

TWO'S COMPANY

LIFE
STYLE

FIND OUT WHAT IT TAKES TO BUILD AND SUSTAIN A STRONG AND HEALTHY RELATIONSHIP. BY CINDY TILNEY

If you've ever been madly in love, you'll know the symptoms: you want to be with your partner 24-7 and think obsessively about the person when you're apart. You don't notice a single bad thing about him or her and are convinced you'll be in love till the day you die.

And then suddenly — after anything from a few months to a few years — the euphoric glow wears off and things start to go pear-shaped. You blame your partner for how you've let your goals slide, the nail-biting or high-pitched laugh that didn't bother you before becomes irritating and you start to bicker about mess and money, families and friends, toothpaste caps and taking out the rubbish.

'People have been saying "till death do us part" for hundreds of years,' says relationship therapist Mary Ovenstone. 'But given the differences between the male and female brain, it's not really surprising that couples run into problems over a lifetime together.'

Petro de Wet and Dereck Beukes, Imago relationship coaches, have a slightly different view on why things go wrong. Petro, whose own marriage was on the brink of divorce before she and her husband attended an Imago workshop, explains: 'Imago is based on the idea that we choose a partner according to characteristics of our parents — both good and bad. When people start a relationship, they see only the good. Then the romantic phase ends, usually after about two years, and the cracks begin to show. Most couples don't realise the true agenda of a partnership, which is to heal.'

For many couples, the cracks keep widening, with approximately 60% of SA marriages ending in divorce. So what is the secret to long-term relationship success? How do you and your partner avoid becoming a statistic?

CELEBRATE THE DIFFERENCES

Mary believes the key to a happy union is to understand the differences between the male and female brain and work with those divides.

Only in recent years have magnetic resonance images (MRI) of the brain enabled us to understand these differences from a neurological perspective. 'We're now able to see the reasons for issues that crop up time and again in couples' therapy,' she says. 'Men are predominantly left-brained, which makes them performance oriented, while female brains are highly complex, with a network of neurons connecting the left and right, making them both-brained and more focused on intimacy.'

While this may sound like a prophecy of doom for any functional union of the sexes, Mary insists that these differences, if properly managed, make men and women ideal thinking partners. 'Women expand a problem, giving it greater detail and depth, while men narrow it down, looking for ways to "fix" it.'

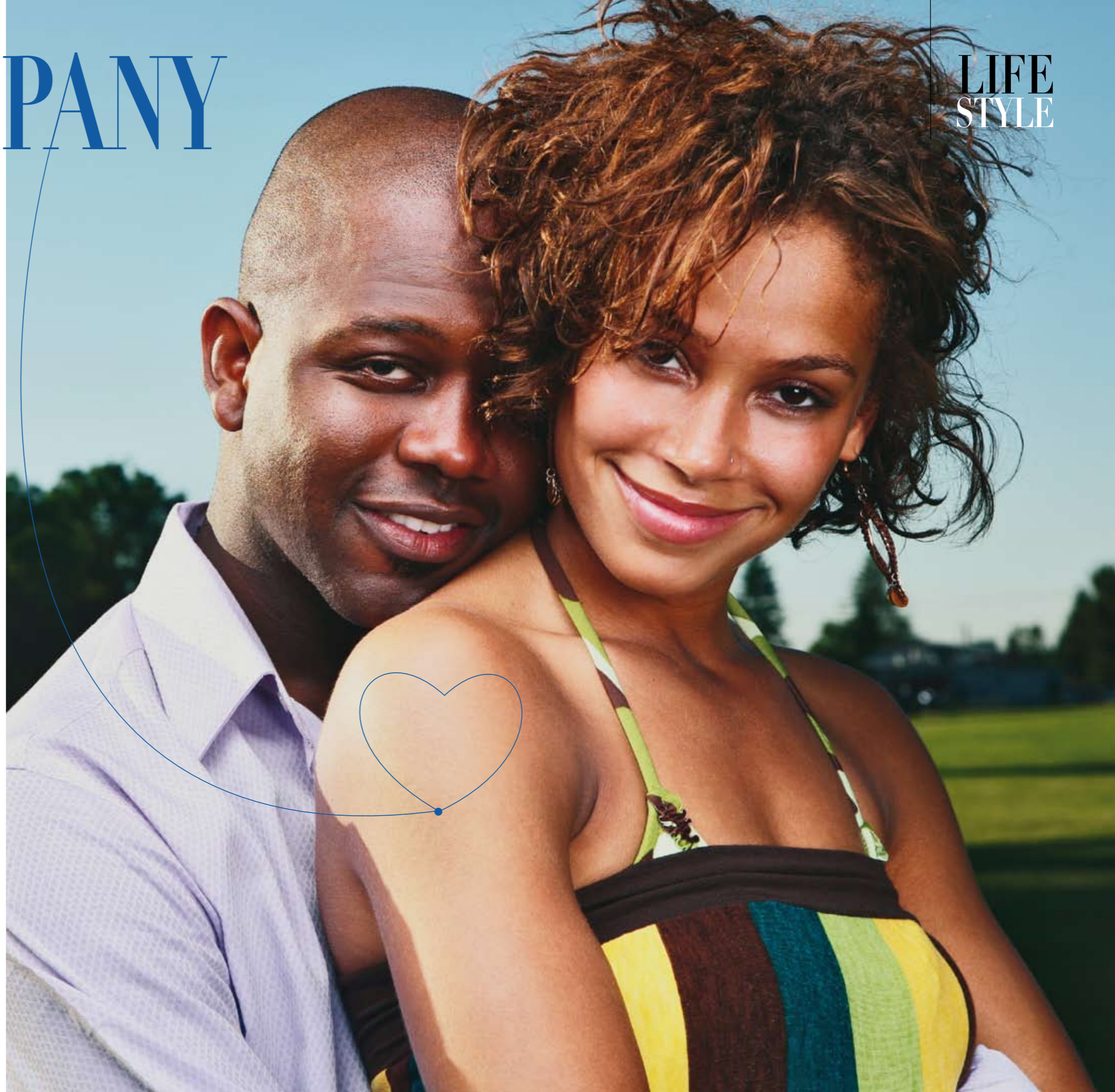
The good news is that using these different approaches in tandem makes solving complex problems a whole lot easier.

USE CONFLICT TO GROW

Once the romantic phase of the relationship wears off, a power struggle ensues, says Dereck, causing many couples to split up. 'But this phase actually holds the greatest potential for growth and self-awareness. Most conflict in relationships stems purely from projection, but if both partners can take responsibility for themselves and their part in the conflict, they can move towards a more positive way of interacting. We aren't here to demonise the other or break them down — rather to learn more about ourselves and each other.'

COMMUNICATE

Petro and Dereck advocate using simple techniques to improve the communication process. These include creating a safe space where both partners can clearly express themselves, and practising mirroring (reflecting your partner's words back to them) to make sure you have an accurate picture of what's going on. 'Couples then experience their own



behaviour through the eyes of their partner, which leads us to change the behaviour that hurts our partners,' explains Petro.

CHOOSE YOUR MOMENTS

As critical as communication is to any successful relationship, so is finding the right time for dialogue. For many years, after finishing work each day, Dereck would leave his home-based office and spend some time playing with his kids while waiting for his wife, Susie, to come home. When she arrived, he would greet her warmly and retire to his study once more, content in the knowledge that she was safely home.

'In my mind, I was leaving Susie to connect with the kids and wind down before discussing anything with her – because that's what I need after work. But in her mind I was abandoning her when what she really wanted was to talk through her day. Once we understood each other's needs and intentions, it was easy to adjust our behaviour to make us both happy.'

Bad timing is a classic relationship blunder, says Mary. Women have six to seven centres for speech throughout the brain, while men have only one or two in the left hemisphere. This means women can work through thoughts and feelings relatively quickly and track the process with words, while it takes most men up to three days to properly process and verbalise their feelings. 'Brain imaging has shown us that men actually use up reserves of dopamine (one of the brain's essential 'happy chemicals') when forced to talk about emotional issues before they are ready,' she says.

'It's helpful to zone time on a daily basis, allowing for the fact that men need some quiet time after work, while women need to be heard. If a woman can hold off on conversation while the man goes into his "cave", and a man can give his female partner some undivided attention during the course of the evening, both parties are likely to be a lot happier and more fulfilled. And if there's an important issue a woman wants to discuss, she should ask her male partner when the best time would be to talk, and respect the fact that it might not be immediately.'

BEWARE THE FOUR HORSEMEN

Acclaimed relationship expert John Gottman identified four major behaviours that can doom a relationship: criticism, defensiveness, sarcasm

or contempt, and withdrawal. The constant presence of one or more of these is an accurate predictor of marital failure.

'We use these behaviours in a futile attempt to change our partner's behaviour, but nobody can change another person,' says Petro.

STAY INDEPENDENT

It's essential to retain your independence in a relationship, nurturing your own thoughts and interests, says counsellor Beatrice Kidd of the Family and Marriage Association of South Africa (Famsa).

'A couple can't be symbiotic forever. It's natural, even necessary, to have a period of intense bonding at the beginning of the relationship. But there comes a time when the differences must matter because they provide an opportunity for self-awareness and growth.'

Otherwise you set yourself up for bitter disappointment when you realise all your interests have fallen by the wayside, she adds. And the relationship becomes more difficult to maintain when one person is 'carrying' the other.

KEEP THE OXYTOCIN FIRES BURNING

The high we feel at the start of a relationship is largely due to a flood of dopamine. But as with any drug, the brain develops a tolerance, and we feel less of that high over time.

As the dopamine rush wanes, it has the potential to be replaced by another hormone: oxytocin. While dopamine is primarily involved in establishing partner bonds, oxytocin is associated with developing attachment and intimacy. But keeping oxytocin levels high takes time and effort, especially once the romantic phase comes to an end.

'Keep in mind that feelings follow actions,' says Petro. 'If you act lovingly towards your partner, loving feelings will follow.' ■

USEFUL CONTACTS

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DOS AND DONT'S

- Do appreciate each other at least four times a day – when you wake up, when you leave for work, when you come home, and when you go to bed.
- Do surprise one another on a regular basis, but make sure it's something your partner would like, and not something you would like him/her to do for you.
- Do hold the gaze. A study by psychoanalyst and researcher Arthur Aron found that eye contact could play a significant role in creating and sustaining attraction.
- Don't ask questions during conflict. Rather say how you feel. A stream of questions causes constructive communication to break down.
- Don't sweat the small stuff.

