



Building relationships
strengthening families



**Evaluation evidence from August 2008 (launch)
to January 2010**

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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INTRODUCTION

One Plus One launched thecoupleconnection.net in August 2008, with support from the Family Information Direct (formerly known as Parent Know How) funding stream within the Department for Children Schools and Families (DCSF). This document presents a summary of the key findings from an evaluation of thecoupleconnection.net, tracing data from its launch in 2008 through to January 2010. Further depth to the findings can be derived from the full evaluation report, which is available from One Plus One.

EVALUATION FINDINGS

The findings are derived from six main sources: Headline monthly monitoring use data; registration data; a cross-sectional online survey; online focus groups among site users; a focus group with the 'Talk-it-Out Team'; and case studies and examples from the forum. A brief set of concluding comments are added indicating new developments of the service as it approaches its third year since launch (from August 2008).

1. HEADLINE MONTHLY MONITORING USE DATA

Google analytics provides automated details of traffic to thecoupleconnection.net and has been collated on a monthly basis since the site was launched. Although the traffic is defined as computer connections usually through the creation of 'cookies' (rather than people) it provides the most powerful indication of how often the site is used.

The two main data available from Google Analytics are the numbers of *absolute unique visitors* to the site on a monthly basis (essentially new, counted only once, visitors to the site – equivalent to an estimation of unique users), and *visits per month* (the number of times the site has been visited per month which is likely to be greater than absolute unique visitors as a unique visitor may make more than one visit per month). Figures 1 and 2 show these headline data.

Figure 1

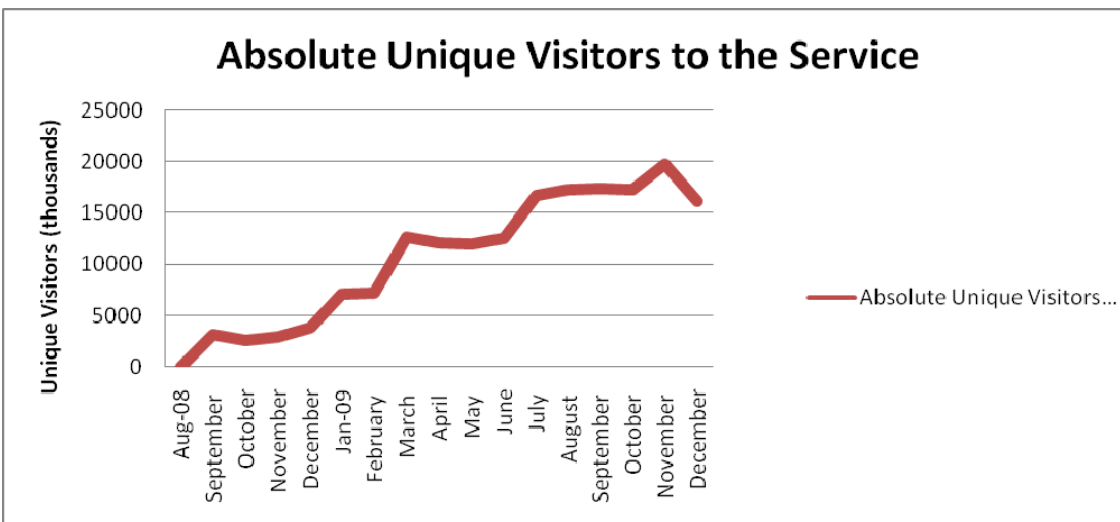
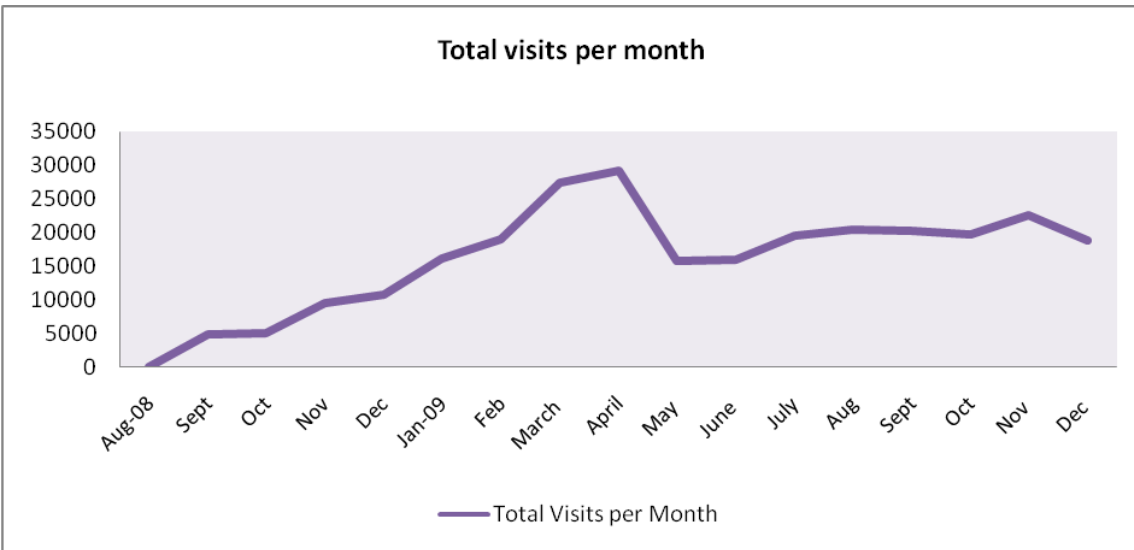


Figure 2¹



Taken together these charts show that the number of new unique visitors to the site has increased steadily to around 16-17,000 a month, who collectively make around 20,000 visits per month. Per month, there are around 3000 unique visitors who have returned to the site. Looking back to August 2008, a total of 180,000 unique visitors have made around 223,000 visits to the site. These figures show important information about the site in that the average use is relatively brief and for short periods at any one time (average time on site is 4.1 minutes and average page view per visit is 4.6 pages).

2. REGISTRATION DATA

Users of thecoupleconnection.net have been invited to register on the site since its launch in August 2008. Registration data provide four interesting sets of information about the registered users of thecoupleconnection.net which will be outlined as follows:

a) Demographic information

As at January 18th (the cut-off point for the registration data and survey [see later]) 2859 people had registered on the site since August 2008. This represents just over 1% (2259 / 180,000) of the total unique visitors to the site. Of those registered, 74.5% were female and 25.5% were male. The largest single age group are those aged 25-29 (20.7% of users), with 72.3% of registered users aged between 18 and 39.

Just over one-third were married (34.6%), 29.7% were cohabiting, 24.3% were 'closely involved' but not living together, and 7.3% were not in a relationship. 4.1% were 'dating'. Of the registered users, 61.6% were parents (parents and parents expecting). A small but significant proportion (2.1%) were experiencing the transition to parenthood for the first time with up to a further 36.3% having the potential to do so in the future. Of those parents using the site, 99 people or 7.4% (99/1346) parents reported having at least one child with a disability.

¹ Urchin was the web analytics tool recommended to thecoupleconnection.net prior to 1st May 2009 which recorded visit traffic to the service differently to the Google Analytic tool, hence the dip in the number of visits recorded in May.

b) Relationship topic areas

When registering, people were invited to identify three (out of 12) 'relationship issues' they would like to work on in their relationship. The four leading issues in rank order are 'Getting on better with my partner', 'Sex/intimacy & romance', 'Affairs and jealousy' and 'Finding time for each other'. Notably, 'Affairs and jealousy' has increased and taken over from 'Finding time for each other' as the third most popular topic area behind 'Getting on better with my partner' and 'Sex/intimacy & romance'.

c) Relationship quality data

The shortened 10-item Golombok-Rust Inventory of Marital State (or GRIMS) measures the relationship quality of an adult couple relationship (Rust and Golombok, 1986). In total, 1562 people completed their relationship quality questions using the 10-item GRIMS measure. The 10 items include those phrased in both a negative (e.g. 'I am dissatisfied with our relationship') and positive manner (e.g. 'We can always make up after an argument') and participants are asked to respond either in strong agreement, agreement, disagreement or strong disagreement.

The general consensus is that most people registering on the site are reporting some degree of distress in their relationship. Combining the 10 items together, and appointing a score of 0 for strong agreement and 3 for strong disagreement for positively phrased questions (and reverse for negatively phrased questions), the average score for all registered participants was 16.5 (out of 30 with a higher score indicating a poorer quality of marital state). For additional interest, the internal reliability of the scale was 0.86 (Cronbach's Alpha) thus supporting the amalgamation of the 10 items into a single score.

d) Sliding scale of relationship happiness

The final questions at the point of registration invite people to report how they see their relationship now, and where they would like to see their relationship in three months time. Both questions are scored on a sliding scale from 1 to 10 with a higher score indicating a more positively rated relationship. The results show that most people are not as satisfied as they would like to be with their relationship, with the mean score for 'now' being 4.16 and 6.16 for the 'future'.

All those completing the GRIMS and sliding scale are invited to complete the questions again at three month intervals. Of the 1563 registered users who had completed their relationship 'now' and 'future' scores, 72 had done this on more than one occasion with most completing it no more than twice. With a small sample, the results were fairly inconsistent with some reporting a discernable improvement (i.e. where they are 'now', being three months after the first assessment, was broadly similar to where they wanted to be three months previously) while others did not. The results from the GRIMS showed a slightly more consistent improvement at the three month follow-up. These data are likely to increase in the future.

3. CROSS-SECTIONAL SURVEY

An online survey was available for completion on the site between October 6th 2009 and January 18th 2010 inclusive. 134 users completed the survey, with 99 completing it fully. The full survey can be viewed in the main report. The survey data provided information in four main areas: profile of survey respondents; using thecoupleconnection.net; attitudes towards the service; and perceived impact of thecoupleconnection.net.

a) Profile data

The profile data for those completing the survey was broadly similar to those registering on the site. For example, 79% were female, 34% were married, 28% living with partner, 17% 'closely involved' (but not living with partner), 10% dating and 10% not in a relationship. 64% were parents, 4% were expecting their first child, 33% had no children and were not

expecting. 34% of those completing the survey described themselves not as White-British, with 7% 'Any other White background' and 5% 'Black or Black British: African', 4% 'Black or Black British: Caribbean', and 4% 'White Irish'.

b) Using thecoupleconnection.net

The survey asked a series of questions about site content and use which had prescribed targets of achievement set at 80% user satisfaction – in this case derived from people agreeing or strongly agreeing to a response. Significantly, all targets were met or exceeded. These favourable responses were in relation to information on the site being useful (93% agreement or strong agreement), kept up to date (87%), and easy to understand (93%). Similar positive responses were provided by ease of use (87%) and navigating the site (85%). Participants were similarly positive about the design of the site (84%) and being able to fit the site to suit their own personal needs (84%).

c) Attitudes towards the service

This section reports findings in three main areas. Firstly, attitudes and perceived use of the 'Talk it out' section, secondly, the perceived benefits of what thecoupleconnection.net is able to offer users and, thirdly, possible advances to the site. In general, participants were positive about the 'Talk it Out' section, being dominated by (in rank order) 'getting things off their chest' (57% ticked answer), getting advice quickly (52%) and appreciating the advice of others (49%).

Participants identified a number of benefits of using thecoupleconnection.net and the responses show how the site was able to offer them support in a different way to other more formal support services (such as relationship counselling). Information at any time of the day (73%), anonymous advice (72%) and advice without paying (63%) were appreciated by around two-thirds of the survey respondents. Additional preferences were well recognised too, although to a lesser extent: advice without being face-to-face (56%), advice without having to make an appointment (56%), and advice from the Talk it Out Team (44%).

In terms of site enhancements, new areas of content where interest was shown were: mental health concerns (36%), starting a new relationship (25%), and drug/alcohol issues (24%). A slightly alternative interpretation is that the leading area of new information requested was only ticked by 36% of the survey sample – this could be an indication that the 12 topic issues recognised at registration and the site content as a whole is covering the main issues in demand. Additional preferences were expressed for availability of the site through mobile technology (45%), from another website not so obviously about relationships (45%), and via a telephone helpline (31%).

d) Perceived impact of thecoupleconnection.net

There were a number of questions concerning the perceived impact of the site on parenting, understanding about relationships, confidence about making changes in relationships and ultimately whether a relationship had been improved. Note that this is respondents' perceived impact of the site – without objective assessments of their understanding (as an example) and without a control group of similar people who have not used thecoupleconnection.net the findings cannot extend beyond these subjective assessments.

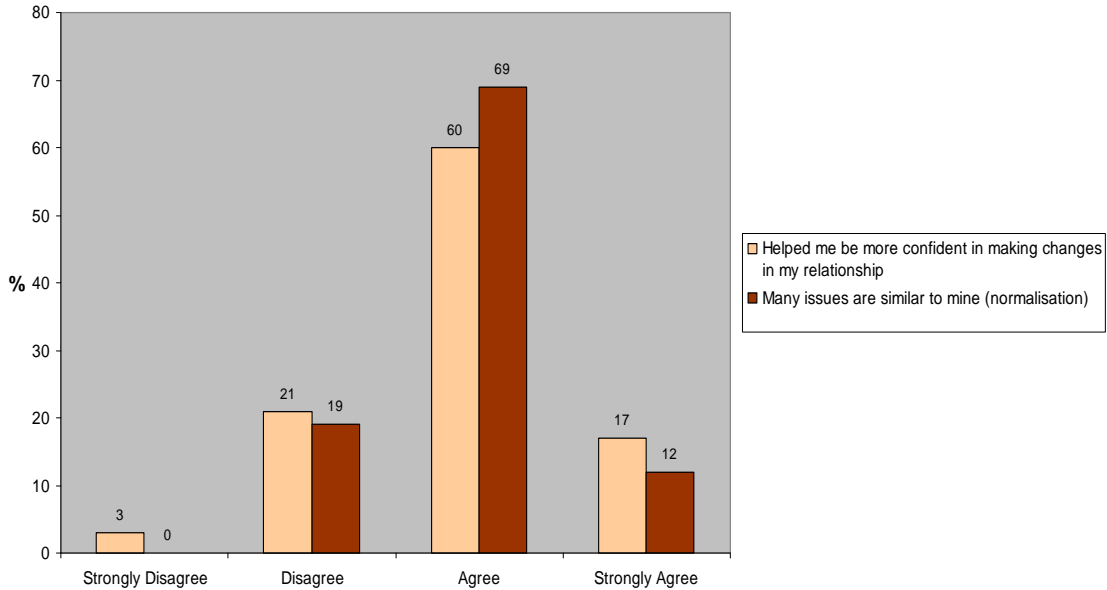
Nearly three-quarters (72% of who expressed a preference) agreed or strongly agreed that the site had helped them to be a better parent. There were similar positive impacts in terms of increased understanding of relationships: 82% agreement for increased understanding about why relationships work and don't work, 85% for how relationships affect parenting and 92% on seeing the real reason behind a relationship problem.

Positive impacts were also seen towards conflict and managing arguments within relationships. 77% agreed or strongly agreed that the site had helped them communicate better with their partner, 82% understand more about their partner's point of view and 71%

manage arguments better. Additional impacts towards an increased confidence in dealing with relationship issues (81% agreement) and knowing where to get further help (92% agreement) were also reported.

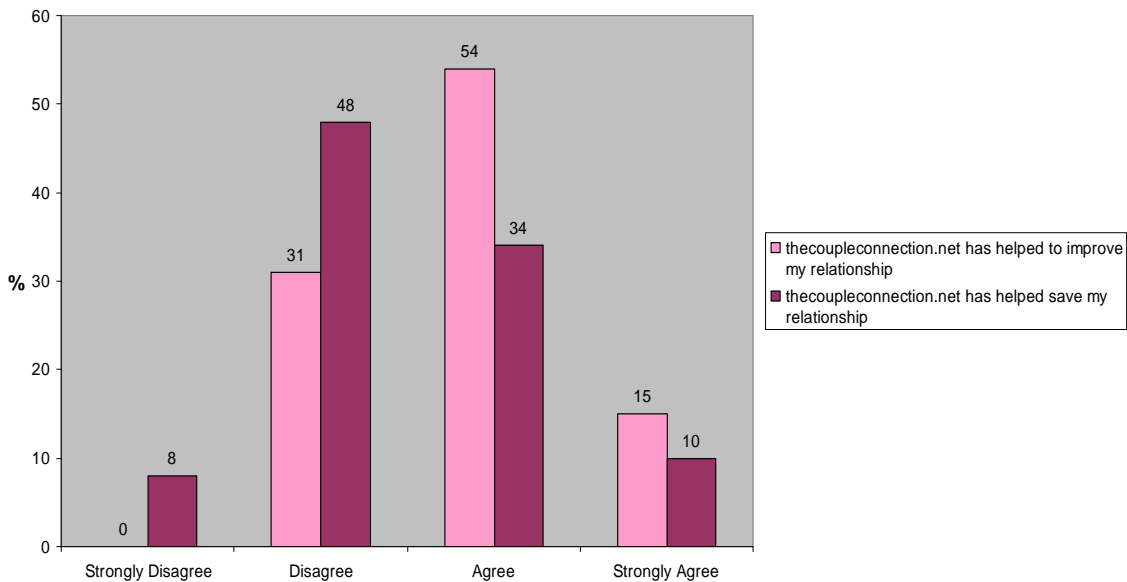
Moving more towards the ability to make changes in relationships, Figure 3 shows positive levels of agreement towards an increased confidence in making such changes (77%) and also a sense of normalising relationship issues (81%) – both of which are crucial prerequisites for relationship change.

Figure 3 Impacts of using thecoupleconnection.net



The impacts to date have indicated improvements in the antecedents of relationship satisfaction and quality in terms of knowledge, awareness, managing arguments, confidence and normalisation. Figure 4 reports ‘headline’ impacts on people’s relationships – 69% agreed or strongly agreed that using thecoupleconnection.net had helped to improve their relationship and 44% that it had ‘saved’ their relationship.

Figure 4 Headline impacts on using thecoupleconnection.net



4. ONLINE FOCUS GROUPS AMONG SITE USERS

At the end of the cross-sectional survey, participants were able to express interest in taking part in an online focus group. A total of seven participants participated in four groups: two groups contained one participant (effectively one-to-one interviews), one group had two participants, and a further group had three participants. All seven participants were female, aged 25-44 years (mean age=33 years) and located in England. Six participants were parents and not currently expecting a child, one was not a parent. Three participants were married, two were cohabiting, and two were 'closely involved' but not living with their partners.

People typically found the site via Google or were referred from other sites. There was a variation in terms of how long people had been using the site, and most of the use had been within the 'Check it Out' and 'Talk it Out' sections. Participants generally indicated a high level of satisfaction with the current site design, and an ease in finding information. Most of the participants viewed the 12 topic areas as *"the most common issues and most relevant."* However, participants also suggested a wide range of other topics to be considered in future, including mental health, communication, step-parenting, dealing with a controlling spouse, relationships within ethnic minorities and counselling.

In terms of accessing online support, participants expressed favourable opinions towards anonymity, neutrality, and a means of expressing their concerns by 'writing them down':

"... but there were issues that were really helpful to discuss with someone neutral. I've also discussed things at length with my husband, but he only has so much to give! What I mean is that it is easier to talk to someone neutral, and even someone you don't physically see or speak to, if that makes any sense... Perhaps because they don't judge you. It's also less embarrassing to admit you have a problem to someone you will never see but whom you don't have a relationship with, who will always pretty much be neutral. Neutrality also means that you can take a step back and you can assess the situation yourself more calmly".

In addition, having the site available whenever required was a further benefit and concurs with the survey findings: *"I like that the site is there whenever I need it"*.

Although participants had found the information from the 'Check it Out' section useful, there was a greater reference to the use of the 'Talk it Out' section or forum which was seen as major strength of the website:

"I receive a massive amount of support from the Talk it Out section. In fact I don't know what I would do without it sometimes... You will always get some negative responses, but feelings are feelings, and if you feel something then you feel it, whether it is right or wrong... I just felt there was complete understanding and it is a strange feeling as the people are complete strangers but immensely comforting".

Findings suggested the benefits were being able to express difficulties, receive support, discover that others were commonly experiencing similar issues (normalisation) and that the diverse opinions enabled people to reconsider their situation and see their relationship difficulties from others' points of view:

"It gives good advice and its nice reading other posts.....you know you aren't alone then, and you can get other perspectives on things by responses to your posts".

Although fewer participants had used the 'Work it Out' section, the diary was viewed as a space for understanding feelings about a relationship, and a means of clarifying thoughts before speaking to a partner. Exercises were also occasionally used, with one participant expressing a desire to share them with her husband. However, all participants tend to view that their male partners would be more resistant to using the site, be it sharing exercises or joining the 'couple space'.

Participants indicated a clear desire for additional methods of communication on the site, and discussed Live Chat and Private Messaging as two potential mechanisms for this. Participants appeared to indicate that this system would allow the sharing of personal contact details in a private manner, which they felt would be protective, and would not breach the Terms and Conditions of the website. The Talk it Out Team were felt to have a continued role within this setting, providing moderation, but also potentially providing a conversation with users of the service. Increasing the optimal access of the site through mobile handsets was also favoured. One participant discussed the potential benefits of having exercises able to be completed online. This was considered to be a way of reflecting back on changes in relationship state.

Participants considered alternative funding mechanisms should the current funding stream be discontinued. A number of participants indicated that they would be willing to pay for access to the website, however they raised concerns that this would not be an option available to all. Instead, participants appeared to indicate a preference for advertisements, though again there was concern that advertisements could become a source of annoyance, and affect interactions with the website.

Finally, there were frequent references to how thecoupleconnection.net had helped people's relationships. Participants viewed it as "a huge comfort" and welcoming "knowing others have the same problems and seeing different points of views". Although participants were informed that they did not require people to talk about their personal relationships, the lower than expected uptake among some groups (which were effectively one-to-one interviews) provided such an opportunity. Some participants expressed the benefits of the site in enabling them to be less impulsive in difficult situations, and be clearer themselves what issues were. For example:

"I was angry about everything before and couldn't see how to get through this. I now log on when I feel the need, read some posts and articles, and then vent my spleen through the diary. Then, when I've calmed a bit I re-read what I have put on previous diary entries and I can somehow cut through the emotion and identify calmly what the issue is. I can then speak calmly to hubby about it because it's clear thoughts rather than some of the rambling confusing conversations we have been having..."

Some spoke more concisely about the benefits of the site:

"It definitely has made a difference for me, because of the professional quality of the site and reply received. I would definitely use it again, don't think you could make it much better".

In general, the findings from the focus group concur with findings from the earlier sections and, in some instances, in much greater detail. Where sections of the site had been used, the overall response was positive. There were distinct parallels to positive responses in the earlier findings in terms of the use and navigation around the website, preferred topics, future developments and perceived impacts on people and their relationships.

5. FACE-TO-FACE FOCUS GROUP WITH THE ‘TALK IT OUT TEAM’ (TIOT)

The ‘Talk it Out Team’ (TIOT) are a group of qualified couple relationship therapists and act as moderators on thecoupleconnection.net. They meet regularly to share experiences of working on the site, share knowledge and ideas with each other, and meet occasionally with One Plus One at a ‘Talk it Out Team Day’. As part of the evaluation, the TIOT were invited to join a focus group to share their experiences of moderating the site – eight TIOT members joined this group.

Among the TIOT group there was acceptance that prior to their work on thecoupleconnection.net they had been limited in their use of technology, and that providing support and advice through this medium was an initial challenge. With increasing experience in using the site they had developed an appreciation of its ability (and the internet more generally) to reach new audiences, support those unable to access counselling, and provide ongoing support for those already receiving such services.

TIOT members discussed a variety of similarities between internet support and a traditional counselling approach. These similarities included using empathy and having unconditional positive regard for posters. Differences were identified in the need to be more directive at times as a result of being unable to engage in a long conversation, as posters do not always respond to TIOT comments. In addition, TIOT members indicated the value of having time to reflect on someone’s post as a method of over-coming differences in the counselling relationship. By re-reading, and reflecting on the post they could gain a greater understanding of the person’s reasons for posting, their needs, and develop a greater understanding of the situation.

TIOT members noted a strong sense of being part of a team, and they indicated that this had developed through being supported by other members when initially joining, being able to trust in other members to support them when posts were difficult, and the benefits of being able to attend TIOT days to meet with each other. They also reported having a good relationship with One Plus One, in which Talk it Out Team Days had allowed them to see the different roles taken.

TIOT members used several criteria to decide when they would provide a response to a post. The reasons were extensive, and included domestic abuse, child abuse, situations of crisis, or the first crisis in the case of some young people. Additionally, indications of loneliness and vulnerability, and posts that elicited strong emotions for TIOT members were also situations in which posts were responded to. A desire to direct individuals to particular resources including content on thecoupleconnection.net, or to counselling, were further instances where the TIOT would respond to a post.

TIOT members had some awareness of the content available on the ‘Check it Out’ and ‘Work it Out’ sections of the website and indicated different reactions to these two sections. The ‘Check it Out’ section was felt to provide a general introduction to topics, with some elements identified as being particularly valuable. The ‘Work it Out’ section was felt on occasions to be too ‘academic’ in style, with only the highly motivated perceived to be interested in using this part of the website. These perceptions influenced the extent to which TIOT members felt comfortable in referring users to other parts of the website.

6. CASE STUDIES AND EXAMPLES FROM THE FORUM

The final set of findings outlined in this summary is fittingly taken direct from the users of the site, through anonymous case-studies extracted from the ‘Talk it Out Section’ or forum. The four case studies outlined in the full report show some prime examples of the impacts of peer to peer support which, in many cases, has resulted in positive results for the users themselves. Although all four case-studies cannot be shared in this summary, one example

has been selected where a poster seeks advice about a long term relationship which they feel is on a gradual downward trend. The original poster responds to the comments provided by others in comments 2 and 4, therefore illustrating a good example of how she responds to this peer support.

By Anonymous on 26 January 2010, 10:03pm²

Relationship Issues³: [Finding time for each other](#), [Sex/Intimacy & romance](#), [Affairs & jealousy](#), [Friends & family](#), [Getting on better with my partner](#)

Tags⁴: [control](#), [abuse](#), [relationship](#), [Love](#), [lost](#), [ungrateful](#), [move on](#), [Support](#)

'Hi, I am writing to ask for some help. I feel so confused. I have gradually become more and more aware of how unhappy I am, which was a surprise to me...I guess I was confused between having a happy, positive approach to life and being happy.

I have done some personal searching and counselling to try to identify what is causing me so much unhappiness, and sadly it seems to be my relationship.

I have been in a long term relationship for nearly 20yrs. I love my partner, he is exciting, charming, and loyal, and loving...he is also moody, argumentative, opinionated, single minded and capable. For the first 8yrs we had an exclusive relationship where he worked overseas (3 months away, 6 weeks home) and during this time, I did my best to 'keep it real' as in, when he was in the UK, we obviously had some catching up to do, but I made sure that I didn't just drop everything and that we had as close to a normal life.

While he was away and when he finally came home for good, he got so jealous of my life, but I didn't realise this, or even contemplate this. I did what I could to keep up with his friends so that they were always aware of where he was and what he was doing...I was also very active in helping him build his life back here in the UK and getting him involved in my life. Basically, I tried very hard to cushion his transition from overseas to UK.

However, he was never satisfied and kept asking me to prove to him that he was important to me. When I included him in things that I enjoyed doing...he would sabotage things and then refuse to accept that this was what he was doing. I was always told to 'get a life' or to 'stop overreacting'.

Anyway, I recognised that he was 'difficult' but never thought he was in any way trying to undermine me, or that he was jealous of me. But unconsciously, I did start to watch what I did or said, or how I said it or what he might not like...I kept my friends separate, had separate plans but supported and encouraged him in all that he wanted and did. So much so, that I didn't think about the fact that he wasn't supporting me, because I loved him...my 'difficult' man. In fact, he was causing me so much stress, unhappiness, anxiety and I just seemed to learn to duck and dive.

So, fast forward to now and I am tired...tired of always having to 'fight my corner', tired of having to 'put up and shut up' with his moods, tired of having to 'dumb down' just to make him feel better about himself. I am exhausted to the point that I just keep putting one foot in front of the other but have no energy to look up to see what direction I am going in...Mostly because I am so disinterested...everything I love/desire/crave/need is North, but he just keeps pulling me South where he feels safe.

² The case studies have been copied verbatim from the site (there are occasional spelling and grammatical errors that have not been corrected).

³ Relationship issues are categorised by the Talk it Out Team.

⁴ Tags are selected by the user submitting the original post.

I have stopped feeling responsible for him, which is refreshing, but I am caught in a 'good cop, bad cop' cycle with him that every time I look up, another 6 months have gone by. I know that I love him, but I don't think that am in love with him. He is totally paranoid and reads things into everything I say or do; he pushes me to constantly prove to him that I love him. But he thinks the things I like, need or want are 'unnecessary', that I should just do it/get them/believe them 'if I want' but he stomps all over them and makes it very difficult for me to persue anything. He thinks that dismissing me and what I say, saying 'if you want it do it' is supporting me, so he has no part in my not doing things.

After some recent events where he, for the first time, left me feeling completely lost and shaken, I moved out but ended up back home...I think because of fear, feeling lost and habit. I have done some reading and talking and it seems that I am in an emotionally abusive and controlling relationship...which has finally explained why, given that I am a capable, independent, outgoing and friendly person BUT that I am sad, lonely, lost, withdrawn and afraid to do anything.

But now, he has used his charm to get me back where I feel trapped but like I am just being ungrateful and making waves.

Am I going mad, just moaning or should I just move on?

Comments

1. Anonymous on 28 January 2010 at 12:42am said...

It is very hard to sustain a relationship over a long period of time, but if there is a firm foundation the changes can sometimes be managed effectively. I would question whether you ever had this firm foundation when you spent so much of your early relationship apart. I know that sounds a bit patronising so I won't dwell on that comment but maybe you should reflect on it.

We need to deal with the here and now. That is the essence of life isn't it? You're very unhappy; you have identified the cause as your relationship; you need to act! That could be to either trying to work things out between you starting with a conversation about how unhappy you are and seeing where that goes; or it could mean getting out once and for all. You are obviously an intelligent woman and you should be able to approach that difficult conversation with some convincing rationality. Lay it out for him and see how he responds. You have given a lot to this relationship and if he doesn't respond now at this stage you need to cut your losses and move on. I have done this several times in my life and whilst it is enormously difficult, if you maintain a positive attitude it can be something of a rebirth, a re-awakening. I guess you are in your 40's or early 50's. Plenty of time left to begin another life and believe me there is plenty of love out there in the world if you have the courage to look for it.

2. Anonymous on 28 January 2010 at 5:32pm said...(Original poster⁵)

I think the comment about the foundation of the relationship is fair. I did all I could to make him feel part of things and he got used to my taking responsibility for him. I thought I was being nice and supportive, and because I felt secure about whom I was, I didn't ask him for anything. I was so busy (as you can imagine), that I didn't stop to think about the implications of what I was doing.

⁵ Original poster is added for the benefit of the reader – not actually stated on the forum.

As to the here and now, we have tried counselling and I asked him to leave a few times (he wouldn't), and finally left myself. Each time that we got back together, if I am totally honest with myself, it is usually because having already reached such a low ebb to finish the relationship, I am in such a depressed state, that he works on me hourly, daily, and makes it easy for me to come back, pretending to take on board the issues. But, he never really listens to the actual words, he just wants me back by hook or crook and things never improve, I just learn to adjust just a little more.

You may ask where my friends and family are here...they are around and concerned, but I am very private and keep things to myself. It is only in the last couple of years that I have actually started to question my partner's motives (either consciously or unconsciously) and the impact they have on me. It is very hard to come to terms with the reality of what has been going on, and the wasted time. I may have been standing up for myself, but I shouldn't have had to do that if I was in a loving relationship.

But the bit I am more sad about is how it has robbed me of my spirit, luckily I know that is has just gone underground. So, you are right...I need to act now and stop accepting this numb existence as my life. There is so much I want to do and it is about time I stop giving to someone who either cannot or will not give in return.

I feel so punch-drunk, so confused...I don't mean to sound overly dramatic, but it's like being told there is no sun...it feels so improbable, but I can't deny what has gone on between us, how he treats me, speaks to me and how I feel...

3. Anonymous on 29 January 2010 at 6:54am said...

Hi there,

It sounds like you know what you want to do and know what you need to do. You will find the strength; it is quite clearly a feature of your personality to be brave and independent. In all things we have a choice, and it sounds to me like you've already chosen and now just have to follow through.

You sound like a wonderful, introspective, sensitive and compassionate person. You'll never lose that. You might have given some of that strength away, but those resources and qualities are yours if you chose to reclaim them. Your language is of a person with a wonderful future - you know what is best for you!

I wish you all the best. :)

4. Anonymous on 02 February 2010 at 9:33pm said... ...(Original poster)

Thank you both for your comments; I very much appreciate your honesty and generosity. You are right, I now just need to follow through and to stop sabotaging myself, putting obstacles in my way. It will be hard, and I can survive this to find a more fulfilling future.

Thank you :-)

Naturally, the above example is unable to reveal what eventually happened in the relationship (whether she left her partner, whether this proved to be the right decision for her, etc). However, one particularly interesting comment from the original poster illustrates a benefit of thecoupleconnection.net as being available for advice where friends and family are not seen as viable support. The original poster (comment 2) states: "You may ask where my

friends and family are here...they are around and concerned, but I am very private and keep things to myself.” For this ‘private’ person, using thecoupleconnection.net was seen as a viable alternative source of support.

Although some positive impacts are expressed by returning comments from the original poster, it must be clarified that these are largely expressed by the poster outlining clarity in their situation or progressing to a next stage in resolving the issue (akin to the ‘making plans’ stage in the helping process). What is missing, however, is to know the relative success of these plans and whether they were effective in resolving difficulties or reaching some conclusion. It is understandable that whether successful or unsuccessful, it is unlikely for a poster to return comments after this stage and therefore the true impacts of the site on relationship outcomes are still somewhat difficult to derive. Nonetheless, it is with some confidence that the forum, through the illustration noted above, does provide a valuable contribution towards reaching a conclusion to some of the difficulties noted. Further case studies presented in the full report show examples of a TIOT member response, and other posters off-loading and sharing their similar experiences in response to an original post.

CONCLUSION

The findings from the evaluation of thecoupleconnection.net have shown its developing use with the number of new unique visitors increasing to around 16-17,000 a month. The 2859 people registering on the site have provided detail on the demographic profile of the site users (three-quarters female, two-thirds being parents, etc.), which was broadly matched by those completing the cross-sectional survey. The survey also provided data on the site use, attitudes and impacts providing headline statistics such as 69% agreeing or strongly agreeing that using thecoupleconnection.net had helped to improve their relationship. A degree of caution, however, should be drawn to the survey data given that the responses were generated from 134 users.

The use of online technology facilitated the focus groups among site users. Again, the findings echoed the general positive response to thecoupleconnection.net. These groups showed more detail about how the site has been used and, importantly, how it had provided a means to work out some relationship issues. Being aware that others are likely to experience similar difficulties and that using the site to make people less impulsive in difficult situations (and be clearer in these situations) were expressed as distinct advantages. Accessing relationship support immediately, at any time of the day, and without being face-to-face were highlighted as further benefits. Additional detail over the site use was provided in the case studies, and the focus group from the TIOT contained valuable insights into the role of the relationship counsellors who moderate the site.

Whilst this evaluation has provided valuable insights to the use of thecoupleconnection.net it has also highlighted ways in which the site could be developed further. Specific and recurring recommendations such as more availability via mobile devices will be taken forward over the next year. Likewise, the requirement to generate further registration data (particularly socio-economic) and increasing the number of respondents to the cross-sectional survey (scheduled for October 2010) are key recommendations. Furthermore, modifications to the way the registration data are recorded, for example, by being able to match individual profile data to relationship data will allow further insights to be generated as the site continues its development.