

WHAT IT FEELS LIKE...

# ...to go through premarital counselling

SHE IS A HIGH-FLYING HIGH EARNER, HE IS LAID-BACK AND FUNNY. COULD THEIR MARRIAGE WORK WHEN THEY KEPT ARGUING ALL THE TIME? ANNA AND JONATHAN TELL **AUDREY WARD** HOW THEY SOUGHT HELP

## ANNA, 36

Eight years ago, I set up my own wealth management company, and it's been very successful. Now I'm earning £500,000 a year and I like to treat myself. When I started dating my fiancé, Jonathan, four years ago, he was fascinated by my success, but a couple of years into the relationship, it had become an issue. He began to feel intimidated by my wealth. He works in the environmental department of the local council and earns £25,000 a year. He is loving and caring, has good values and comes from a traditional family. I liked that. For me, our income gap was never an issue. I'm a typical eastern European and like a bit of bling, whereas Jonathan is typically English and doesn't like to show off. One Christmas, I gave him a Rolex while his gift to me was a paperback. After opening my present, he started shouting. "This is ridiculous. Why do I need this?" I didn't care that my gift was a lot more expensive than his, but he thought I did.

It wasn't only material things that we argued about — my work was also an issue. Sometimes I put my career before our relationship, cancelling the theatre for work, for example. As Jonathan's frustration grew, the pointless arguments increased. I couldn't cope any more and was concerned about our wedding, which is in April. I still wanted to marry him, but I was worried our fights would mean our marriage might not last. "We're two intelligent people," I reasoned. "We have a problem, and we should do something about it before it escalates."

When I first suggested pre-marriage counselling, Jonathan told me I needed therapy. That upset me; he couldn't see how it might work, but I convinced him to try it. So, late last year, I found a premarital counsellor through the Susie Ambrose Clinic in

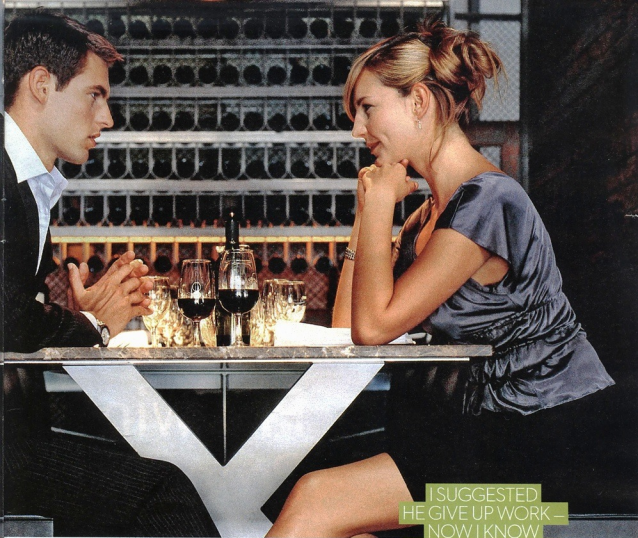
Knightsbridge, London. In the beginning, anxieties were high and Jonathan was a bit withdrawn, but over time we relaxed into the weekly sessions. Our counsellor, Trudy, asked us to write down what we loved about each other and what we didn't, and to describe our own strengths and weaknesses. As we went through the different exercises, slowly the puzzle fell into place. I began to realise "I never thought of that. I never looked at things that way".

In one of our first sessions, we argued about a trip I'd booked to stay at the Ritz in Paris. Jonathan is from a middle-class family and had always holidayed in B&Bs, which he felt were more appropriate. The counsellor had to intervene to help us try to see the other's viewpoint. I grew up in communist Bulgaria, where we had very little money and couldn't buy nice things. Jonathan began to understand how my past affected me and why I have this desire to treat us both. Meanwhile, I realised that I never really listened to him; when we argued, I became defensive and wouldn't give him the space to talk before going on the attack.

On a number of occasions, I had suggested Jonathan give up work. I thought it would be nice if I could look after him, and he doesn't care about his career as much as I do about mine. Through counselling, though, I've come to realise that he needs his job — and to earn money — for his self-esteem.

Trudy taught us to understand our roles in the relationship. Jonathan didn't know what he contributed to the relationship because, without realising it, I'd assumed responsibility for everything, from managing our finances to making sure the cars were serviced. Now we have learnt to share the tasks. We know who does what, so, for example, he now handles the bills. After 12 sessions, we've also learnt to compromise. This year, for our holiday, we've decided to go hiking in the Lake District, and are staying

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in a B&B, which Jonathan wants. Then, for Valentine's Day, we'll do something I want to do. We're both happy with that arrangement. In the past, I would have said, "How can you be so ungrateful?" Post-counselling, I ask him, "How did it make you feel?" – I've learnt to let him explain. Before counselling, I felt a bit like his mum, but things are getting better and better because he knows his role in our relationship. Before, he thought the money was mine, now he's learnt that it's ours. Now I'm 100% sure that I want him for my husband. I'm a much happier person, because I can see that we are a team.

## JONATHAN, 38

Anna is an amazing person, very loving and kind, intelligent and successful, and she wants the best from life. I would describe her as very driven, whereas I am only relatively so. Before we started pre-marriage counselling, we used to argue a lot, and it would always come down to money. I enjoy my job, but looking back, I recognise that I had an issue with the fact that Anna was running her own business and was the main breadwinner. I worried about my contribution and that our expectations of each other might be stumbling blocks to a happy marriage.

I wasn't sure what to expect from the counselling; I didn't know anyone who had tried it. After the initial consultation, it became much clearer and it made sense to give it a go, as we wanted to iron out all the problems before the big day and give ourselves a good chance of a long, happy marriage.

Trudy was not zany, as I had imagined she'd be, but warm

and practical. In each session, we were very open with each other – we discussed our communication, our roles and our expectations – and she helped us to find solutions to our problems. We have been seeing her for more than four months now, and it's given me a new, more positive view of our relationship, and of Anna. I've realised that we are not in competition, and I'm reconciled to the fact that Anna earns more than me.

Trudy taught me to focus on how lucky I am to have met someone amazing, and although Anna excels in her career, it is not a reflection on me. I realise that I should not have let my feelings about myself influence my feelings about Anna. It is hard for men to deal with their partners earning more than they do. If a woman is successful, she is proud to break the stereotype, but it's not the same for men.

Trudy helped me to understand how much I bring to the relationship – I help Anna to be what she wants to be, and I can help to make the work/life balance possible. So, if Anna is at work until 8pm and I've finished at 6pm, I get on with chores so that the time we do have together is "us" time. I also bring a sense of fun to the relationship. I show Anna how much I love her and I help with practical things. Now I realise she doesn't expect me to buy her expensive gifts, or take her to luxury hotels. Meanwhile, the expectations that she has – that I should love her wholeheartedly – I can fulfil; there's no price on that. The arguments about money and work are much rarer these days. Some couples may feel they don't need to go for pre-marriage counselling, but I found it extremely helpful – and so did Anna. ●

Susie Ambrose Clinic, 12 Hans Road, SW3; 020 7753 7634, [susieambroseclinic.com](http://susieambroseclinic.com). One 90-minute couple coaching session costs £900. The Grove Practice, 4 Wimpole Street, W1; 020 7637 7765, [counselling.org](http://counselling.org). The standard fee for couples is £120 per 50-minute session