2005). That said, if you raise the bar so that

success is defined in terms of formerly distressed couples describing their relationship as now positively satisfying, the success rate drops to around 40–50%. And, unfortunately, about a third of these couples do not maintain their improvement over time and eventually divorce (Christensen *et al.*, 2006; Shadish *et al.*, 1993).

So although couples therapy can be effective, it certainly is no cure-all. High levels of initial distress impede improvement, as does lack of commitment and low trust in the partner's regard (two elements that we have shown are critical for relationship success). Unfortunately, of the minority of couples in relationship trouble who actually seek help, most wait until their relationship is all but over and only the remnants of commitment and regard are left to work on (Doss *et al.*, 2004). And, as we have seen, relationship difficulties are also commonly accompanied (and to some extent caused) by problems residing within the individual members of the couples (not the relationship), such as neuroticism, depression, drug and alcohol addiction, unemployment, and so on. Furthermore, the interdependent nature of relationships means that whether a relationship thrives or dives also depends on the unique nature of the relationship between two people. It is not surprising that marital therapy has not proved to be as effective as therapies tailored for individual-level disorders (Seligman, 1995).

We cannot emphasize enough the magnitude of the task facing the couples therapist. Moreover, the simple descriptions we provided do not convey the difficulty or richness of the therapeutic process, or how therapy is typically tailored to the experiences and difficulties of each unique couple. In practice, many therapists draw on a range of perspectives and techniques to fit the specific needs and difficulties of each couple, rather than sticking to one approach. In addition, the existing literature is not yet informative on what techniques are most effective for specific types of couples facing particular problems, or the best ways to prevent relapse to ensure lasting improvement. Finally, keep in mind that it is problematic to necessarily count divorce or separation as a failure. If the process of therapy convinces one or both partners that the best course of action is to leave the relationship, and empowers them to take that course, such an outcome does not seem to us to necessarily constitute a failure.

The challenge of helping couples once they have reached the point of seeking treatment has led to the development of a variety of marital prevention and enhancement programs to help couples acquire core relationship skills before they run into significant difficulties. The most widely evaluated preventive programs are those based on the central therapies outlined above, such as the **premarital relationship enhancement program** (Markman *et al.*, 1994), which focuses on (i) developing constructive communication skills and more realistic expectations so couples are equipped to tackle any future problems; and (ii) building commitment and bonding experiences to ensure couples continue to actively maintain the quality of their relationship. There is good evidence that these types of programs generate more positive communication and enhanced satisfaction, but little is known about long-term effects, such as the longevity of the relationship (Hawkins *et al.*, 2008). Moreover, those who voluntarily seek this type of program might already possess the motivation and wherewithal to cope with relationship and life hurdles; thus, such programs probably miss out on

dealing with the high-risk couples who may need it most (see Bradbury and Lavner, 2012).

The need for preventative programs highlights the point that sustaining relationships is more often than not a tough, ongoing task. Humans fall in love, sometimes choose mates badly, and enter relationships with dispositional and historical baggage. They face stressors and demands on their relationship outside of their control, while needing to coordinate different beliefs, expectations, and behavioral styles, and they encounter a variety of potentially devastating events. Given the extraordinary social and technological environment we currently live in, the way in which we are assaulted with glossy images of attractive alternatives, and the freedom in western countries to form and dissolve long-term relationships, the number of marriages that stay the course for life, in our view, is remarkable. Given the difficult and complex nature of the task, the success with which expert therapists can help people make decisions, communicate more effectively, and cope with distress in intimate relationships is equally impressive.

Summary and Conclusions

Since the 1950s the divorce rate in western countries has steadily increased, facilitated by more relaxed social norms concerning divorce, the widespread adoption of no-fault divorce legislation, and the increased economic independence of women. Still, the majority of couples across western countries (from 50 to 75%) who get married stay married, figures that are similar to other cultures round the world including hunter-gather cultures in Africa. These statistics, and our analysis in this chapter, are consistent with a major theme in this book; namely, humans are a bonding species, with a strong drive toward establishing long-term, monogamous sexual relationships.

Of course, human mating patterns are nothing if not flexible, and a long list of factors that people bring with them into long-term sexual relationships increase the probability of break ups including being young, having no job, little money, being neurotic, or having insecure attachment styles. However, the research suggests that these factors exert their causal power by feeding into more proximal-level causes such as communication and relationship management skills, and levels of investment and commitment. In particular, those who have a long-term mating orientation (see Chapter 5) tend to have the required commitment and command of cognitive/ emotional and behavioral strategies needed to foster and sustain their relationships, including a charitable and optimistic attitude to the partner, and the ability to adjust levels of honesty and accommodation according to the situation (see Chapter 9).

Even the happiest and best regulated relationships can fall prey to the power of external events, and certain behaviors that humans have a weakness for, especially infidelity, can destroy the foundation stone of any good relationships; namely, trust. And, when long-term relationships end, as scientists have assiduously documented, they typically produce difficulties for both the adults and the offspring, up to and including suicide, depression, and health problems. Fortunately, reflecting the resil-

ience of human nature, most people recover and many eventually forge new and successful intimate relationships.

We also briefly described some of the principal relationship therapies. They are all linked to the empirical work and theories in the broader scientific field, but stress different major elements in the psychology of intimate relationships including dysfunctional interactive behaviors (cognitive behavioral couples therapy), maladaptive cognitions (cognitive behavioral couples therapy), accommodation (integrative behavioral couples therapy), and the power of attachment and emotions (emotion focused couple therapy). The modest success rates attained by these therapies we think are impressive, given the complex and difficult nature of the therapist's task, and the brute facts that humans do not choose their parents or their evolutionary heritage, often choose mates badly, face many temptations in the modern world (from access to pornography to the possibility of extramarital sex), and often endure ongoing demands and stressors more or less outside of their control.

This chapter illustrates the aphorism that there is no free lunch in human nature. The sweetness of love and intimacy carry with them the power (often actualized) to inflict extended pain and grief when relationships end. This is the hand humans have been dealt – as we have seen it is not infrequently handled with both skill and courage.