

Dr. He Said, Dr. She Said

Advice Columns on
How to Make Relationships Work



Hanalei Viera, Ph.D.
M'Lissa Trent, Ph.D.

Dr. He Said, Dr. She Said

Advice Columns on
How to Make Relationships Work

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Introduction

This eBook is a compilation of many of the columns we have written in response to the hundreds of letters we've received from readers of our newspaper column, *Dr. He Said, Dr. She Said*, which appears in three of the local newspapers in the San Diego area. We are a married couple who have been working for over 18 years with couples who are confused or hopeless about the quality and condition of their relationships.

About three years ago we decided to find a better way of putting all the information and experience we had accumulated in our couples counseling practice out in front of a larger audience. We knew we had something valuable to offer because we were able to observe with our very own eyes the positive results couples could achieve if they had the willingness, desire, and love necessary to hang in there and learn the work of a relationship.

Our effort has always been to portray a balanced approach of how a healthy relationship can not only survive—but how it can thrive—when challenged by multiple sources of stress. We came up with the idea to write a relationship advice column in the *Dr. He Said, Dr. She Said* format as a result of the success we had been having in our work with couples in presenting both the male and female viewpoints of whatever issue our couples were struggling with so that each member of the couple could feel that their unique perspective had validity. After all, just because we may disagree with our partner doesn't mean that we don't deserve to have each side of the situation acknowledged and understood!

Another important “balancing act” we have brought to our couples has been to help them become aware of how they are both equally accountable for both the good stuff as well as the not-so-good stuff that defines their relationship. Other than in the case of infidelity, we believe that the basic condition of the relationship is something that both people had a hand in helping to shape and create. This is one of the themes that you will notice throughout our responses to our readers in this eBook.

The goal we strive to help the couples we work with achieve—which is also our goal in the advice we give in our column—is healthy, intimate partnership: how to achieve it; how to maintain it, especially when under stress; what it looks and sounds like; what it walks and talks like; why it

is so important; and why it is so difficult to figure out. One of the ways we do this is to help our couples get out of their power struggles by teaching them how to identify the underlying, unmet, unexpressed emotional needs that create their anger, disappointment, and mistrust of one another. Learning the skills necessary to do this not only brings couples closer together, it can also help to heal old wounds from the past that have yet to be dealt with.

All the letters we have compiled here (all the names have been changed to protect confidentiality) address some specific aspect of partnership that we hope will give you a perspective that you can apply to your experiences with your own partner. By the way, if there is a topic that you feel we should address more specifically in future columns and eBooks, please contact us and let us know what issue that would be. We love hearing from our readers!

∞ *Dr. He ~ Dr. She* ∞



Commitment & Marriage

Boyfriend is Second Guessing His Move

Dear Dr. He Said, Dr. She Said,

A year ago I decided to move from Columbus, Ohio to San Diego in order to be with my girlfriend. We were exhausted and stressed out from carrying on a long distance relationship for almost 2 years. Even though I had a great job in Columbus as a software engineer for a small company which I loved very much, I was willing to give it up in order to start over in Southern California so that we could be together. My girlfriend has a great job here, which is a good thing because I am currently unemployed (but looking hard in a very tough market) and totally dependent on her financially. She is very generous about paying for most of my expenses, but it is driving me crazy to have to be so dependent on someone else for the first time in my adult life. Sometimes I feel resentful that she doesn't appreciate how much I gave up to move out here, and I start to wonder if I made the right decision. I'm very confused about how to talk to her about this. Can you help me?

Jeremiah, Kearny Mesa

Dr. She

Dear Jeremiah:

I don't have to tell you how many extreme changes you have currently gone through, however, giving up a job, a community, a lifestyle and an identity all in one fell swoop is nothing to make light of! The fact that your role as a man who has been successful and independent has had to alter so quickly makes your confusion and feeling unappreciated make a lot of sense. I think it would be very difficult for your girlfriend to put herself in your shoes since she is not a man and has not experienced all the sudden changes that you have. As you know, we are big on encouraging our couples to try to put themselves in their partner's shoes so they can each have a broader understanding of the other's experiences. This would be an important exercise to try with your girlfriend. Could she imagine leaving her city/state, job, friends, family, career, etc., and not feel displaced? It also sounds like you need to explore your own feelings a little deeper to help her understand where you are coming from. I can only imagine that you feel like a man without a country, displaced, unknown, unappreciated. You were building your kingdom in Ohio and you basically had to tear it down and start all over again. The good part is that you are doing it with the love of a good woman (I hope!) yet still a rebuilding from the bottom floor nonetheless. I would encourage you to look at what you are needing emotionally and physically to recreate your foundation and talk to her about all that as well as your need for her understanding and appreciation of all that you have changed in your life....Good Luck!

Dr. He ~ Dr. She

Boyfriend Won't Commit

Dear Dr. He Said, Dr. She Said,

I am 46 and my boyfriend is 52. We are both divorced and have been dating for nine months. I am ready to make a commitment and want to get remarried, but he is giving me the run around and doesn't feel like we need to get married. Neither of us has kids, and he feels since we won't be having children at our ages, there is no need to go through the process of "making it legal." I guess I'm more traditional and want to be the "wife" with all the feelings and status that go along with that. I am feeling like this is a deal breaker. Am I being unreasonable?

Mary, Carmel Valley

Dr. She

Dear Mary:

I can only assume that being "traditional" means it is important for you to have a ritual that is both tangible and legal, and which symbolizes the commitment two people have exclusively to one another. It sounds like being "married" would reassure you that you have a lifelong partner in all things and, of course, this is a reasonable desire and request.

As you know, a legal document is not what keeps a couple together. However, there is something to be said for a mutual agreement between two people to take part in a legally binding ceremony as a way to make an exceptional emotional commitment to each other and how that encourages them to try harder to make their relationship work.

Your boyfriend, on the other hand, has every right to feel his own values about relationship. If he is not interested in long term commitment through marriage and you are, this is a philosophical difference you should have found out about him in the very beginning of the relationship. If this is a deal breaker for you, then nine months of dating at your ages is a reasonable amount of time for you both to be clear about your needs and expectations—as well as whether or not you both feel compatible—with one another. Anytime I hear someone is getting the "run around," especially about something as big as their values on marriage—especially at your ages—I have to assume there are fears and needs not being identified and expressed. This needs to happen!

Dr. He

Hi Mary,

I would certainly want to know more about what your boyfriend's experience was with his ex-wife and what sorts of concerns he has developed as a result of that relationship. Depending on what happened in his previous marriage or relationship history, you may have to take this as a sign of his inability to trust and open up in a deep way to a woman.

Nine months is a good amount of time to know whether or not you love somebody. But for some people, nine months may not be enough time to learn how to trust someone and “let them in” to their hearts. It seems important to talk to your boyfriend and ask him whether or not he is aware of the ways that he has a difficult time trusting other people in general, and you specifically. If he has had “good reasons” to mistrust in the past, e.g., feeling betrayed or taken advantage of, then he needs to quit “giving you the run around” and paint you a more complete picture of his history so that you can have a better understanding of what is going on for him. If he would have a desire to “work on” his mistrust so that he could not be ruled by the ghosts from his past, then he might feel safe enough to consider marriage as a possibility for himself again.

If on the other hand this is just a purely philosophical difference between the two of you that you can't come to some kind of compromise on, then you, Mary, will need to move on and find someone more closely aligned with your philosophy.

∞ *Dr. He ~ Dr. She* ∞

Husband-To-Be Wants A Pre-Nuptial Agreement

Dear Dr. He Said, Dr. She Said,

My husband-to-be wants me to sign a pre-nuptial agreement with him before we get married. We have argued about this a number of times over the past few months. I can't help but feel insulted by his lack of trust in me when I have done absolutely nothing to deserve this kind of treatment. I also feel like it starts the marriage off with an expectation that we will end up divorced, and that feels very unhealthy to me. I know that he got burned by his previous marriage where his ex-wife took him to the cleaners financially and emotionally, but I feel like I have to suffer because of the mess she created. This doesn't seem fair to me. What can we do?

Lorna, La Jolla

Dr. He

There is nothing more controversial for an engaged couple to deal with than the prospect of signing a pre-nuptial agreement. It is such a head-on collision of emotion and practicality that it requires an enormous amount of patience and understanding in order for both parties to come out on the other side still motivated to get married. And being that it is such a highly charged emotional issue, it is difficult to predict what the right outcome is for every couple. One thing for sure is that talking about a pre-nup is definitely an opportunity for a couple to learn how to deal with their differences. So much of what we see that destroys the faith couples have in each other is their lack of skill or understanding of how to safely navigate the waters of their more challenging distinctions, and getting to the underlying deep-rooted feelings of what a pre-nup symbolizes to both parties is a very worthwhile endeavor—despite whatever final decision is made.

As distressing as this may be to read, Lorna, you are right that you are the one who has to suffer as a result of your fiancé's previously messy relationship. But the same can also be said about what your fiancé has to deal with regarding whatever your baggage is that you bring to the relationship. His baggage just happens to have a legal document attached to it that sends the message to you that you will not be given the opportunity to prove whether or not you are a trustworthy financial partner. The pre-nup takes that opportunity out of your hands when you sign the document. On the other hand, when it comes to financial assets that one brings into the relationship, is it not understandable—maybe even prudent—for a person to want to protect those hard-earned assets? Are you able to put yourself in his shoes and wonder what it must be like for him risk losing his money again?

Dr. She

Dear Lorna:

If you are entering the relationship with the belief that you and your fiancé should have 100% trust in each other I would imagine that your fiancé's request for a pre-nup would feel very upsetting and confusing. If you want to be with a man who has that same belief system, it is possible you might

be with the wrong guy. I have to say that the belief that we should trust our partners 100% entering a marriage is most often a misguided one and an expectation that usually backfires. If couples can understand that: 1) they are at the beginning stages of knowing their partner when they first get married (usually people know each other 1-3 yrs before marrying) and that trust will continue to build over time and experiences together, 2) each partner will inevitably bring some mistrust into the relationship based on their lifetime of experiences and that mistrust will unavoidably get projected onto each other in some form, and 3) until we really learn what our partner's definition of loyalty is we can't know exactly how to be completely trustworthy in our relationship. If you keep these things in mind then you will have a realistic foundation to build trust.

In addition, from divorce statistics we know that marriages are not guarantees that people will stay together forever and often times love is just not enough. The work of a marriage comes in the deep exploration of understanding each other's needs, wants, desires, and expectations in a healthy dialogue format about a myriad of topics, one of which being finances. The exercise of talking over a pre-nup in and of itself could be a trust building exercise. It will give you an opportunity to understand each other's needs, desires and expectations around money, lifestyle and distribution of labor. Finances are one of the biggest reasons couple's divorce. To go into a marriage with similar values and shared ideas about your relationship with money, its place in your life, who is expected to be the primary breadwinner, what happens when children come into the picture, etc., gives your relationship a big head start.

So, Lorna if you can reach an understanding of what your fiancé is requesting and feel in agreement with him then you might have just developed a new level of intimacy with him. You could also have an agreement that the two of you will revisit the pre-nup in five to ten years and see how you each feel about it then. However, if the placement of a pre-nup will make you feel unloved and not trusted then this will lead you to feel resentment that will get carried into the marriage. I would suggest that you two get some pre-marital couples counseling to work out these issues. Good Luck!

∞ *Dr. He ~ Dr. She* ∞

Why Is There So Much Fear of Commitment in This Generation?

In our private practice we seem to see a lot more people who are afraid to venture into the commitment of marriage. Although it is often presented in our office as “commitment phobia” we think that in the current generation there are a lot of bona fide reasons why people (yes, men and women) are afraid to enter into a “until death do us part” contract.

Here are some of the ways we understand men and women’s fears of marriage:

1. Too Many Choices Creates Indecisiveness

A lot of people who have a fear of committing to a long term relationship have a difficult time making decisions about a lot of other things as well. Some people are overwhelmed by the fear that making one decision will eliminate all other choices/possibilities available to them. This “black and white”/ “what if” mentality might keep doors open yet it also keeps people from having deeper experiences in relationships and life in general. Choosing something/one, committing to something/one and investing time and energy into that something/one will enhance, deepen and enrich a person’s life experience. The process of valuing and developing what we choose to invest in is how we derive meaning in our lives. We also believe that society’s intense competitive pressure to be the best at all things and have the best at all costs to prove we are “special” compounds and heightens the fear of making “the wrong” decision. When we put ourselves in a “win at all costs” mentality we set ourselves up for competition and comparison versus valuing our unique choices and experiences. Hence...the grass is always greener.

2. Reaction to Experience of Divorce Instills Fear and Avoidance

We see a lot of people whose pattern is to stay in a relationship for a couple years and then bail out when it starts to feel too vulnerable. This is a way to avoid the pain of rejection or to steer clear of issues that require self-reflection and hard work. Here, the fear of rejection is most often connected to previous experiences of abandonment (most often through parents divorcing in childhood) or a sense of not feeling good enough due to emotional neglect in childhood. There is a generational backlash of people not wanting to re-experience the pain of divorce again due to their personal trauma. The overall zeitgeist of the times demonstrates that 50% of marriages fail and this too seeps into the collective unconscious and manifests as a fear of commitment. There is not yet a comprehensive paradigm in place for a new vision of marriage that incorporates all the changes that have occurred for the current generation. People are lost and avoiding the exploration of a new model of relationship because it is so complicated and enigmatic.

3. Fear of Responsibility

A lot of people in this generation have experienced their parent’s divorce and/or other traumas that have caused their emotional development to arrest at an early age. These types of early traumas force individuals to take on more responsibility than their young psyches can manage. Many of these particular individuals have lost their childhood and want it back! Because so many people come from divorced families there are a lot of people out there who are much more comfortable taking care of “me” than having to care for a “we” (which eventually may include children). People

today are also much more conscientious and fearful about the depth of personal investment it takes to raise an emotionally and physically healthy child. The cohorts of people who already feel overwhelmed are even more inundated by the onslaught of information arriving via the technological age, the recession and an unknown future. Together with high expectations of success and material gains...all roads lead to a heightened fear of taking on more responsibility across the board.

4. Confusion of Roles...Co-dependence versus Independence...Is there a Middle Ground

Despite all of the psychological sophistication in this generation, adults still get trapped in an idealistic, immature version of love that is about needing to be taken care of or saved by the other. This romantic version of marriage then locks horns with many different, advanced concepts of relationship. Whether it is about women being equal to men, women being the provider and men assuming childrearing responsibilities, traditional roles, women wanting their man to be the provider but not wanting to assume traditional roles themselves, open marriage, etc...identity and role confusion in marriage is abundant! Everyone is struggling against old hardwired patterns and new possibilities of what being in relationship means.

In our private practice we do also continue to see a lot of individuals who want to move forward into marriage. For those that come to us for pre-marital or marital counseling we feel it is our job to help them to reality check their "idealized" version of marriage and develop a more mature and realistic perspective of the venture they are about to undertake. Our goal with couples is to set a strong foundation of trust and develop a communication style that will help them work out all the issues they will face. We encourage couples to not set themselves up to be so easily disappointed and disillusioned when issues do arise. Despite the evolution of the technological era, human beings will never lose their desire for connection and love. We believe good relationships are at the root of what makes everything else on our planet work so we believe finding a new paradigm for relationship that works is a critical endeavor.

∞ *Dr. He ~ Dr. She* ∞

Why Should We Get Married?

Dear Dr. He Said, Dr. She Said:

I am seriously contemplating whether I want to get married or not. I have been engaged for a year, and I am dreading the actual marriage. Please trust that it is not about my fiancé. I just can't grasp the whole idea of marriage and what its true value is. Yes, I do come from a divorced family and yes, I know that has affected me, but I also look around and see so many of my friends who are already divorced (I am 34) and how ugly that process was for them—especially the ones with children. I see people divorcing for so many reasons: money, sex (or lack thereof), growing apart, and I just don't see any reassurances or guarantees that marriage can be successful. I question whether the whole institution of marriage is a well thought out idea. I am looking for some reasons to move forward and get married. I don't see why I just can't live with my fiancé and have a very satisfying life—even if we do have children together—without making it legal, so if it doesn't work out it won't be so messy untying everything.

Cheryl, Carmel Valley

Dr. She

Dear Cheryl:

I think you raise some great questions and I am glad you are contemplating what marriage means to you because ultimately this is what is important. We have all been influenced by the historical concept of marriage and our collective unconscious myths of 'knights in shining armor' and 'happily ever after'! However, an important question to ask is: "How is marriage relevant and valuable for me in my life and what do I—along with my fiancé—want marriage to look, feel, walk, and talk like?"

Connection, feeling loved, and trusting that we can count on someone other than ourselves are basic human needs. Marriage can provide a consistent place to satisfy those needs. The legal commitment of marriage may help people "psychologically" feel more secure; however, it is inevitably the behavior of follow through and accountability that creates a sense of trust and security in partnership. The legal commitment tends to cause people to try to work on the marriage and not act impulsively...sometimes. Though the legal commitment may help people "think twice," many are challenged to walk the talk of working through conflict and thinking like a "we."

If you feel the depth of commitment to your fiancé does not need a little external influence (the legalization of marriage) to help you through the rough times, then perhaps marriage isn't necessary for you. However, none of us can ever anticipate how we will change in the marriage, or how our needs and projections of our partners will change. It is that unknown factor that throws people off, makes them feel like they didn't get what they signed up for, and leads to bailing out of a relationship before taking the time to update data bases and redesign the relationship in order to meet current needs.

Also, it does seem very important to your relationship to take a deep look at the possible fears you may have about commitment given that you do come from a divorced family. Fear of abandonment is so common for children who come from divorce. Although you “get it” intellectually, you may still have some emotional work to do there.

Dr. He

Hello Cheryl,

It certainly makes sense to me that there would be parts of the institution of marriage that you would question or be confused about. With the divorce rate so high these days, marriage is definitely not one of the sure bets in American culture. Despite that, I am going to focus on one particular sentence you wrote in your letter as a way of making a case for marriage. At the end of your letter you wonder out loud why you can't simply live with your fiancé and “have a very satisfying life... without making it legal.” The whole idea of having a very satisfying life with your fiancé—while a lofty and understandable goal to have for any relationship—does not really portray the actual effort required to achieve that goal. As I'm sure your divorced friends have told you, saying “I do” at the altar is not necessarily the same as saying, “I know how to make this a very satisfying relationship with my new spouse.” How to have a satisfying relationship is a learned experience that takes effort and a willingness to stay open to learning new things about oneself as well as about one's partner over the course of time.

Our experience in working with so many couples over the last 15 years is that one of the (many) things that being married does to any couple who is looking to make their relationship better, is that it takes walking out the door off the table as a possible “solution” to a problem—at least temporarily. Many times that temporary truce from walking away from a problem is what couples need and utilize in order to give the relationship more time to grow and learn and try again and again in order to find a way to make it all work. All I know is—from this side of the couch and what we see couples struggle with—the legality of marriage can serve a very useful purpose when it comes to teaching a couple how to hang in there and try beyond a point where they otherwise might “throw in the towel.”

∞ *Dr. He ~ Dr. She* ∞

Why We Can Believe in Marriage

New Years is always a good time to take a step back and look at the things we commit our energies to—like the institution of marriage—so that we can proactively re-invest ourselves into the process. When we go through our lives unconsciously, we often get ourselves into a rut, feel frustrated, wonder why we are in the situation we are in, and then fantasize that life would be better lived other ways. Those feelings are all valid and normal, but what can help to shake us out of our stupor is to remember why we invested ourselves into the institution of marriage in the first place. Appreciating the qualities of marriage that we take for granted on a day to day basis can not only help us to remember why we are living the life we are, but also to recommit to the process. We understand, of course, that there are circumstances where divorce is appropriate, but we are not addressing those situations in this article. For this column, we have researched studies and thrown in our own point of view to give you seven reasons to believe in marriage in the New Year.

1. Commitment and accountability

Commitment to a relationship motivates individuals to look out for one another and to be accountable to one another. The ritual—and the “contract”—of marriage is a commitment made on an emotional, spiritual and legal level. Marriage can provide a sense of meaning to a higher cause, a sense of purpose beyond self that can be very gratifying. It is not as easy to just “walk away” from a relationship once that contract is in place. And studies have shown that couples who “stick it out” through rough times claim to have much happier marriages a few years later.

2. Psychological well-being and happiness

Studies show that married individuals are happier than unmarried individuals and that mental health is consistently higher when married as opposed to individuals who are unmarried or divorced. Building deep bonds of kinship and trust are paramount to psychological and physical well-being overall.

3. Intimacy

People who are in long term marriages feel better known, seen and understood and report having more and better sex than single people have. Knowing each other over a long time can improve emotional closeness and knowledge of each other’s sexual interests and pleasures. We are “relationship” beings and crave consistent connection with others.

4. Raising children

Marriage provides a strong psychological container for raising children. Although having kids is not the essential reason to get married, being married provides a sense of belonging for a child and can offer both a male and female role model to help balance a child’s personality and gender identity. This makes for much healthier and productive adult lives for the next generation of a family.

5. Physical health and mortality

The social support and improved psychological well-being also improves the immune system, which leads to better health and longevity. Research shows that men who are single tend to engage in more risky behaviors such as drinking and smoking. One study found that non-married people have higher rates of mortality than the married: about 50% higher among women and 250% higher among men.

6. Financial health

People who are married tend to have more income and are able to save more money than individuals who are single. One study shows that married men earn 10% to 40% more income than single or cohabitating men. Couples who live together but are not married are less likely to pool their money and invest together, and studies show that women and men who are divorced are in worst financial situations than if married.

7. Distribution of Labor

Sharing the financial and household chores responsibilities is another benefit of marriage. Having a partner to help in all areas helps you to feel you are not alone and helps reduce the stress of feeling like you have to be in control of every little detail of your life or else everything will fall apart. Sharing the load in all aspects of life is a great benefit of marriage.

∞ *Dr. He ~ Dr. She* ∞



Children, Family & Friends

Newly Engaged Fiancé Doesn't Want Kids

Dear Dr. He Said, Dr. She Said,

I have been dating a man for the past two and a half years, and over the Thanksgiving holidays he proposed to me. That is the good news because of course it is what I want. The bad news however is that this past week he also informed me that he has thought long and hard about it, and that he does not want to have any children. I was shocked because I thought all along that we were on the same page about this issue, or at least he led me to believe that he was in agreement to having kids. He said that he can't imagine giving up the independence we have as a couple to travel and do what we want when we want. I am so sad right now because I love this man dearly, but I can't imagine not having children in my life. I am 37 years old and don't feel I have time to waste while I am still able to have children. What should I do?

Jean, Del Mar

Dr. She

Dear Jean:

A couple points I'd like to make, Jean. First, if your fiancé knows you to the depth we would hope for before he proposes marriage, how did he think you would respond to this news? The timing of this revelation is interesting and either comes in the form of sabotage of the relationship or extreme "me" thinking and lack of consideration for a pretty big desire. If you clearly tell a potential lifelong partner that you want children and he states that he is in agreement, and then changes his mind at the eleventh hour, we are dealing with a potential deal breaker and he should know that. He's not changing his mind about desired travel destinations or bathroom colors ...which are negotiable and don't have the depth of meaning and value that children do. Having children is a commitment to a very particular lifestyle that involves experiences that cannot truly be experienced elsewhere. Your inquiry gives me no indication that you are on the fence about having children or see not having children as a viable option. Would working with children or being an "auntie" to children of family or friends satiate your desire to be a mother? It seems that giving up a life desire to have children would be a huge sacrifice of yourself and unfortunately this is one of those instances where love is not enough in this relationship. If you gave up the choice to have children I fear you would feel deep regret and sorrow and those feelings would later get projected onto your fiancé in the form of resentment.

Dr. He

Hello Jean,

If I put myself into your shoes right now, I think I would have a hard time believing anything that came out of your fiancée's mouth. The fact that he "thought long and hard" about this on his own without sharing his misgivings and struggles with you along the way is a huge red flag about his approach to a partnership. Couldn't he have given you the heads up about his struggle about having

children before he proposed to you? Did he not already know how he felt about this issue before he bought the ring and popped the question? Or did the reality of the whole marriage/family thing finally hit him over the head once you got engaged? It makes perfect sense for anybody to question their readiness to have children. But to approach you about this with his unilateral decision after the engagement is like unilaterally making the decision for you that you should marry him. For example, the fact that he didn't even ask you for reassurance that—if you were to have kids that you would work with him to make sure you both would continue to “travel and do what you want”—sounds like he has no clue about how to ask for what he needs or how to enlist you to help him work out problems. If on the one hand he is locked into this idea of not having children, then unfortunately you have fallen in love with someone who pulled the old bait-and-switch routine on you. If on the other hand he was having a bad day and freaking out about seeing himself as a father or confused about how it could be possible to have kids and a life as well, then tell him to read a book, talk to married friends, or get to a therapist to figure out his fears. Sadly, the way he handled this situation probably says a lot about how he will handle other challenging situations in the future, and *you* need to make a decision—*before you get married*—about whether or not you want to commit to spending your life with someone like this.

∞ *Dr. He ~ Dr. She* ∞

Wife Wants to Have a Child

Dear Dr. He Said, Dr. She Said:

I am a 49 year old man who married a woman 10 years younger five years ago. When we were dating and discussing marriage, she said she was positive she did not want children. That was a perfect fit for me—and one of the reasons I married her—since I already had two children from a previous marriage, and I felt I was done raising kids. Now she is 39 and declaring to have had a big change of heart. She truly feels that she wants a child, and it is causing a huge upheaval in our marriage. I told her a promise is a promise. I feel I'm right, but told her I would ask you guys. Please help us.

Tom, Solana Beach

Dr. She

Hey Tom:

This one is a bit tricky, but definitely not an open and shut case. You both have every right to feel the way you do, but now the big task is for each of you to dig down deep and discuss what is in the best interest and health of the relationship—not to mention a potential child.

Your wife needs to explore her new found desire for a child. Many women feel an eleventh hour emotional/biological surge of maternal urges as the window of possibility begins to close. She needs to ask herself if she is connecting with the fantasy of having a child or is she really able to imagine the day to day care—taking a child would require. It is also possible that your wife may finally feel emotionally ready to have a child now that she has found the right man and situation to bring a child into the world.

It is important for you, Tom, to ask yourself why you feel done having children. Is your age and/or the fact you've had two children in a previous marriage the real issue? If so you are entitled to that for sure. However, I'm wondering if your first experience of having children may have translated as a negative and stressful influence on this relationship since your first relationship was unsuccessful. If your current relationship is good, you could have the opportunity to experience your relationship with your wife growing and deepening in a positive way after the birth of a child.

Dr. He

Dear Tom,

When it comes to the subject of whether or not to have children, it is probably best not to play the “I'm right, and you're wrong” card. You may be right about the fact that you both had an agreement five years ago, absolutely. But there is probably no way your wife could believe her desire to have a baby isn't just as “right” as whatever it is you are feeling.

Where you and your wife made a big mistake was when you didn't agree to revisit the topic from time to time throughout the window of your wife's child-bearing years. For you to assume that your wife would never change her mind was unrealistic. What we are talking about here is a very primitive, biological urge for a woman that neither you nor I could ever relate to. I'm not saying that you don't have the right to feel angry and betrayed, Tom. What I am saying is that you both were very naïve to think that this decision would never change for your wife.

There is no easy answer to this one. It is crucial for you, Tom, to ask yourself the questions that Dr. She has suggested up above. Have you considered the possibility that you might be able to view this whole situation in a different light other than the one that you have held onto for this many years? This is the woman you love. She deserves to have you at least *try to imagine* the joy of having a child with her.

∞ *Dr. He ~ Dr. She* ∞

She Wants More Children

Dear Dr. He Said, Dr. She Said:

My husband and I have been married for 10 years and have two children. When we first got together he swore he wanted a gaggle of children. I have tried to make his life very easy for him around the children because he works so hard. I make sure he barely has any duties when it comes to childcare, and I actually prefer doing it on my own. My husband's anger has increased over the years, and he seems to always take it out on me and the children by throwing things and yelling. He denies he is angry and never takes any accountability for his stress or his actions. He is also expressing his anger by telling me he doesn't want to have any more children. This is a huge deal breaker for me. I don't care if he doesn't have time for another child... I do, and I want to have at least five children. I am so angry and feel so betrayed by the way he has gone back on his promise. I can't believe he is having such a hard time with having another child since I make things so easy for him and most of the time he has off work he uses to "rejuvenate" by "doing his own things." I am just so angry and want to have children so badly I don't know what to do. Time is a factor as well considering I am almost forty. Should I leave and find a man who is willing to have more children?

Kimberly, Rancho Santa Fe

Dr. She

Dear Kim:

There is a lot to take into consideration in your scenario. The first priority, of course, is building a better foundation in your relationship with your husband that will in turn serve the best interests of your children. The dynamic between you and your husband seems to emit a lot of toxicity in the household which I am sure your children are feeling and are trying to cope with.

Before the conversation about a third child takes place, you seriously need to consider working on the communication in the relationship and addressing your underlying resentments towards one another in a way you can actually hear and understand each other. You both sound like you have a lot of anger built up that you haven't successfully addressed, hence your husband's outbursts and your stubbornness about having a third baby with or without him. It also sounds like you lead parallel lives and don't really co-parent your children. How is *that* in the best interest of your children? It seems you have created a situation that serves *each of your own* personal needs (for you, having children and for him, having his own time). The children need to feel both their mother and father fully participating in their upbringing. The message it sounds like you send your children now is that, *daddy will be around when it suits daddy and our job is to accommodate daddy*. Again, how is that in the best interest of your children?

Lastly, I wonder why you would demand to have a third child with a man who is so angry. He is obviously unavailable and perhaps underlying his anger and lack of availability he feels incompetent or overwhelmed by the prospect of parenting the two children he already has. The fact that you don't mind this scenario and have been so involved in co-creating its "okay-ness" seems very short-sighted in terms of what the children need. Kim, I truly understand the desire for children...

they are amazing creatures; however, it is our duty as parents to look at and manage the big picture for them to the best of our abilities. Please work on the relationship first and then, within a healthier relationship, possibly reintroduce the conversation about a third child.

Dr. He

Hello Kimberly,

In reading about your husband's anger, I like Dr. She's theory that he may be feeling incompetent and overwhelmed by child rearing. Many men feel that way if they don't have or take the opportunity to spend time creating a bond with their children, which can then build their confidence around the kids. This, however, also leads me to my own theory about your husband's rage. I wonder if he is angry at the fact that you insist on being the one to control what happens to the kids, which in turn may make him feel like you are also controlling any input he may have about them. Despite his busy-ness at work, I have to wonder whether or not he believes his kids really know him and respect who he is and what his opinions about life are. If he feels like you keep him from having the opportunity to establish that respect with them—by what you call trying “to make his life very easy for him around the children”—then his anger makes sense to me. Actually, I wonder if what you really mean is that it makes *your life* much easier to make sure he barely has any duties regarding the kids because this keeps the power in your hands to control the household.

What is interesting for me about your letter is that nowhere do you talk about your feelings for him other than your anger. You consistently paint the picture that your marriage is an “arrangement” brokered by you both to suit your personal needs rather than some mutual feelings of love. And the last question of your letter, Kimberly, is the most telling statement of all. The fact that—before you would ask us for help to work on how to save the relationship—you instead ask us if you should consider leaving him to find someone else to help you fulfill your own wish to have more children tells me that you probably married him for the same reason. No wonder he is so angry! I will assume that you give and get a lot of love from the kids, but I certainly wonder, who is showing him love? If he is not spending much time with the kids, he's not getting much from them. If you are spending all your time with the kids and not him, I will assume he is not getting much love and appreciation from you. This to me would help explain why he brings his anger to you and the children. His throwing things and yelling is inexcusable and he needs to grow up and learn how to communicate with you. But the depth of his anger probably speaks to the depth of the pain that he feels at being so alone in this family. It's up to you, Kimberly, if you feel it might be worth working to repair the relationship, but that still is no guarantee of him being willing to have more kids. You need to make your choice to stay or leave according to what is more important to you—your desire to have more children or the love of the man you married.

∞ *Dr. He ~ Dr. She* ∞

Husband Distant Since Birth of Baby

Dear Dr. He Said, Dr. She Said:

My husband has been very checked out from our relationship since I became pregnant, and now he continues to be distant from me even though our baby is almost a year old. I am really confused because I thought he wanted to have kids, and he says he is happy about our baby girl. I was pretty scared throughout the pregnancy, and so I was probably more anxious than he's ever seen me be. The bottom line is, I still need him to step up and "be there" for myself and our daughter in ways that he has yet to achieve. I feel desperate because we have never been so detached in our entire six years together. I ask him what is wrong and he says he is just stressed out from work. What am I supposed to do with this?

Marjorie, Del Mar

Dr. She

Dear Marjorie:

Find a way to let your husband know how much you are missing him and ask him to really help you understand what might be going on for him that is keeping him so distant. Try to explore the following possibilities with him:

Perhaps your husband is feeling work stress (has he gained new responsibilities over the course of the year?), however, it is more possible that he is feeling overwhelmed with his new responsibilities as *father* and *primary breadwinner*. Even though you have been married for a while, the level of emotional investment and responsibility exponentially increases when a baby enters a couples' life. Men take on the role of provider very seriously and sometimes at a deep collective unconscious level, meaning through years and generations of hard-wiring that he may not even be aware of.

Also, some men might not have the same inherent sense of how to nurture an infant as many women do and this may lead your husband to not only feel overwhelmed but also incompetent. In today's society men are expected to be much more involved in the daily caretaking and nurturing of their children and may not feel a natural sense of how to do this depending on their own life experiences. Many men deal with feelings of overwhelm and incompetence by going into survival mode and emotionally distancing from the ones they love.

In addition, your husband might not know how to relate to you in your new role as mother and full-time care taker of your baby girl. As you mentioned he has known you as a strong woman and during the pregnancy he saw you in a vulnerable state and I am sure he continues to see a new "nurturing mother" side of you as he watches you with your daughter. Perhaps all of these changes are throwing him off guard and he doesn't know how to identify them or talk to you about them. Many men don't feel they have the right to express all the overwhelm they are feeling when they see their wives having to be the one to be the primary caretaker day and night. Give him permission to express his overwhelm!

Lastly, it is important that you take a look at the way you have been relating to him since the pregnancy and birth of your daughter. Do you continue to treat him as if he is an important member or have you only focused on your daughter?

Dr. He

Hello Marjorie,

Have you been very clear and specific with your husband about what exactly you mean when you say you need him to “be there” for you and your daughter? Has he at least had a clear picture of what your expectations of him have been throughout pregnancy and since the birth? I will assume he doesn’t read your mind very well, so it is very important for us to know whether his behavior is based more on his reluctance to follow through on input you’ve already given him as opposed to being about his ignorance based on a lack of clarity on your part.

When you say that he saw you become more anxious than he ever had previously, I certainly wonder what the pregnancy was like for the both of you. For instance, were you able to talk to him about your fears from the perspective of *what you needed*, or did you express your fears more in terms of *what he was or was not doing correctly*? There is a huge difference between these two approaches. If from his point of view your personality changed drastically and he was on the receiving end of your anxiety or mood swings, he may still be emotionally wounded from the experience and unsure of how to regain the confidence he needs to fully “be there” for you. If he has difficulty communicating his feelings, he may still be walking on eggshells around you with no clue of how to feel safe enough to risk talking about what he needs.

Despite his happiness about your daughter, he may be afraid of how to interact appropriately with this totally dependent and vulnerable infant girl that requires him to take her on as a sacred responsibility. I would think that he has all kinds of fear running through his system right now that he hasn’t shared with you yet. Ask him to talk to you about whatever fears he may have about himself as a father, as a husband, and as a man.

∞ Dr. He ~ Dr. She ∞

Husband Feels Left Out of Family

Dear Dr. He Said, Dr. She Said:

My wife and I have a nine month old baby girl, and I feel like our lives have changed so drastically. I no longer feel connected with my wife because she seems so much more attentive and concerned about our daughter than about our relationship. I also feel left out of her relationship with my daughter, and this makes it really difficult for me to enjoy fatherhood. I have to be honest and say that I've been very angry lately and haven't acted very kindly toward my wife. I'm not sure what to do. Can you help me?

Gerald, San Marcos

Dr. He

Dear Gerald,

If you expected your relationship with your wife to somehow be able to remain the same and not become affected by having a baby, then you've been naïve and unrealistic. On the other hand, *as a man, you need to be honest with yourself about what kind of husband and father you want and need to be*, and then communicate this to your wife. It is really important for you to tell her about your concerns for the lack of connection between the two of you while having some compassion for all the responsibility she probably feels for your daughter's care. Underneath your anger may really be your pain of feeling rejected and abandoned by her. If so, talk to her about these feelings instead of treating her in an unkind way, *because attacking her will only inflict a deeper wound onto the relationship that will move you both further apart.*

It is important for you to *create your own relationship with your daughter*. Be involved with her feeding and diaper changing. Give your wife a break from a long day of being with an infant by engaging the baby on your own when you come home from work. Bring home the bacon, protect your family from harm, and be the supportive partner in all the many ways that your wife and daughter need you to be right now, Gerald, because it is all part of the crucial role you play as the man of the family during this first year of child-rearing.

Dr. She

Hey Gerald:

There is a lot to look at here. First off, there is no way to anticipate and prepare for the physical and emotional changes that occur when a child enters the relationship. As you know, the mother is the primary care giver because of the physical bond a child has with the mother. What is newly required of your wife on a moment to moment basis emotionally and physically is enough to throw her into "survival mode." Also, the fact that this is the first child tells me your wife is in "brand new territory" and is probably struggling with all the unknowns of being a first time mom. Because of

all this, *your first point of re-connection will need to develop as an outsource from your empathy for your wife's new role.*

In these last nine months I can imagine you have felt displaced because your role doesn't feel as crucial in the care giving of the child, and your wife's attention has moved from the relationship with you to the relationship with your child. As Dr. He says above, your job primarily during this first year is to support your wife in taking care of the baby and to ***understand*** she may not have the kind of energy for you that she used to. Your emotional and physical support is what will help her feel connected to you. If you pull away from her out of anger, she will only be resentful and retreat from you further. You also need to remember that this phase will change and you will be able to become much more involved and feel a part of the relationship with your daughter and wife. When you start to feel ***that*** connection you will know what the patiently waiting was all about. Good luck!

∞ *Dr. He ~ Dr. She* ∞

Baby Blues

Dear Dr. He Said, Dr. She Said:

I can't believe it. My husband and I did so much psychological preparation for having a child—we read books, took classes—and even though we discussed everything ahead of time, we have fallen immediately into our worst patterns with each other. I feel like I have to do everything, and he seems to resist complying because he is tired of me telling him what to do. He feels since he is the breadwinner in the family that he doesn't need to be there for me and our son as much. We talked about this before we had a child—that we both needed to be involved in taking care of and raising our son—but he is not stepping up. I've also asked him to help me set boundaries with friends and take time just for ourselves, but he keeps inviting people over and saying yes to social invitations. He feels so distant to me, and I'm not sure what to do. Please help!

Caroline, Del Mar

Dr. He

Dear Caroline,

Without trying to oversimplify your situation, it sounds like you and your husband are back to the pattern of behavior between the two of you that a) was in place long before the baby came along, and b) has very little to do with the baby. If the “psychological preparation” you both were doing focused more on how to become parents rather than on becoming partners, it makes sense to me that you are feeling this way again now that your son is on the scene. The mistake that most “savvy” parents make is to focus more on the “picture of parenthood” they each imagine they want to achieve without dealing first with the reasons that they don't work well together as a team. And the one thing that always gets in the way of teamwork and seems to be what you and your husband are in front of now is the childhood wound that each of you carries that gets reactivated by the way you talk to each other.

Dr. She

Dear Caroline:

As Dr. He mentions, the pattern of partnership is what needs to be addressed here, but also the part that is unforeseeable (and impossible to prepare for) is the personal vulnerability that occurs when you have your first child, the change in personal needs as a result of having your first child, and the fear of the unknown that comes up for all new parents. All of this is what spins couples back into old familiar survival patterns. This is what has you looking at your husband wide-eyed and wondering where all your agreements went, and wondering where “your man” is.

As both of you become more familiar with the new world of parenting and everything it involves you will start to adjust better to the here and now of it all. For men, the fear of having the deeper commitment into the role of provider can be so frightening that they get tunnel vision into that

role at the same exact moment that you need him to be more available emotionally. Bad timing, huh! But none the less, each of you is going through your own personal transformation and developing a new identity regarding what being a mom or dad means to you. Keep talking, start aware of the change in your emotional needs and state those clearly to your partner. Ask him to be aware of what is going on for him.

∞ *Dr. He ~ Dr. She* ∞

Career Man Has Children

Dear Dr. He Said, Dr. She Said:

My husband is an old fashion man who is very career-oriented and traditional about being the bread winner in the family. As a career woman myself in a high paying job, my career is very important to me as well. However, over the last four years we have had three children, and my priorities have shifted. I am now totally invested in the physical and emotional well-being of our children, but unfortunately my husband's priorities have not shifted at all. He is so angry that I ask him for help with the kids and seems to be resentful at times that we have children at all! He says that he had always warned me he would be a strong career man, and now he feels I am pulling a bait and switch on him. I can't believe he is not more connected to his own children and that he can't shift his priorities. The environment between us has gotten toxic with a lot of yelling in front of the children, and I think it is starting to affect them. I am so close to calling it quits...HELP!

Emily, Del Mar

Dr. She

Dear Emily:

The one thing I noticed that you did not mention was whether you and your husband were initially on the same page about having children in the first place. Setting up agreements and expectations in a marriage is so important especially in regards to having children. The lack of being on the same page going into having children seems to have set you up for a lot of disappointment. It seems that you have been more impacted by and aligned with the job of being a mother than your husband has embraced the emotional responsibilities of being a father.

However, if your husband told you he wanted to have a limited role in parenting and you secretly imagined a magical transformation, then you were definitely setting yourself up to be disappointed. The fact that he has so much resentment about your demands for him to change—and the fact that you have so much resentment about the fact that he is not stepping up to his role as a father—sounds like the source of the toxic fighting. This is the issue to address first and foremost! You have got to find a way to take a time-out, go to a different room, and agree to discuss the issue when the children are not around. If you are engaging in fighting in front of the children at this level you are also forgetting your priority as a parent for the moment.

I would encourage you two to agree to understand that a partner's needs and priorities constantly change over the course of a relationship, and new agreements need to be made based on the external and internal changes that we make in our lives. Every one of us has to do this. If any of us enter marriage believing it will be one way and one way only forever, we are fooling ourselves and setting ourselves up for a lot of heartache.

Start by creating new agreements that are small in scale. For example, can your husband help out for an hour every other day. Or can he put the kids to sleep a couple of nights a week? Then go from

there. Hopefully as he develops more of a connection and attachment with the children he will feel competent, capable and desiring of being around them more often. I would encourage you to be realistic in your expectations and develop a deeper understanding of what keeps your husband's disconnection from the children in place.

Dr. He

Dear Emily,

Two full careers and three children in four years....you and your husband have very full plates! It is crucial especially under these conditions that you both have a healthier communication style that will keep you functioning like a unified team. Given your description of him, I will assume he doesn't believe a whole lot in communication period—especially the type of communication that expresses emotions. Rather than asking him to be a better father, I wonder if he could hear it better from you if you were to ask him to *be a better partner to you* in general in your busy lives. (I would guess that part of his anger now is about how inadequate he feels as a parent based on your feedback to him.)

You say you can't believe that he hasn't "shifted his priorities," but depending on the environment he was raised in, I'll bet *it makes perfect sense* that he hasn't shifted his priorities based on the values he learned in his younger life. You portray him as an "old fashioned man," yet you sound so surprised that he wouldn't want to be more emotionally connected to his children. Unless he has been vocal about wanting to change into a more emotionally intelligent man, it sounds like you have a very unrealistic expectation of who he is capable of becoming.

So you have your hands full, Emily, if your goal is to try to change him. Yes, it would be wonderful if he could open himself up to playing more of a role of the hands-on dad. Don't get me wrong. I believe that you have every right to want him to be an emotionally involved parent. However, I also believe that at this point it is important that you try to understand why it is so difficult for him to live up to that given how he was probably raised as a boy or what he learned from his childhood about who and what it is to be a man. That kind of empathy from you might make him more open to feeling like your partner than trying to squeeze him into a box that is foreign to him. Good luck!

∞ *Dr. He ~ Dr. She* ∞

Disrespecting the Children

Dear Dr. He Said, Dr. She Said:

My wife does not speak to our kids respectfully, and I am having a very difficult time helping her to understand the damage this is doing to them and to their relationship with her. In particular, my teenage son doesn't respect her or listen to her, but my wife believes telling him what to do and making demands on him is the only way to guide him. Her tone and how she is with the three children is also leaking over negatively onto our relationship. I am having a hard time respecting her, and I want to defend and side with the children all the time. I feel like our household is not cohesive, and I don't know how to change it. I am feeling like my only option may be to divorce my wife. Do you have any thoughts?

Tom, Carmel Valley

Dr. She

Dear Tom:

Whenever we are faced with an issue in our relationship, it is always good practice to first take a look at how we might be contributing to the problem ourselves. So, I am wondering how you have been managing this disrespectful element in the household all of these years. As I am sure you know, disrespectful communication starts with the parents and is learned by the children through the parent's behavior. It is difficult to imagine that if you and your wife have had a respectful relationship throughout the years that she or your children would feel the need to act disrespectfully on an ongoing basis. We all get stressed out and say things we don't intend from time to time, but this sounds like it is consistent behavior that has been going on for awhile. Ask yourself how you and your wife have practiced and demonstrated respectful and validating communication between the two of you. How you have talked about the importance of respectful communication with the children? When the children came along, did the respectful communication decrease? Was there a split or divide in the relationship at that time due to stress that never got repaired? If there was, this split can easily get played out with the children if not addressed between the two of you.

If you have had some underlying resentments, have *you* been disrespectful towards your wife and unknowingly role modeled that for your son? If your son sees you being discourteous to your wife or you splitting from her by siding with the children in her presence, then he is getting the message that, as a man, it is okay to respond in kind to his mother. Remember that you are the role model for your son (and your other children) regarding what is to be expected in relationship with the people you love and he learns much more thorough what you *do* versus what you say.

Regarding your wife, if there is something in your wife's personality or past that is creating a more authoritarian parenting style, she needs to take a look at that. How was she treated as a child? What style of parenting was role modeled for her? If she feels incapable or incompetent as a parent, can she try a different approach than what she was raised with? She will first need to see the value in raising her children in a positive environment and the value of having a better relationship with her children than perhaps she did with her parents (I'm speculating here). She will need to some-

how learn that respect is earned and cannot be commanded or controlled. Managing the children through fear breeds resentment rather than respect. I would encourage her to go to a Redirecting Children's Behavior class even though the children might be older. Remembering the basics of parenting can be an important tool in the challenging teenage years.

Dr. He

Hello Tom,

Rather than jumping to divorce as an option just yet, let's look at your predicament from another perspective, that being *self-respect*—what it looks like, walks like, talks like, how to live it, how to feel it, etc. What I have found to be true in my own personal life is that the degree of respect I show to others really is a reflection of *how much respect I feel for myself*. In other words, if I am not being very respectful to others, then it is highly likely that I am not feeling great about myself as a person. We can apply this to your wife and imagine that her shabby treatment of the people she loves to be an example of the lack of self-worth she feels for herself.

There is a way to talk to her about this, but let's first deal with another important example of the lack of self-respect in your household, Tom—namely, *yours*. A similar version to what we've been talking about goes like this: *if I allow others to treat me disrespectfully, then I don't have a whole lot of respect for myself*. I put this in front of you to consider and ask yourself, "How much disrespectful treatment do I willingly endure from others, even from the woman I am married to?" As Dr. She writes above, respect is something that is earned—not owed. If you believe that the way you live your life shows respect towards your wife, Tom, why would you tolerate being treated "negatively" by her? What are you teaching your son about relationships by not drawing a healthy boundary when your wife brings her disrespectful behavior toward you? Way beyond whatever level of respect is possible for your wife to feel towards you, I would want you to first check in with yourself about your own lack of self-worth. If you are lagging in that department—and who among us doesn't have that struggle at times?—then focus on how to best "reconfigure Tom" to a solid state. This will teach you how to deal with her disrespect in a healthy way. Confronting her will only succeed if you include yourself in the discussion of "the work" that needs to be done to get the marriage back to a place of mutual respect. Once that happens, *all of your children* will be on the receiving end of the healthy love that they deserve from their parents.

∞ Dr. He ~ Dr. She ∞

Fearless Fathering

Many of our readers ask for parenting advice, and in honor of Father's Day, I thought it might be useful to write about some consistent and meaningful issues that my male clients bring up about being better fathers to their children.

Contrary to what one might think the above title implies, **Fearless Fathering** to me means actually *dealing with the fears* that come up for us as fathers, as opposed to *denying the presence of fear* or expecting that there could be an *absence of fear* when it comes to being a male parent. I also call this *courageous parenting*, which refers to the fact that both fathers *and* mothers need to offer their children not only courageous guidance and love, but also to be living examples of *how to be accountable* when it comes to dealing with the consequences of our choices.

Working with them both as individuals and as a part of couples, I believe men have many unique challenges and opportunities concerning how best to offer that role model of accountability to their children. As I have written about previously in this column, men in American culture today continue to search for an anchor-point within themselves about their own sense of masculinity that isn't as easily defined as it was for their fathers. Because of this, men are also not as grounded about what constitutes effective fatherly leadership, guidance, and protection of their children in an era where so many of the child-rearing duties are being shared between both parents. This inevitably leads us to a new set of expectations about how men need to "show up" in their child's life.

As the father of our eight year old daughter, I constantly question my decisions about how to guide her to a better understanding of herself without imposing my own filter about Life onto her young sensibilities. My father raised me very differently. The only thing he could think of to offer me was what he knew best, *which was for me to fit into his concept of how to be man*. While there are things I can look back on and appreciate about what he tried to teach me, I can also see now that *he wanted me to take on his filter* of how he saw Life, rather than develop my own.

As my daughter's father, there are times that I struggle with whether or not I am making decisions that are *in her best interest* as opposed to trying to meet some unmet need (fear) that I have about myself. And yet, I also continue to trust (and hope) that—no matter what decisions I make regarding her well-being—it is more important for her to observe me being accountable for my choices when I make mistakes than it is for me to try to justify my behavior to her.

As a man, I take my role as a protector and provider of my family very seriously, even though there are ways that I am still learning how to best fulfill that role. I also know that *the fears that come up for me as a father have their roots in the fears that come up for me in how best to live my life with integrity as a man*. And so the best role model as a father that I can think of being for my daughter is one where she watches me struggle (face my fear) and strive to learn how to stand my ground for what I am passionate about and what I feel deeply convicted about in my life. I want her to see me take risks and fail and succeed and fail and succeed so that she will know that she can do the same with her life and be okay. I want her to see me face my insecurities as a man and take a stand for something good, that contributes to our lives on the planet, and to see the kind of man that that makes me in the process. One way or the other, I know there are ways she will end up emulating

me, so I want to give her something of value to emulate, something that can contribute to her happiness, her self-esteem, and her ability to make a contribution to Life.

The best way I can do any of the above is to confront whatever fears I have that keep me from doing what I know to be true in my heart as a way of teaching my daughter how to do the same for herself. This is the gift of **Fearless Fathering** that I offer my own child, and I hope it can offer you or any of my clients the same.

∞ *Dr. He* ∞

A Generation of Entitled Children

Dear Dr. He Said, Dr. She Said:

I am having a difficult time with my wife around the three kids. She caters to them, doesn't make them do any chores, cleans up after them all the time, carts them around everywhere with no expectation of appreciation, and I am seeing the result to be children who are disrespectful and expecting all the time. I work my butt off to financially care for everyone, and I too feel unappreciated. I am constantly trying to get my wife to set boundaries with the kids, but she won't because she feels she wants to give them all the things she didn't have—including a mother that is always there. I know her intentions are good, but I am afraid of the outcome. Please give me some direction in how to talk to her and deal with the kids. I have to admit, I've sort of thrown my hands up because I am gone away from the house a lot of the time.

Sam, Del Mar

Dr. She

Dear Sam:

What is happening with a lot of children today is a tricky phenomenon that has developed in this most recent generation as a *backlash* to previous generations of more parent-centered versus child-centered parenting styles. Parents today want to “attend” to their children in a way they were not attended to. Our parents’ generation was not very psychologically sophisticated (some were of course, but not as a whole) and not tuned into the “individual” needs of their children. Many parents today came from the old school parenting style of strict “it’s my way or the highway” mentality or just survived their childhood without much guidance. Many parents of today have made an internal decision to raise their own children in a much different way than they themselves were raised. As most trends ebb and flow, many parents have swung the pendulum to the other side and, as a result, our generation has become overly aware of and attentive to our children’s psychological needs. We feel, as a backlash to what we didn’t get, that the right way to parent is to give our children constant positive reinforcement, put them in front of all the opportunities we never had, talk to them like adults, listen to their feelings and needs, and avoid putting our children in front of anything uncomfortable—but almost to a fault. Some of this is good, of course but again, as larger trends go, we now find that we are out of balance in the way we are developing solid, self-sufficient children.

The backlash of *the overcompensation of what we did not get* is that we are breeding a generation of children that feel entitled: to get all the opportunities they want; to be in front of constant positive reinforcement; and to have more choices than they can handle. At the same time, they have also—as a generation—not learned how to struggle with challenges, nor have they learned how to self-soothe since *so much* soothing has come from outside of themselves. We, as the parental generation are in need of a fast repair. We need to recognize the importance of boundaries, the importance of giving our children responsibilities that may not feel “fun” to them, the importance of letting our children face their own challenges and struggles so they can learn how to cope with conflict, and how to self-soothe and problem solve. If we neglect to put our children in front of anxiety provoking

situations, as children they will not have the resources or resilience to deal with anxiety or discomfort in their adult lives. Parents of this generation, with all the best of intentions, have been the mama and papa lion protectors of discomfort for today's children. And I'm sure you get by now that what we are doing as a generation of parents is projecting our own needs onto our kids. OUCH, we know...we are guilty. By constantly reinforcing every move our children make we also end up with children who having an overinflated ego and will have a very difficult time in the real world when they aren't received as "special" and have work hard like everybody else.

So, Sam, yes...it is vital that your children have chores, have tasks that they don't necessarily enjoy doing.

Dr. He

Hello Sam,

Another way of saying what Dr. She says above is that the error our generation has made is that we have gone to the opposite end of the spectrum of how our parents raised us, and that a more balanced approach that incorporates both _____ and _____ is probably what would be best for our children. We have probably focused more on giving them what they WANT instead of giving them what they NEED.

Along with your concerns about the children, it is obvious that you and your wife aren't very effective at being a "team" when it comes to both parenting and—more importantly—being a couple. I say that based on the fact that if you felt more appreciated, it would mean that you would feel that your viewpoint regarding the kids would be taken more seriously. It also probably means that you don't feel like your wife is aware of what you yourself need these days in general. I would guess, Sam, that much of what you are writing about here is a result of poor communication skills between you and your wife.

∞ *Dr. He ~ Dr. She* ∞

R-E-S-P-E-C-T

Dear Dr. He Said, Dr. She Said,

I have grown weary and frustrated with how different my husband and I are. It feels like we are water and oil on so many issues that I try to remember what it was that connected us 18 years ago when we got married. For instance, we both love our two children immensely, but he and I disagree on so many things about how to raise them. He has a lot of fear and anxiety left over from his childhood that colors his everyday life, and especially when it comes to making decisions about the kids. He can't help but see the worst case scenario happening whenever they want to do something. I want them to be safe and secure, but I also want them to learn about life by trying new things and having first-hand experience at learning from their mistakes. My worst fear is that they now are becoming fearful and anxious like him. I have tried to talk to him about this, but we always end up in an argument. Can you help us?

Antonia, Pacific Beach

Dear Antonia,

In reading your question we thought it would be most useful to address how you and your husband are dealing with your differences as opposed to addressing the subject of parenting itself.

Making room for two different realities between two spouses is a hugely challenging issue for every marriage. Initially in the dating phase of a relationship, it is much easier to revel in the things we have in common with someone else. It is a time that we actually seek *reasons to connect with the other person* in order to be at peace with our decision to “choose” him or her as our mate. The haze of love at the front end of being a couple brings with it more built-in patience and flexibility for the challenges of working out differences.

As the haze of love dissolves, our differences become a battleground for power in the relationship. Someone prone at all to judging someone else's personal opinion as being either right or wrong and good or bad is what we consider to be **DISRESPECTFUL**. It sounds like you are both not only disrespecting each other's opinion, Antonia, but *you are both also disrespecting each other*. You must both acknowledge to each other that each of your opinions not only have value, but that each of your opinions scare the heck out of each other! That would be respectful because that seems to be the truth of what you both feel. But it takes courage to say that stuff to each other!

You *both* have fear and anxiety leftover from your childhoods. Everyone does. But trying to make the argument that his childhood stuff gets in the way of your marriage and yours doesn't is not true—nor is it fair. His need for what feels safe is no less important than what you need. His childhood pain is no less meaningful than yours. We'll bet that you married each other fully well believing that. But showing each other respect has nothing to do with agreeing or convincing someone that what you believe has value. It means valuing each other's needs in life—even if they are different—simply *because you love each other*. So what if you have different views on how to raise the kids. **THAT** is part of what you signed up for when you got married. But the true test of love for our partners is how we maintain and show our respect for him or her even when it seems we both live on different planets.

Another important aspect of respect is the concept of *self-respect*. We have learned that our ability to show respect toward others is in direct proportion to the degree of respect that we feel for ourselves. In other words, if I am not showing respect to someone I love it probably means that I am not feeling very good about myself. That is just something we want you to think about and wonder to yourself whether or not it is true for you. The bottom line is, showing respect to others is a sign of self-respect. It is also a way for us all to embrace our differences. Remember: when you married your husband, you married and loved him for all the things he was—stuff you liked and agreed with, as well as stuff you didn't like and didn't agree with. That is no less true today than it was back then.

Best of luck,

∞ *Dr. He ~ Dr. She* ∞

Husband Still Attached to his Mother

Dear Dr. He Said, Dr. She Said,

I can't seem to get my husband to detach from his mother. After 10 years of marriage, I feel like he still runs to her for everything and she still runs the decisions we make in our lives. I'm getting really tired of it, and my husband refuses to see that there is a problem after years of trying to get him to understand me. How do I deal with this situation?

Gina, Bankers Hill

Dr. She

Dear Gina,

This is definitely a common scenario we see with the couples we work with: adults who are in relationships or marriages that really haven't individuated from their families of origin—*especially sons from their mothers*. It is, of course, extremely important to respect the relationship your husband has with his mother as an *adult* son would have with his mother. However, it sounds like he hasn't yet cut the cord nor has he grown out of playing the *child* role in his life.

You are on the right track in your desire to have a husband who is an adult and who holds you as his primary adult relationship. You will be caught up in an unhealthy triangle until your husband is able to emotionally develop into a mature man who can stand on his own, i.e., have and identify his own thoughts, opinions, and feelings. Until he is able to do this he won't be able to make the long overdue emotional separation from his mother nor will he be able to have a healthy emotional relationship with you. If you have children, he is also neglecting to model the united front a husband and wife team need to display that gives children the boundaries, structure and role modeling they need to grow into mature adults themselves.

I'm wondering what your approach has been with your husband in broaching this subject. If you've approached him in a nagging motherly tone he will surely be dissuaded from hearing your concerns. You may also remind him of the mother he already fears setting boundaries with. If that is the case, he will most likely feel triggered and get *defensive* when you sound critical *versus* dealing with what's in front of him in a mature way. If, however, you approach him as a mature adult woman who wants to have a loving partnership, he may be able to hear you better. Men who don't individuate from their mothers usually have powerful, controlling mothers who they fear disappointing.

Dr. He

Hello Gina,

One thing most men have a difficult time understanding is the extent to which the relationship they've had with their mother influences the way they interact with their wife or girlfriend. It can

be weird for men to even consider the possibility that their present-day relationship could somehow be a reflection of that mother-son dynamic, but there really is a lot of self-knowledge to be gained from identifying similar patterns of behavior between the two relationships. The reason for this is that our mothers are our first face-to-face experience with the opposite sex, and the way that we feel loved and cared for (or not) by her, wires up our personality as boys with regard to how we feel desirable to females. If we don't take the time to identify this wiring that we carry from our boyhood into our adulthood from that relationship, we run the risk of unconsciously playing out the "little boy" role we learned at that early age with the adult woman in our lives today.

There is nothing wrong with your husband taking his mother's feelings into consideration on certain issues. If, however, he "runs to her for everything" as you suggest in your letter, then he puts *your* partnership with him in jeopardy. He must make a decision about whether or not he wants to have an adult relationship with his adult wife. If he defers to his mother's wishes over yours, it makes having any kind of healthy, adult relationship with him impossible. If he doesn't get help to understand how enmeshed he still is with his mother and how unhealthy that is at his age, he will not succeed in creating an intimate relationship with you.

∞ *Dr. He ~ Dr. She* ∞

In-Laws at Christmas

Dear Dr. He Said, Dr. She Said,

Here come the Holidays and our annual dilemma of how much time to spend with my wife's family. The reason I have a problem with them is that I don't trust them. A year ago they handled a family financial matter with us in a way that I thought was underhanded. As far as I am concerned, this was one of a handful of situations over the years where they were not totally honest and up front with us. I come from a family of high moral character, so my in-laws feel toxic to me, and I don't want our children influenced by their lack of scruples. My wife is always quick to forgive them, but she also thinks I am arrogant and have a holier-than-thou attitude toward them (and her). She has a hard time saying 'no' to her family and feels caught in the middle of how to handle the situation. How do I convince her that I am right and that spending time with them isn't good for our children?

Jim, Leucadia

Dr. He

Dear Jim,

Don't make the mistake of thinking that the *facts* of your unsavory interactions with your in-laws will persuade your wife to change her *truth* of how she feels about her family. She grew up with these people, and while she has more than likely evolved her own standards of personal integrity, the truth is—when it comes to birth-family—blood is thicker than water. No wonder she feels caught in the middle. She has yet to find a way to support her husband without betraying her family-of-origin and vice versa.

However, let's take a look at *your* background, Jim, since you are the one writing the letter. The fact that you feel a need to convince her that you are “right” about this says a lot about how you and your wife probably resolve conflict in general. When you two disagree about something, is it important for you to determine which one of you is “right” and which one of you is “wrong”? If so, then this can often lead to the slippery slope of determining who has a “good” opinion and who has a “bad” one, and—worst case—who in fact is a “good” person and who is “bad.” If this is your strategy for how to deal with differences, then you both are in for much heartache and pain.

It might be more effective for you to talk to your wife about *all the fears you have* about dealing with her family as a result of being raised in the family that you were raised in. This would require you to delve into the underlying emotional landscape of your early life living in a family with “high moral character.” Sharing whatever you learned back then about what is good versus bad and what is right versus wrong will help give your wife a deeper understanding of your reactions toward her family. Also be aware that it would be best to do this in a way that is not condescending or arrogant, Jim. Her family obviously scares the heck out of you, and it would be infinitely better for you to talk to your wife about *those fears* rather than try to convince her that she is wrong about how she feels about her family.

Dr. She

Dear Jim,

Trying to persuade your wife to not spend time with her parents is probably not your best approach. Helping your wife to understand that you feel you are not protecting your children when your in-laws are around is probably the place you two can connect....what is in the best interest of the children. Regarding this, Jim, you have to consider whether your in-laws are *truly* a danger to your kids in the way they relate to *children* versus the way they relate to you. Do your in-laws indiscretions orbit more around adult matters such as irresponsibility with finances, or are they emotionally manipulative with the children as well? Is it really toxic for the kids to be around their grandparents a few days at Christmas or is this more about the adults? If the grandparents are mildly inappropriate with the children, to address your concerns, talk to your wife and together teach your children about setting appropriate boundaries and understanding when people cross over those boundaries. Teaching your children to take care of themselves in any situation that feels compromising is in the best interest of the emotional well-being of your family. However, if the grandparents are truly toxic with the children, then it is your responsibility to protect them.

It does sound very appropriate for you and your wife to have a heart-to-heart about old resentments you carry for her parents and develop an agreement about how you can best have a dialogue with them to, again, set appropriate boundaries for future interactions. If your wife resists considering what is in the best interests of the family, then she is still enmeshed with her parents and still sees them as the ones in charge. Also, the approach you use in your question indicates that she might see you as the “controlling parent” who is telling her what to do. This may trigger her to want to rebel against you playing the authoritative role. When you treat your wife like an equal, adult partner and engage in a conversation about what you both feel is in the best interest of your children, you will most likely make headway in becoming a unified couple.

∞ *Dr. He ~ Dr. She* ∞

Blending Step Kids With Grandparents

Dear Dr. He Said, Dr. She Said,

I am a 36 year old woman and my parents don't accept the fact that I am dating a man who already has a son. They've always wanted me to have my own children, and they are rejecting the idea that this may end up being my step-son and that I may never have children of my own. We have been dating for a year and a half, are very serious about each other, and plan to spend our lives together. Christmas is coming up and my parents are not open to the idea of all of us spending Christmas together, but they do expect to spend time with me. How do I talk to them about this?

Suzette, Carlsbad

Dr. She

Dear Suzette:

It must be very confusing for you to find a man you love, go through all the personal emotions of integrating his child into your life, and then feel the rejection of your own family. It sounds like you are being put in a position of choosing between the man you love and your family of origin. It is very sad and telling of your parents feeling of entitlement, that they are trying to control your life choices. I am imagining that their reaction does not come as a complete surprise to you since your parents sound like they could have a history of not seeing you as an individual adult in the world who lives her own life, makes her own choices and deals with the consequences of those choices responsibly. I have to wonder how *you* might encourage them to continue to be over-involved in your life. Have you depended on them too much emotionally or financially throughout your adult years? If so, it is really time to individuate and set some boundaries with your parents.

It is understandably disappointing for a parent to be saddened by the idea that they may never experience the joy of being a grandparent. However, grieving the loss of the opportunity should not come at the cost of punishing you by outwardly rejecting your boyfriend, his son, and your choices in life. It sounds like you need to sit down with them, empathize with their pain about the loss of the opportunity to be a blood grandparent, but also help them understand how you feel about your boyfriend and his child. Hopefully your parent's best interest will ultimately lie in your happiness.

Dr. He

Dear Suzette,

Just because your boyfriend already has a son of his own by another woman, why would your parents assume that you wouldn't want to have a child with him someday yourself? *His already having a child has absolutely nothing to do with your parents becoming grandparents or not.* Your "ability" to give them grandchildren is still intact, if you so choose. You don't mention it in your letter, but have you told your parents that you've decided not to have your own kids now? If not, why are they

assuming this is so? This seems to be an issue between your parents and yourself, Suzette, and has little to do with your boyfriend. For them to treat him as *persona non grata* is very destructive to your relationship with them. Let them know this and tell them to start treating him with respect. Tell them to give *you* the respect of dealing with you about this issue straight up and not take it out on him. I certainly wonder what your relationship with your parents has been like throughout your lifetime, Suzette. If they have always expected you to fulfill their needs as being more important than you fulfilling your own—then this scenario is not surprising. Set them straight about what your priorities are, and remind them that they cannot guilt-trip you into making decisions about your love-life that serve only them. And finally, you could also remind them that they have a wonderful opportunity *right now* to practice their grand-parenting skills on your boyfriend's son's life. Just because he may not be related to them "by blood" doesn't mean he couldn't benefit from whatever love they have inside them that's just waiting to gush out onto a child.

∞ *Dr. He ~ Dr. She* ∞

Husband's Arrogant Friend

Dear Dr. He Said, Dr. She Said,

The other night my husband and I went out to dinner with one of his very close friends and his wife. I get along pretty well with the wife, but I really don't like my husband's guy friend. He spent the whole night interrupting whatever other conversation was going on at the dinner table as a way to draw attention back to himself, and he even put his wife down in a real backhanded way that obviously embarrassed her. We get together with this couple probably three or four times a year, and some form of this is what happens every time. My husband does not like confrontation of any sort, so he is very reluctant to either talk to this guy directly or blow off his friendship. I want to just shut down any more contact with these people because the aggravation to me is just not worth it. How can we handle this?

Nicola, Oceanside

Dr. He

Dear Nicola,

Sometimes it is a challenge to see whatever values our spouse or our child finds in certain "friendships," especially when the dark side of those relationships is so obvious to us. Is this a boyhood friend of your husband's that has been in his life for many years? If so, then your husband's relationship with this guy probably carries a lot of sentimental value that might be difficult for your husband to imagine not having in his life. If he is a boyhood friend, his self-centered preoccupation might be what your husband has always dealt with by just accepting him "warts and all." If your husband on the other hand doesn't like this friend's narcissistic and demeaning ways, but also won't say anything to him about it, then he has to decide and be clear with you about what he is willing to put up with. Has this guy ever put your husband down? Would your husband be tolerant of this guy putting *you* down? If your husband genuinely values this fellow or values certain traits that he possesses, then it is important for your husband to paint a picture to you of what these traits are and why they are appealing to him.

Dr. She

Dear Nicola:

From your inquiry it seems as if you have given your husband's friend many opportunities to adjust his behavior and you are continuing to feel disrespected. It must also be very painful to watch him disrespect his wife. However, perhaps the most painful behavior to watch is your husband standing on the sidelines in fear of confrontation and/or condoning his friend's behavior.

It sounds like it is time to take care of yourself. I would suggest that you first talk to your husband one more time to see if you can appeal to his values of respect in a relationship. If he is still unwilling to have a "man to man" with his friend then it is up to you to decide whether the relationship

is valuable enough to you to have a conversation with this man yourself. If it is not, you have every right to let your husband know you won't be making future plans with his friend and his wife as a couple.

Again, I think your main consideration needs to be with your husbands' inability to have a conversation with a buddy about his inappropriate behavior and/or your husband's lack of awareness or concern about his friend's inappropriate behavior. It might be time to regroup together as a couple about what is important to each of you when it comes to relationships, what is tolerable and intolerable, and what kinds of boundaries are appropriate to set for yourselves individually and for the relationship as a whole. Good luck!

∞ *Dr. He ~ Dr. She* ∞

Daughter's 180 Degree Turn

Dear Dr. He Said, Dr. She Said,

I am really confused about what to do. My twenty eight year old daughter has been telling me for over a year that she wants to get out of her relationship of three years. She told me she didn't feel she was in love anymore, and that she wasn't sexually attracted to her boyfriend. She feels that her boyfriend was unable to fully commit, and she has also been having some difficulties with his family. One of her main fears was being financially on her own again since her boyfriend has a very successful business and pays for most things. I think my daughter, although independent in many ways, really does like the idea of being taken care of. So, yesterday she called me and did a complete turnaround. She said she decided that he really was the one for her after all and that she needed to stay with him and not abandon him. I guess I am confused by the 180 degree turn, and I'm not sure how to support her anymore. I really am not an overbearing mom, but I just don't even know how to feel or what to say when she brings up the subject. Do you have any advice?

Stephanie, Vista

Dr. She

Dear Stephanie:

I think it would be helpful to first take a look at some possibilities about what could be going on with your daughter so you can have a better understanding of where she might be coming from. Then, given what you know about her, you can decide how to approach her. Remember that I'm only hypothesizing given the brevity of the information in your question.

It sounds like your daughter may be experiencing a lot of fear, and it is difficult to know from your question which side of things her fear lies on. For example, if we are afraid of commitment ourselves, we tend to choose people who mirror that sentiment. So perhaps choosing a man who is afraid to commit represents something within herself. As time passed, maybe her adamant proclamations that her boyfriend was not "the one" were more a reflection of her growing feelings of vulnerability, which increased her fear of attachment and abandonment. This might have been when you started to hear a lot about her boyfriend's shortcomings. We can unconsciously push away things we are afraid of *and* things we subconsciously don't believe we deserve.

When she came up against the reality of actually leaving the relationship, a few hypotheses are possible: 1) she could have come to terms with the fact that she really loves him and has decided to work through her own fears of commitment, or 2) as you suggest, she could be a little more co-dependent than she comes across, and the fear of starting over and being on her own was too terrifying for her to make the move away from the relationship.

On this last point I am wondering if your daughter sees her boyfriend as somewhat of a father figure. If she is looking for someone to "take care" of her—but has also had an over-inflated sense of

independence—it could be to mask her unmet needs from childhood of needing to be taken care of by a father figure. That is something that would be important for her to look at to avoid developing a long term parent-child style relationship with him.

Dr. He will address how you can approach your daughter, but I would encourage your daughter to talk to someone about her confused feelings before she takes the relationship to the next level. Good luck!

Dr. He

Hello Stephanie,

Since Dr. She has given you a number of possibilities regarding your daughter's decision-making process; I think I will focus more on you and your desire to help your daughter. You obviously love her very much and want her to be happy, yet you are obviously struggling with how much to say to her without becoming a butt-inski. It seems like you could—in some moment that you would feel was the right moment—ask her if she was interested in knowing what your true concerns are for her in this relationship (reminding her that it was also all right for her to turn down your offer to give her feedback). This would be a way for you to “get her permission” to say from your heart what your true concerns are, most pointedly, that you are afraid that she is staying with him for the wrong reasons.

If she is open to your feedback, then by all means let her know *how scary it is for you* to think that she might be settling for a less than satisfying relationship in her life because she might not have the confidence to stand on her own two feet. The important piece of this message to her needs to be more about *your fear*—and NOT about *her behavior*. Since you are unsure about how to support her, then *ask her how she would want you to support her* in this experience given the fact that she talked one way for so long and now is singing a different tune.

If she is not open to your feedback, then you will need to find a way to stay out of it. If this is her way of learning this most important Life Lesson, you will have to let her learn it her own way—which I would bet is similar to how you've had to learn any number of crucial lessons about Life! Best of luck with this, Stephanie.

∞ Dr. He ~ Dr. She ∞

Mother Fears Intolerant Sons' Opinions

Dear Dr. He Said, Dr. She Said,

I am a divorced woman with two sons, 16 and 13 years old. I love both of them very deeply, but they both have a trait of their father's that is painful for me, and that is how they from time-to-time make racial slurs against anyone who is not white. This is especially troubling for me because I have started to date a Hispanic man, and am developing some real feelings for him. He treats me a hundred times more respectfully than my sons' father ever did, and he is eager to meet the boys. I haven't told them yet about this man because they are very loyal to their father. When and how should I approach them to let them know how I feel about him?

Celine, Mira Mesa

Dr. He

Dear Celine,

I can certainly see why you would have concern about how to handle this situation. You did not mention it in your letter, but because you say that your male friend is eager to meet the boys, I will assume that he himself does not know that your sons possess this particular "trait." It seems that it would be very important for you to sit him down and have a talk with him to let him know just what he might be in for when he meets your sons. I can imagine that this might be a scary conversation for you to have with him, but sooner or later this will have to happen. You don't mention exactly how long you two have been dating, so I will assume that you have thought long and hard about whether or not the timing is right to introduce him to the boys. If, however, you have only been out on a handful of dates with him, you might re-think whether or not it is time yet to have them all meet.

If you have taken this all into consideration, then this might be the logical next best step to solidify your position with him as being on the "same team"—even at this early stage of dating—as well as being a way to protect this new relationship in your life. Your sons will always be in your life, and so it seems important to find some way to reassure this man that you are willing to stand up for your true feelings—even to your sons! This will hopefully be appreciated by him as a positive thing, and I think it will also usher in a newer and deeper level of trust between you two.

Dr. She

Dear Celine:

Being honest and upfront with your boyfriend is of utmost importance towards building open communication between the two of you. Giving him a real picture of what your life entails is another way to build trust early on in a relationship. He needs to know about your boys prejudices

and he needs to know how you parent your boys around their prejudices. All of this information will give him a bigger perspective regarding who you are.

Regarding your boys...I am wondering how you are talking to them about their prejudices. If you are not talking to them about these values or if you are “tolerating” them then you are giving your boys the unstated message that their judgments are “okay.” *How* you discuss this with them will create a foundation that will help your boyfriend to see and trust that your belief systems are truly different from your sons. As I’m sure you know, it is important for you to teach your boys the value of quality characteristics of a human being versus fearing “differences” *even* if their father gives them an opposing message. They will eventually gravitate towards what feels right to them in their guts.

It is also important for your boys to know that your boyfriend treats you with love and respect and that *those* qualities are what you want in your life and is the makings of a healthy relationship. You *are* a role model for your boys in relationship. If you have raised respectful boys then they will *want* you to be treated with love and respect as well. Your son’s emotions will probably be complicated around accepting a new man in your life in general, but again it important to have open communication about the role this man will play in your life and in theirs. If your boyfriend is an emotionally mature adult he will be able to understand that your boy’s will have natural hesitation towards opening up to him and will *even* understand that they have learned prejudices as a result of their father’s belief systems.

All in all, your boyfriend needs to see how you handle the situation with your sons to trust that moving forward in the relationship is a smart thing to do! Good luck!

∞ *Dr. He ~ Dr. She* ∞



Communication, Intimacy, & Relationship Dynamics

How Do I Meet People?

Dear Dr. He Said, Dr. She Said,

It's so difficult for me to meet people. I'm a professional, I work long hours and the profession I am in is comprised of 70% females. People have been suggesting I go on-line to meet someone, but it feels so unnatural. What do you suggest?

Elizabeth, Cardiff

Dr. She

Dear Elizabeth,

San Diego can be a difficult place to meet people due to the urban sprawl which dictates a lack of community feel. The Internet has become a resource for fast pace professionals and people in general who don't have time or are uninterested in perusing the bar scene.

So I would encourage you to use the internet services that provide the most comprehensive pre-entry interview/testing process and have an experience! It could be an opportunity for you to meet people you might have never met before and it could provide you with more information about what you want and don't want in a relationship. Then, as you talk to different men let your natural instincts guide you...develop the skill that women inherently have for spotting the red AND green flags but don't always use! Also, put some time aside for more hobbies that might intersect with some men in your everyday life.

Dr. He

Elizabeth,

While it may not feel natural to advertise your single status on the internet in hopes of attracting a mate, a recent study showed that *more than half the numbers of new relationships today are started from personal ads on internet dating sites.* That's starting to sound more and more natural, don't you think?!

Even though it may seem daunting, internet dating seems to screen out the less- than-serious candidates that you would normally have to give a polite heave-ho to at any bar scene. So even though it's not a perfect system, it does provide a weeding-out process that a lot of people are taking advantage of and are appreciating. You could also try one of those meet-me-for-coffee/lunch/dinner dating services that pairs you up or puts you in front of 15 like-minded singles of the opposite sex looking for love.

The good news is that most guys doing this will also be as serious-minded as you so that you don't have to wonder about that from the get-go. The not-so-good news is that you may still have to

kiss of few frogs before you meet the prince meant to be your true love! Bottom line is, take a deep breath, get a cool photo of yourself into your computer, and start sending it out!!!

∞ *Dr. He ~ Dr. She* ∞

Understanding Intimacy

We believe intimacy between two people is the glue that keeps a relationship connected, vibrant, and alive. The meaning of the word *intimacy* is one that is ever evolving as the 21st millennium takes shape. Previous generations of married couples have their respective definitions of what intimacy has meant to them. Our intention here is to help clarify what we believe healthy *intimacy in relationships looks and feels like today*.

To start with, intimacy between two people includes—and goes way beyond—whatever sort of physical or sexual connection that is generated by a couple. Yes, the sexual needs of any couple are very important and legitimate. But sex can only sustain a relationship for so long before the *emotional connection* must also be acknowledged and talked about. Sexuality often gets confused with intimacy but the quality of a sustained sexual relationship directly correlates with the quality of emotional intimacy in a relationship. Steamy sex does exist without intimacy but is not sustained in a long term intimate relationship without the emotional connection.

The best way to describe creating emotional intimacy is having the courage to vulnerably express one's thoughts, feelings, and needs to another person. And having needs is NOT the same thing as being needy! Being needy is something altogether different and involves an ongoing sense of feeling insecure. Becoming needy occurs when a person looks to, and even expects, some other person, place, or thing to fulfill his or her own personal needs—as opposed to taking the time, energy, and courage to learn how to satisfy and “fill in” one's own sense of wholeness.

EVERYONE has needs.

As humans, we have physical needs, we have intellectual needs, we have spiritual needs, and, yes—we have emotional needs! And it is a healthy thing for a woman and a man to look to their intimate relationship as the place to get their emotional needs met, as long as there is no expectation created by either person that their “job” is to be the sole resource of getting each other's needs met.

Women look for intimate sharing with their girlfriends, and then quite naturally look for that same type of intimacy in their relationships with men. But because “having emotional needs” is nowhere to be found on the chart of “masculine traits” that we learn as boys, we as adult men are confused about how to give that very thing back to our spouses. *Knowing—much less expressing—his emotional needs is every man's journey into the unknown!*

We believe that men don't have to talk about their needs and their feelings *the same way* that women do. There is no way men can. But men still have the responsibility in their intimate relationships with adult women to somehow, some way learn how to express themselves emotionally. Both men and women need to understand that until they get better at doing this, that their ability to be real is *very limited*, and their ability to create and sustain intimacy will be *very limited*.

So, here we offer some key elements we believe help to create and maintain intimacy in your relationship:

1. Stay committed to understanding who you are (being emotionally aware) and being as honest and forthcoming in sharing your feelings, thoughts, needs and expectations.
2. Genuine intimacy requires dialogue, transparency, vulnerability, and reciprocity (Wikipedia).
3. Listen to and be non-judgmental, empathic, compassionate and understanding of your partner's feelings. This will help you *know* your partner. *Knowing* your partner and yourself also helps you resolve conflict more effectively which leads to deeper intimacy!
4. Feeling and expressing trust, loyalty and respect are important to enhancing intimacy. Knowing that the emotional and physical aspects of your unique relationship are private and exclusive to the two of you builds intimacy.
5. Being affectionate and romantic is another level of physical and emotional intimacy. Developing comfort and ease and an ability to laugh and be playful are also important to intimacy.
6. The relationship needs to have a purpose that makes sense to both of you and feels supportive of each other's individual and mutual goals. This also helps you get through life's tough challenges as a team which in turn creates deep intimacy.

We wish you the best in developing and maintaining intimacy in your relationship!

∞ *Dr. He ~ Dr. She* ∞

Boyfriend Tries to Fix Her Problems

Dear Dr. He Said, Dr. She Said,

I am so tired of my boyfriend trying to fix my problems. I keep telling him that I'm going to stop telling him what goes on for me unless he stops telling me what I should do. How can I help him understand this without offending him?

Sharon, Leucadia

Dr. She

Dear Sharon,

This is a very common complaint women tend to have with men. It also happens to be one of the biggest points of miscommunication and misunderstanding that exists between men and women. When a woman presents a problem to a man, there tends to be an immediate *urge* on his part to come up with a solution. Historically, that has been the male *protector* role, and while we may be living in the 21st century, hard-wiring from the past is difficult to change! It is *one* certain way a man feels like a man, and is as innate and instinctual as nurturing a child is to a mother. Of course there are always exceptions to this rule, but for now we are talking in generalities.

So first, *you* need to have an understanding of your boyfriend's need to be a man, and that solving your problem is a way he instinctually knows how to show you he is your man. Secondly, you have to help him update his hardwiring. Help him to understand that as an independent woman you love his support, but you feel it more when he listens. Help him to understand that sometimes you just need to *download*, that this is a way you process information. Originally women were *gatherers*, and as gatherers we were also *sifters*, sifting through all we acquired while sorting the good from the bad, what worked from what didn't work. We now do this processing more mentally than physically.

The bottom line is that you need to have a basic understanding and respect of each other's needs. Then there needs to be willingness on both your parts to break new ground and update old hardware. Good luck!

Dr. He

Hey Sharon,

As Dr. She pointed out, one of the pieces of our masculinity as men that we innately possess—and one that we are proud of—is our ability to be effective problem solvers. It's an important part of our survival instinct to be able to overcome obstacles that get in the way of or threaten our ability to survive. We may not have to slay any woolly mammoths or saber tooth tigers these days, but the primitive impulse that still lives in our gut to solve problems is very much the same today as it was

for our hunting cave brethren. Working our way out of a quandary for ourselves gives us a feeling of value and self-respect. Helping the woman we love get out of a jam is a way that we not only provide and protect, but it's how we show our love.

Unfortunately, what your boyfriend hasn't figured out yet is that *not every problem situation requires a solution*. Not every predicament is a life or death battle for survival. What we men *don't* have much of a natural disposition for is the whole idea of sounding off about problems without finding an answer. Tell your boyfriend that you appreciate the way he shows his love to you by helping you find answers to your problems, *and* that you need him to learn *another* way of showing his love, which is to learn to just *listen*. You can even let him know *before you start to download* to him whether you want him to problem-solve with you, or just listen to what you have to say. Last but not least, Sharon, do not get caught in the trap of withholding information because you will just end up becoming resentful, and that will create a whole new set of problems.

∞ *Dr. He ~ Dr. She* ∞

Wife Reminds Husband of his Mother

Dear Dr. He Said, Dr. She Said,

This is really strange for me to say, but very often my wife reminds me of my mother. She doesn't look like my mother, but boy, does she ever sound like her a lot. I love my wife very much, but lately we've been arguing a lot, and it has really caused me to feel turned off to her sexually, and this really freaks me out. Whenever I tell her she sounds like my mother, she just gets more upset and angry, which reminds me even more of my mom. Figuratively speaking, I always end up feeling beat up by her. How can I get her to change?

Myron, Pacific Beach

Dr. She

Dear Myron:

Well, I can't tell you how often clients describe their partners to be like their parents. So, there must be something to that, don't you think? We believe it is about familiar patterning. What I mean is that we are very hard wired at a young age to learn the patterns of the people in our environment who care for us, which is primarily our parents. It is like growing up in a household where everyone speaks French...you learn to speak French. Then, when you grow up and are an adult out in the world, someone who speaks the particular French dialect that you learned in your household seems very familiar to you. This usually causes you to feel a "pull" or "attraction" towards that person. I can't tell you how many people say, "I don't know why but he/she just seemed so familiar to me." So, in the initial "getting to know you" phase of your relationship, you were probably not "aware" of the ways your wife was like your mother, but—as you settled into a more routine existence and the veil of the romantic phase began to lift—you probably started to notice the ways your wife was pushing your buttons in a way that was similar to how your mom pushed your buttons when you were younger. You probably also started to notice some of the not-so-positive-patterns your wife has in common with your mother. And so the cycle has gone for thousands of years.

So, Myron, this is not about trying to change your wife, it is about recognizing what patterns push your buttons and why. If you feel criticized by your wife and have had a "critical mother," then you need to deal with your original wound of being criticized *as a child* by your *mother* so you can approach the criticism coming from your *adult wife as an adult man*. First, you need to help your wife understand your buttons and how it makes you feel when she pushes them (i.e., "I feel incompetent or not good enough when you say...and it reminds me of how I felt when I was a child"). What this also means is that, as an adult man you know how to get feedback, you know when to acknowledge what is working about your behavior and what is not. And you know how to set boundaries if your wife were to become attackingly critical and inappropriate with you. This will create a very different dynamic with your wife than you had with your mother. If you come from a wounded child place with your wife you will only recreate a parent/child dynamic with her which will of course turn you off to her sexually...who wants to have sex with their mother!

Dr. He

Hello Myron,

I can certainly see why you would be concerned about your perception of your wife as being similar to your mother. I would bet, however, that if we were to ask your wife whom *you* remind *her* of, she would undoubtedly reply with some reference to you as acting like a child or a little boy that needs some sort of parental guidance or control. I would also bet that *you yourself* probably feel like she treats you or talks to you as she would to a child. And I would finally bet that this happens for both of you especially when you both disagree about something or are arguing about your differences with each other. This *parent-child dynamic* is one that is present (unfortunately) in most relationships in America, where one partner acts out or “plays” the parental role and the other plays the child role. As Dr. She explains above, there are some very good reasons why we react to our partners in such a way. We also call this a *one-up-one-down* relationship, and it is definitely not healthy for your marriage because it breeds an environment which is the exact opposite of what a couple needs in order to create a partnership.

It is impossible for a true partnership to thrive when there is either: a) a perceived need for one partner to exert parental control over the other, or b) if the other partner feels as if he/she needs to subvert his/her needs in order to “keep the peace.” A genuine partnership occurs in an *adult-adult* relationship, Myron, where both people treat each other as equals; where both people are accountable and take responsibility for whatever action they have or have not taken; and where both people talk to each other respectfully when there is a difference of opinion with no condescension or criticism. I will assume that you and your wife have yet to create this kind of partnership for yourselves. It’s not too late for you both to get some help on how to do this. In the meantime, I would suggest that you focus on doing a better job of how you are accountable for the agreements you make with your wife. As a starting point, this could help get the ball rolling in a much healthier direction for you both.

∞ *Dr. He ~ Dr. She* ∞

She Likes Bad Boys

Dear Dr. He Said, Dr. She Said,

I have always been attracted to “bad boys” despite my many failed attempts at getting a relationship with one of these guys to last longer than a few months. Well, I ended up marrying one a couple of years ago because I thought he would turn out to be different from the others, or at least that’s what I had hoped. Anyway, we are already talking about splitting up and getting a divorce. He says he couldn’t help himself when he and his friends went to Las Vegas and he ended up at strip clubs and “partying” all night long. I know he doesn’t tell me everything he does with his friends, but I know what his friends are like, so I know there are always other women around to “party” with when they go out. He recently told me that marriage feels too restrictive to him and that he had thought he could change, but he admitted that he really doesn’t want to change. After my parents got divorced when I was a little girl, my mom always got into relationships with these edgy kinds of guys. I feel like I’m repeating her mistakes. Help!

Vickie, Rancho Bernardo

Dr. She

Well, Vickie...you are definitely not alone in your plight. I have worked with a lot of women who are attracted to “bad boys” and have observed some basic themes. Generally speaking, women are attracted to men who exude confidence and strength. Women have a basic core desire to know that their man can protect them and that they can lean on them if need be (yes, even in the era of women who know how to take care of themselves!). Unfortunately, a lot of “bad boys” tend to put on an “air” of confidence, but when push comes to shove they are not emotionally mature enough to follow through and show up for their women. This is because they are usually out for themselves. “Bad boys” also provide a sense of unpredictability that can be exciting and a trip out of the mundane. A man that is always predictable can be experienced as boring. The variable reinforcement that is the nature of a bad boy (for example, never knowing when your man might come through with a compliment or affection) can be much more alluring than constant predictable reinforcement (for example, knowing your man will *always* come through with a compliment or affection). Some women may find the anticipation of the *unknown* more exciting than the comfort of knowing her man will always come through.

Women who are attracted to bad boys usually are trying to work out a pattern in their life of the “unattainable becomes attainable.” You *do* seem to be trying to work out a sense of abandonment with men that you are repeating over and over again in order to master or correct. Unfortunately, choosing the same type of unavailable man will only lead to the same conclusion. When you realize that you deserve to be with a man you can trust, you will begin to choose a different type of man. You will have to be very conscientious of your old pattern of being drawn to the excitement of the unpredictable and unattainable to unlearn it and then develop a sense of *value* for being with someone you can count on. And by the way, choosing a man you can count on doesn’t mean you have to choose a man who is boring! Good luck!

Dr. He

Dear Vickie,

I think Dr. She eloquently covered the “bad boy” end of the emotional immaturity spectrum for men. I will talk about the other end of the same spectrum that is just as unhealthy in men, and that is the “nice guy.” I think it is just as important for a woman to remember that choosing either of these types of men will result in less than satisfying relationships. If “bad boys” are overly-focused on themselves, then “nice guys” are overly-focused on everyone *but* themselves. This may be a relief for women who have previously been with narcissistic men, but looking for Mr. Nice Guy still isn’t a healthy, mature choice for someone who wants a *partnership* with a man. It is a role that men play with women rather than being authentic and genuine with them. Just like bad boys, it may be very attractive at first, but after awhile it becomes very evident that nice guys are willing to sacrifice their own integrity in order to garner the love of a woman. *This is a huge red flag of emotional immaturity.*

The type of guy I am talking about here won’t dare give his woman any bad news that might make her angry or upset her. He would rather walk on eggshells around her than to have to deal directly with her disappointment or judgment of him. He is the guy who—when asked his opinion—will defer to whomever else is there in order to keep the peace. He is a man who will listen and listen and “be there” for everyone else, but he won’t have the courage to ask someone to listen and “be there” for him. Inevitably it is difficult to trust this type of fellow because it is hard to know exactly who he is, because he rarely if ever lets anyone see his authentic self. As he exerts his energy doing or saying what he thinks his woman may want him to do or say, sooner or later—just as with a “bad boy”—being in relationship with him feels empty and lonely because he will not allow his true self to “show up” and be present. My wish for you, Vickie, in the future is that you *focus your attention toward men who respect themselves enough* to just be who they are without hiding behind any mask of either “bad boy” or “nice guy.”

∞ Dr. He ~ Dr. She ∞

Wife's Attitude Oppresses Husband

Dear Dr. He Said, Dr. She Said,

I am a stay-at-home dad, which means that I take our two kids back and forth to school, clean the house, do the laundry, pay the bills, and make the social calendar for us all. My wife is the bread winner. She works for a large corporation, has a graduate degree in economics, and busts her butt to make a decent living for us. A long time ago I had to make a decision that I could live with this arrangement between us. We've been married for 17 years, and for the most part it seems to have worked for us. There is, however, one area that I am fed up with that drives me crazy. My wife likes to treat me like I am not a very smart person. I never finished college, and as a result, she seems to think that her opinion should have more weight than mine in our relationship. What's worse is that she has always treated me this way in front of our kids, who now jump on the band wagon with her to discount my opinions when they hear something from me they don't like. This feels unhealthy to me, but she says I am being a cry-baby about it. What do you think?

Warren, Bay Park

Dr. He

Dear Warren,

The first question that comes to my mind is, "What took this guy so long to grow a pair and finally speak up?" Your willingness (read: lack of self-respect) to put up with this kind of treatment from your wife says more about you, Warren, than about her. The economic division of labor role reversal in your marriage is not uncommon these days, but if—as a result of this arrangement—also came the expectation that your opinions and needs are not as important as hers, then this is what I feel a need to comment on. You say that she "likes" to treat you as if you weren't very smart, but I would bet that she does it because she knows now that she can get away with it as a way to hold more power in the relationship than you. Again, rather than try to wonder what that is about *her* personality, I wonder what it is about *you* that has put up with this kind of treatment for so long. When you made your decision long ago to live with this "arrangement," did you realize that in effect you agreed to check your manhood at the door? Is it unhealthy for your wife to put you down in front of your kids? Absolutely, but waiting 17 years to do or say something about this lack of respect in your marriage sounds pretty unhealthy as well, Warren.

Until you present yourself to your wife as the adult man you are who has opinions, thoughts, and feelings that are just as valid and important as hers, she has no reason to show you respect. Remember: *respect is never owed; respect is earned.* Not having a job or a college degree in no way justifies disrespectful treatment from a spouse. You, however, need to figure out why you lack the gumption to sit down with your wife and paint her a very clear picture of how unacceptable it is for you that she treats you this way—whether or not it is in front of the kids. Talk to a qualified professional to help you figure out why you made this kind of a deal with your wife in the first place, so that you don't ever do it to yourself again. Best of luck, Warren.

Dr. She

Dear Warren:

I think Dr. He has painted a good picture of your part in this muddle. I would add that you and your wife need to get extremely honest with each other about this problematic arrangement. She is obviously *not* okay with being the breadwinner even if she says she is. If she was, she would not be pulling the power card on you, nor would she have such disrespect for you that she would degrade you in front of your own children. She must be *extremely angry* to allow the children to join in discrediting you. What is most concerning is that the dynamic between the two of you is teaching your children that they cannot count on a man—that a man's opinion is irrelevant—and that emasculating a man is okay. If you have a son, his self-identity as a man is in jeopardy. If you have a daughter, her respect for men is being compromised. I can't imagine that your wife would continue with her behavior if she was really aware of what she was teaching her children. I can't imagine that you would allow it to continue if you really understood the subconscious message you were sending to yourself, your wife and your kids.

Please get into therapy and get to the bottom of your wife's anger and to the bottom of your own lack of self-worth that put you in a position to allow this to go on in your home for so long. You have an imbalanced relationship and you need to change that for your own sake and for the sake of your relationship with your wife and your children. All the best to you, Warren.

∞ *Dr. He ~ Dr. She* ∞

Wife is Social Director

Dear Dr. He Said, Dr. She Said,

Why does my wife feel the need to say “yes” to every single social invitation that comes our way? I am becoming very resentful at how she needs to fill every free minute of our already busy lives with a party or a dinner or a get together. We are both already exhausted from managing work and kids. Is it too much for me to expect to have a weekend where all we do is hang out at home? She gets very upset when I suggest it. Help!!

Troy, Pacific Beach

Dr. She

Hi Troy:

It is true that a woman tends to be the “multi-tasker” and relationship-builder in the family. However, as much as a woman feels competent in this role, I can guarantee you that she is not really wanting to carry that entire load alone. Perhaps if you suggest to your wife that the two of you sit down once a week and discuss just your social calendar, she would feel she doesn’t carry all the responsibility on her own shoulders. During this time, discuss which events are “do-able” and which ones are not and why. Your wife will feel that you are a partner in this often times overwhelming arena and she will appreciate that the job of nay or yea saying is more of a “we” thing. Your input will help both of you feel more proactive about setting some boundaries to create time for you and the kids.

It would also be helpful for your wife to feel that **you** are putting some energy into forming relationships to help fortify your “tribe,” so to speak. Not that you have to do it her way, but if you show interest in your friends, make some effort to spend time with them, participate a bit in the meal planning, she will pay more attention to your needs and interests because she won’t feel she is a one man show. And best of all, when your wife feels you participating in any of these ways, she will feel she has a partner, and you will look **sexier** to her, which will likely inspire her to want to hang out with **just** her man!

Dr. He

Dear Troy,

It’s pretty natural for a wife to fill the role of family “social director.” As a mom, she is the one that usually manages the logistics of kids’ pick-ups, play dates, and sporting events. As a woman who probably values nurturing relationships, she also values the social get-togethers that promote those relationships with friends.

As a husband and father, you are also busting your behind by doing what you do to bring home the bacon and protect your family. As a guy, however, you may not be keeping track of how well those social relationships are being maintained. If you participated more with her in putting the social calendar together, this might give you more of a “voice” in the scheduling and have more of a say in what does and doesn’t get scheduled. The other piece of this, Troy, is that you and your wife need to agree when it is okay to say “no” to an invitation in order to take better care of yourselves. Too much activity can erode the family structure if there is little time left over for everyone—especially the husband and wife—to connect.

∞ *Dr. He ~ Dr. She* ∞

Wife's Suicide Attempt

Dear Dr. He Said, Dr. She Said:

My wife tried to commit suicide a few weeks ago, and she blamed it on the fact that she feels I am not "there for her" emotionally. I was devastated by her attempt and her accusation. The hospital said she really didn't take enough pills to kill herself and that it was probably just a cry for help. Honestly, I am exhausted by her neediness, and I have tried to have some of my own space to not get pulled into her drama. I guess I can be pretty shut down when I need to be, but I am completely overwhelmed and don't know what to do. I feel like I want to leave the relationship in order to avoid any further drama, but we do have one child together so I'm not sure that's the best choice.

William, Carmel Valley

Dr. She

Dear William:

Well, a couple of things might be happening here for your wife to take such extreme measures to get your attention. Whenever a suicide attempt is involved the situation is dire. Obviously you weren't able to go into the history of the relationship in your question, but I'm wondering how long she has been trying to get your "emotional" attention and what other methods she has attempted in order to do so. If your wife's initial attempts to make an emotional connection with you were reasonable, then it looks like she has continued to "ramp up" the volume of her cries for connection out of hopelessness that there was no other way to get out of a painfully "stuck" pattern she finds herself in regarding the relationship. If she has always had a more dramatic edge, then this dramatization could be a core part of her personality, and I would not be surprised if she has taken desperate measures in the past to try and get her needs met. If this is her *first* time to respond to her needs in such an extreme way, then you have obviously had a huge blind spot to what has really been going on in the relationship, and you both have a very ineffective and immature way of dealing directly with one another. I'm wondering if her desperation to get your attention matches your overwhelm with not knowing how to handle a woman and a relationship who is needing more than you might know how to give? Usually, the intensity of one person's actions to come forward in the relationship matches the other person's intensity to avoid those same issues of the relationship.

Before you decide to leave the relationship you need to ask yourself:

- 1) Has my wife always been this needy and if so what is it about me that is/was drawn to that? (Perhaps your need to be the "rescuer" or perhaps your wife is able to express the emotional part of you that lays so dormant. We often look for an unexpressed part of our own selves in our partners).
- 2) Have I worked on myself enough to change this pattern of lack of emotional availability and avoidance to not repeat it again in another relationship? (Frankly, it doesn't sound like it and, if not, you *will* repeat it no matter who you are with.)

3) Is my wife taking responsibility for her own needs in a healthy way and is her feeling of being *stuck* solely related to my emotional absence? (I would think not.)

4) Because I *love* my wife and I have a child with her, am I willing to do whatever it takes to get us to a better balance?

In this situation that I would seriously recommend both individual and couples counseling before you make any decisions about the relationship. Good luck!

Dr. He

Hello William,

As a man, it is really important to learn the difference between taking some of your “own space” as a natural need to balance out your stressful life, versus, isolating in your cave to avoid dealing with the pressure of your stressful life. If “checking out” has been your *modus operandi* for dealing with your wife’s neediness over the years, it makes sense that she would be frustrated with the lack of contact from you in the relationship. This in no way, however, justifies her attempting suicide as a way to get your attention. And while it would be convenient for you to ask your wife to go get her neediness fixed, it makes just as much sense for you to look at the *trigger that gets pushed in you* when she feels insecure and hopeless that makes you run for the hills. For example, if you feel helpless about how to reassure her when she gets into her needy mode and you get easily drained of energy as a result, one of the things you can do that is probably different than what you usually do to **identify for yourself how much energy YOU have at the moment to help her get what she is needing, and let her know that.** *It is crucial for you to learn how to take better care of yourself as a way of taking care of your relationship.* The best way to take care of yourself is to know how much energy you have to give a situation and to then let your loved ones know this up front. This lets them know that your fatigue is not a personal affront to them. It is just because you—like all humans—have certain limits, and when you reach these limits, it is important for you to honor them. If you expect yourself to give and give and give your energy to your wife until you are drained and resentful, then you are not taking care of either her or yourself. Let her know *how much energy/time/attention you have* at any particular moment to give, and at the point at which you have reached your limit of available energy to give, let her know that you’ve reached your limit so that she won’t have to take it personally that you have reached your limit.

Bottom line, William, is that this is a way to learn how to take better care of your wife and yourself in those moments *without retreating into your cave!*

∞ Dr. He ~ Dr. She ∞

Communication Block

Dear Dr. He Said, Dr. She Said:

I am not sure what to do about my communication with my husband to whom I have been married for five years. I feel like I want to bring up topics of discussion with him, but he is always very resistant to talking about anything and always wants everything to be okay. If I mention the slightest grievance he rolls his eyes like I'm nagging him (again) and complains that nothing he does will ever be good enough for me. Now, I grew up being afraid of conflict myself, so I tend to let things build up inside me, and they finally rise to the surface in tears and distress. I want to be able to talk to him about even the smallest things, but it seems he is not receptive. I don't feel I ever get a straight answer from him about how he feels. He is a great guy whom I love a lot, but I am confused about how to move forward. My husband has a great job as the head of a company, but it is very stressful, and I'm afraid to rock the boat with him. What can I do?

Carol, Del Mar

Dr. She

Dear Carol:

Well, it sounds like you picked the perfect guy to work out what you didn't learn about conflict resolution growing up. If you grew up in a household where conflict was swept under the rug, it is no surprise that you are afraid of conflict yourself and that you have chosen someone who also avoids it. Since neither of you learned positive communication patterns it is never too late to develop a new skill and this seems like the first order of business in your relationship.

Simply, you need to get better at managing your anxiety around conflict so you can learn to approach your husband in a more effective way. As you describe, in your fear of conflict your delivery tends to come out in an exaggerated form because you hold so much emotion in and then explode. Speaking to your husband long before you are ready to explode... in a calm, non-attacking, and concise manner will most likely be received much better. Obviously—if you are scared—this is difficult, but learning to manage your anxiety on the front end will be much more fruitful than doing damage control on the back end where you probably end up feeling even *less* connected to your husband than when you first approached him.

Also, if you are approaching your husband with a lot of assumptions that have built up in your head about what he may or may not be thinking (e.g., “I think you are not attracted to me because you are never affectionate with me”) *versus* approaching him with how his behavior is affecting *you* (e.g., “I have been missing you and have missed being affectionate with you”) he will feel backed into a corner and most likely shut down.

You will never feel like you are resolving conflict if your husband's own fear of conflict causes him to back away and if neither of you ever addresses things that come up. So, it would be ideal for him to take a look at his own fear of conflict but the only thing you have control of is to work on

your own fears and your side of the ineffective communication patterns that have developed in the relationship. Good luck!

Dr. He

Hello Carol,

One of the things a man likes to hear from his wife is that the effort he makes to provide and protect his family is noticed and appreciated. I want you to ask yourself very honestly whether or not you express your appreciation to him for working so hard to provide the lifestyle you both have. A sincere “thank you” every once in awhile for his efforts would likely go a long way, and I think it is important that you tell him directly that he does many things for the family that are indeed “enough” with no if’s, and’s, or but’s.

Since it seems he cannot help but hear your comments as being anything but critical (I’ll bet he was on the receiving end of a lot of criticism in the household he grew up in as a kid), I have a suggestion for you: try writing him a note or email that says 1) how much you appreciate him for all he does, and then 2) asks him if he would be interested in having a *two-way discussion* with you about what you both think would make your relationship better. If he resists, ask him to think about it, reassure him that what you want to know is *what he needs from you* in order for him to feel closer to you, and offer a time to meet in the next 48 hours where he can “have the floor” first. Hopefully he will open up to this kind of invitation if he feels that it won’t just be a forum on what he does wrong. *Ask him to work with you* to find a way to have productive, healthy discussions about your lives. Remind him that just because you may have grievances with each other does not mean that there is anything “wrong” with the relationship. Make an agreement between the two of you that for every “complaint” you have with each other that you will also acknowledge something positive about each other. My hope is that he will be more open to talking with you if he starts to trust that you indeed notice the “good stuff” he does as well as the not-so-good-stuff.

∞ *Dr. He ~ Dr. She* ∞

The Underbelly of Unexpressed Emotions

Dear Dr. He Said, Dr. She Said:

My husband has been angry at me for years but he won't directly discuss it with me. He says he is not angry but he does a lot of passive-aggressive behavior like making critical barbs, putting down the things that I like, making fun of the way I dress. My husband is the kind of guy who doesn't express his feelings freely. I had an affair 10 years ago and he still has never really expressed any anger or jealousy. He talks about his mom like he had an ideal life and, from everything I can tell, his family was pretty messed up. There are so many ways that my husband is a great guy, but I feel like I'm living in this crazy atmosphere where he denies all his feelings. I will also admit that I'm not the best at expressing my feelings either. I get emotional very easily and when I feel overwhelmed emotionally, I tend to shut down which drives him crazy. Anyway, I know he means well and I really love him, but I can't continue to live in this emotion-less world that drives me crazy. What should we do???

Carole, Del Mar

Dr. She

Dear Carole:

It sounds like you are both sitting on a minefield of unexpressed emotions. If you have never discussed the natural hurt and anger that is part of the fallout of an affair, or if your husband grew up in a crazy environment and describes *that* as not having an effect on him, it makes a lot of sense that passive-aggressive anger would be the release valve for all that unidentified and unexpressed emotion!

I would first turn to you and say that sometimes the thing we need to work on the most inside *ourselves* is the thing we notice the most in others, especially our close partners! It sounds like you need to work on figuring out what is going on for you emotionally, get clearer in your own emotional communication and then address your husband from a clearer, more direct place. The clearer you are the more difficult it will be for your husband to shove everything under the rug! It will also be more difficult for your husband to push back or stay in denial if you are accountable for your own emotions.

I know this can be difficult because we do look to our partner to create a safe place to communicate and be vulnerable, however, the safety to communicate, express ourselves really has to come from within ourselves. When we trust ourselves to say what is true for ourselves in a loving, compassionate way (without attacking), we co-create a safe environment with our partner and it helps us to build our own confidence in our ability to manage challenging emotional situations. As we offer that to our mates, our mates feel more inclined to reciprocate.

Of course, to help develop and expedite clearer communication I would highly encourage the two of you to get into some counseling and I would have your husband read a book about Narcissistic parents. What is highly usual to see is an adult who was raised by a narcissistic parent who had to

idealized his/her parent and play into the parents own idealization of themselves in order to survive. The process of humanizing parents can be painful if we have had to hold onto an illusion in order to feel safe. But it will be very important that you both get more real with yourselves so the relationship does not implode! Good luck!

Dr. He

Hello Carole,

In working with a lot of men like your husband over the years (and being a guy myself) I have seen firsthand that expressing feelings is a very learnable skill when there is a genuine desire to gain knowledge of the two part process necessary. The first part involves actually recognizing that there is a feeling “going on” inside of ourselves and distinguishing it from a range of a handful of emotions such as happy, sad, hurt, scared, angry, or ashamed. The second part involves actually putting words out loud to that feeling and expressing the emotion *honestly from our hearts*—not from our heads. I suspect that your husband has just as much difficulty with the first part as he does with the second part. This is not at all unusual in a culture where men have been taught for many, many generations to avoid feeling and showing the vulnerability of our emotions in order to appear manly and attractive to a mate.

Your husband is obviously chewing on many years worth of rage—probably from his so-called “ideal” childhood as well as from the affair you had a decade ago. Depending on how anger was handled in the household he grew up in, we can assume he learned to suppress his anger as a boy in order to emotionally survive in that family setting. Sadly though, rage and resentment have a way of “leaking out” onto the people we love most when not expressed and dealt with directly. In order to give your husband some incentive about why learning how to express his feelings would be important for him even though it is totally unfamiliar to him, I would challenge his belief as to whether he considers himself to be an honest man or not. Expressing genuine emotion is a cornerstone of living and breathing a life of integrity. Whatever belief system gets in the way of that for him would need to be explored and confronted, because until he learns how to be more emotionally honest with both himself and with you, your relationship is doomed. By the way, this same standard applies to you too, Carole. You both have work to do here, but ultimately that is what is necessary for any couple to save their marriage—the understanding that because you have both created the problems of this relationship, you both have responsibility to take for saving it as well.

∞ *Dr. He ~ Dr. She* ∞

What is “Fair Fighting”?

Dear Dr. He Said, Dr. She Said:

I need your help to understand what fair fighting is. My husband and I completely disagree on this matter. He thinks it is perfectly acceptable to use raised voices and derogatory language when we disagree, and he doesn't even care if we use this style of arguing in front of the children. He always says that it is just the way he grew up, and he thinks I shouldn't expect him to be any different. He feels that I am being way too sensitive. I feel that each time we fight a little part of me shuts down, and I don't know how much more of me there is left to be in this relationship. We tend to always fight about money and the kids. I have to admit that when he gets louder, I eventually join him there to keep him from overpowering me. When we first started dating he had a bit of a temper, but we could still talk things through. Now—10 years later with two kids—we just can't seem to get onto the same page. I grew up in a family that never fought, so getting into this pattern with him has been surreal for me. Do you have any advice about how to deal with all this?

Amy, Carmel Valley

Dear Amy,

Before we get specific with offering some fair fighting strategies, let's start by talking about respect and respectful communication. None of the communication skills we teach are effective if there is a basic lack of respect in the relationship to begin with. We assume that couples who talk “at” each other in a loud, aggressive, and derogatory manner are probably lacking the trust and respect needed to “fight fair” in the first place. In other words, if either you or your husband harbor unresolved anger, resentment, and mistrust toward each other, then it is no wonder that your communication style is one that is loud, blaming, and name-calling. And by the way, just because your husband might be more used to this kind of aggressive style doesn't mean he is still not being disrespectful toward you. You can't change your husband. He has to want to change and grow for himself and the relationship. *But you have every right to expect your husband to talk to you in a respectful way!* And, by the way, even if you didn't originally raise your voice with your husband—yet talked to him by putting him down, raising your eyebrows, or scoffing when he made a comment—you are also showing disrespect, but in a different way.

In case you haven't read this column before, Amy, we always talk about couples who say they “never fight” as being just as ineffective and unproductive as couples that are always verbally smacking each other around. Couples who don't fight don't build up the kind of respect that comes from learning how to work out conflict and how to honor each other's differences. If you had learned how to do this when you were growing up, you would not feel like you have to match your husband's volume level in order to feel heard by him. It is no wonder that you question how much tolerance you have left for this relationship. However, *if you can start by making an agreement with him that all communication between you two must be respectful*, then you will have a much better chance of working out your disagreements.

So before we can talk about tips for fair fighting, you need to make sure you have your resentments and mistrust in check. This means that, even if you feel highly resentful or mistrustful, try to speak

from a place of respect, keeping in mind that this is someone you care about—even if you are not feeling it in the moment! (We don't even need to mention that physical abuse is off the table, right?) Here are some tips:

1. *Forewarn your partner that you have something you want to talk to them about and to ask them when a good time to talk would be.*

Make an agreed upon date and time and show up in the right frame of mind. This will give you some time to breathe and think about what you want to say from a respectful place. Try your best not to fight in front of your children. You can have calm discussions in which your children witness conflict resolution modeled, but if you know you have a lot of built up intensity around an issue, make sure you do it away from the children, and ideally, when they are not in the house at all. Kids who witness disrespectful communication between their parents grow up doing the same thing in their future relationships.

2. *Remember that the point of the conversation is to understand each other and not to be right.*

It is also about *taking accountability* and coming up with an *agreement* about how to deal with the issue and *what is needed to resolve it*. Remember that you are looking for a “win-win,” “we’re-on-the-same-team” solution. Make an agreement that you will each have your turn to state your case. Take time to discuss the pros and cons of different proposals and remember that you will need to compromise.

3. *Do not speak from a place of attack.*

Commenting on your husband's behavior is much different and better than commenting on who he is as a person. No character assassination or verbal abuse allowed! Let your husband know how his behavior *makes you feel*. When you are in the position of listening, try to put yourself in his shoes and see his perspective of the situation. Pay attention to listening versus building your defensive rebuttal. Let your husband know that you've heard what he said. *This does not mean that you agree with his position*, but that you heard what he said and that it makes sense in his world given who he is. Then take your turn helping your husband to understand your side. Give each other equal time in the conversation, yet don't let the argument go on for too long.

4. *Don't use black and white terms like “you always” or “you never.”*

This only intensifies the other's reactions and is usually not true. Also, using ultimatums or threats—like threatening divorce—as a way to get your partner's attention *is not productive* and precisely what we call “un-fair fighting.”

5. *Deal with one subject at a time.*

Don't bring up a lot from the past unless you are talking specifically about the past and trying to heal that. Stick to the current issue at hand rather than pulling out the laundry list of past misdeeds. When you start to blend issues then it does start to feel like an attack.

6. If the fight gets too intense and you cannot manage your emotions, call for a time out and make an agreement about when you will resume the conversation.

Never try to force your partner to stay in the argument. This makes your partner feel trapped like a caged animal, and he/she will act like one by fighting and clawing to get their way out.

When either or both of you feel you have too much resentment or mistrust to have a fair fight, it is probably time to find a couples therapist. Remember that conflict in a relationship is very normal, inevitable, and an important part of any healthy relationship. Differences and disagreements usually lead people to feel hurt and misunderstood. When people feel hurt, they usually get angry as a way to protect themselves. Feeling angry is not a problem if that anger is handled constructively and when you are each getting to what is underneath the anger. If you can learn to fight fairly you will have a great opportunity to enhance your relationship!

∞ *Dr. He ~ Dr. She* ∞

Rules of Engagement

Even though we teach healthy communication skills to the couples we work with in our office, we also realize that no technique will be effective at home for our couples if there are no safe and solid underlying agreements between them—ground rules, so to speak—of *how* to talk to each other in the most productive way.

Here are the *Rules of Engagement* that we believe create the safest environment for healthy communication to take place:

1. Mutual Respect – unless both parties are willing to speak to each other in a respectful way, there really is no need to even attempt to work out differences. Let's keep it simple and real: Respectful communication means speaking to someone in the way that we ourselves want to be spoken to. The real test here comes when someone needs to express anger (see Rule #6 below) and/or their own version of what happened that caused the disagreement in the first place (see Rule #3 below). Also, it is disrespectful to try to tell the other person how he or she feels at any given time.

2. No Double Standards – the values and standards we use to measure and evaluate the other person's behavior are the same values and standards we use to measure and evaluate our own behavior. For example, if I feel hurt by something that my wife said or did—and if I want her to hear about my pain and be accountable for what she said or did—then I myself need to also be open to whatever pain I may have caused her to feel and be accountable myself for what I may have done or said to hurt her. Or, if I get angry when my wife flirts with other men—yet I think it is okay that I flirt with other women—then I am living a double standard.

3. Listen to Each Other Without Interruption– each person has the right—not only to their own version of whatever it is that happened—but also to express their version of what happened without interruption, harassment, or “reality check” from the other person. We all have our own unique filter for how we perceive any given event in our lives. This goes back to Rule #1-Mutual Respect. Agree as to who will speak and who will listen, and then switch roles, but whoever is in the listening role, do just that: listen! You will get your turn to speak!

4. No “Fight or Flight” – since the Survival Mode of “fight or flight” as a coping mechanism is probably what helped create the discord in the first place, more of the same will only make the situation worse. “Fight” is any form of aggressive attack, harsh judgment, insult, criticism, or accusation toward the other person. “Flight” is any form of hiding out, shutting down, defensiveness, or deflection or abdication of responsibility or accountability for hurtful behavior. Neither of these is productive. In attempting to reach mutual understanding with another person, remember that if it feels like the conversation is starting to spiral down into a fight-or-flight dynamic, then consider taking a Time Out.

5. Time Out – when push comes to shove (figuratively speaking of course), *an agreed upon Time Out* could help to defuse the heightened need for “fight or flight.” The Time Out consists of two pieces: 1) agreement to separate in order to “cool off,” and 2) an agreed-upon time to re-convene in order to finish the conversation. Whatever time frame is needed to regroup—whether it is 10 minutes or one hour or till later on in the day—agree to how much time is needed, take it, then

come back and pick up where you left off, but back within the framework of the above Rules of Engagement. Time Out can never be used as a means of “flight.” It must be used as a way of getting back on track with healthy communication.

Rules 6, 7, and 8 that follow are reminders of some of the important elements of healthy communication.

6. Assertiveness – the willingness to be honest and forthright without being aggressive. This means “telling it straight” in a loving manner without tip toeing around your partner. As we have said many times in our columns before, if you are tip toeing, you are hiding out in fear of your partner’s reaction. This only leads to built up resentment in you and lack of trust from your partner. There is an assertive, honest, loving style of communication that we have found serves healthy communication the best and builds trust with the most consistency.

7. Accountability – this is a huge piece of building honest communication and growth in the relationship. When you have played a part in the misunderstanding between you and your partner, do not hesitate to hear it, own it, think about why you did what you did, and be accountable for it. Figure out what triggered you so you can conscientiously try something different the next time you are faced with a similar challenge. In addition, when you are ready to make a sincere apology, you need to say, “I am sorry for what I did,” not “I am sorry if you are feeling hurt.” The former is taking full responsibility. The latter is putting the responsibility back on your partner.

8. Empathy – trying to understand your partner and where they come from is an important aspect of the Rules of Engagement in a serious partnership. If you can’t have empathy for your spouse’s hot buttons, you will react and take things personally versus responding and being of value and support. Of course, it is not okay for your spouse to “take things out on you.” However, if you take the time to approach your spouse with their hot buttons in mind, you might have a more successful communication experience with them, and they will so appreciate you understanding them a bit more.

∞ *Dr. He ~ Dr. She* ∞

Growing in Two Different Directions

Dear Dr. He Said, Dr. She Said:

My husband and I got together when we were seventeen years old. Ten years later I am now strongly pursuing my career and traveling, and my husband just wants to do the work-his-boring-nine-to-five-job-then-park-himself-on-the-couch-in-front-of-the-TV-thing with no passions to speak of. I love my husband and I want to make the relationship work, but I am meeting so many interesting people now and I am being pulled in a lot of creative directions career-wise. I feel like we are moving in two completely different directions. How can we bring this marriage back together?

Karen, Solana Beach

Dr. He

Dear Karen,

Having been a couple since your teen years means that you both have had to grow up together learning about life AND marriage at the same time. *Learning about either one by itself is challenging enough for most people.* The high-school-sweetheart-story is one that is always, well, sweet, but it also has some built-in land mines that can start to detonate after a decade of being together. One of the land mines is that the emotional maturity of the relationship can tend to stagnate because there is limited Life experience to forge the personal maturation process during some very critical young adult years. Couples tend to want to hold on to what brought them together in the first place, and so I would think that one of your challenges as a couple has been how to even see beyond the bubble of the innocent 17 year old world-views that got you two together initially.

It is a challenge for every couple, Karen, to learn how to explore and encourage each other's personal growth without drifting apart as a couple. If your husband is just plain scared to push the envelope of his safe and risk-free world, then he could probably benefit from talking to an older male who could mentor him through his fears to aspire to something more. You on the other hand seem to have broken out of the bubble of your limited world-view and are now like a kid in the candy store of Life; sampling new and exciting possibilities of personal growth that only take you further and further away from your high-school-sweetheart-story. Neither of you is "more right" or "more wrong" than the other, but you both must decide *as a couple* if you are going to grow together or grow apart. Find a qualified professional who can help you learn how to at least come to *that* decision together.

Dr. She

As Dr. He suggests, it is difficult to marry so young when your personalities, identities, and interests are still developing. When you married you probably thought your paths would never diverge to such polarities. I'm sure you had some conversation about your mutual goals and directions, however, given your age it was inevitable that you would individually need to explore what made

sense to you in order to develop your sense of “self.” Developing a sense of “we” simultaneously can be difficult with a strong sense of “self” has not yet been realized. A relationship is a constant dance between the progressions of the “I” within the context of the progression of the “we.” Since more attention has been given, as of late, to the development of the individual “I,” it is time for the two of you to swing the pendulum back to rediscovering the shared interests of the “we.” It can be okay to have different interests as long as there are some strong core shared interests and values.

When the balance of any relationship is in flux sometimes partners hold different roles in the relationship subconsciously in order to bring the relationship to some equilibrium. It is possible that your husband is “holding down the fort” metaphorically while you “fly in your career” to keep the relationship grounded. He might also feel intimidated by your success and feel the masculine/feminine energies in the relationship are unbalanced as well. It is important to re-establish both your intentions in moving forward and redefine what you each need so you can both manage change and feel the stability or constancy of the relationship simultaneously. Good luck!

∞ *Dr. He ~ Dr. She* ∞



Men in Relationships

Why Men Struggle in Relationships

Everyone has blind spots when it comes to making a long-term relationship succeed.

American men have particular trouble creating emotional intimacy because our culture teaches us to minimize our emotional intelligence in order to look and feel manly. This lack of familiarity with what I call emotional honesty creates a lack of emotional maturity. It also sets us up to have a huge blind spot—not only about relationships, but also about ourselves as passionate, feeling individuals—that keeps us trapped in a frustrating and **Unavoidable Dilemma**:

On the one hand, as men we rely upon the **deeply hard-wired survival instinct** within ourselves whenever setbacks or adversity happen to us on the road to “making it” or succeeding in our careers. This is a good thing.

On the other hand, we also unwittingly and unconsciously rely on this same deeply hard-wired survival instinct whenever setbacks or adversity occur on the way to “making it” or succeeding in our intimate relationships. However, rather than help resolve the problems that occur between a couple, relying on this instinct as the primary way of dealing with our loved one **only creates more disappointment, more anger, more confusion, and more hopelessness in the relationship**.

This is our *Dilemma*.

Furthermore, because this survival instinct is also a very fundamental piece of who we are as men and how we express our masculinity, it is difficult—if not impossible—for us to function without it.

That makes it our *Unavoidable Dilemma*.

Survival is that fight-or-flight, I’ve-got-to-make-it-to-tomorrow-no-matter-what, win-or-lose mode we get into when our backs are up against the wall, and we have to do whatever it takes to keep our businesses alive and compete in a dog-eat-dog world. Our survival instinct (survival mode) is also how we react whenever we feel threatened or hurt—either physically OR emotionally. When things aren’t going well in an intimate relationship, **we feel threatened and we go into survival mode**.

While it may be second nature for us to protect ourselves utilizing the same instinct that keeps our businesses or careers alive, the price our relationship pays is huge whenever we engage our partner from that hunkered-down, swords-drawn, I’m-right-you’re-wrong, you-are-now-the-enemy, survival state of mind. And the worst part is that we usually don’t realize the damage we have caused **until it’s too late and she is threatening to leave the relationship!**

The bottom line is this: being in survival mode **creates distance between us and the women we love**. Our survival mode more than likely triggers her survival mode, which then relegates us to a survival relationship. And when this pattern of interaction repeats itself over and over, the foundation of the relationship erodes, leaving no trust, no goodwill, and no hope to save the relationship.

In a **thriving relationship**—especially during times of stress—what a woman needs from a man is to approach her as the adult, mature man that we are, not the wounded little boy that is looking to take his anger and pain out on her. The way out of our unavoidable dilemma is to talk to her about what is real and honest for us in the moment. No tip toeing or walking on eggshells around her. **Being real** means revealing whatever truly is in your heart or your gut or your soul, even if it might not be received well or understood or agreed with. In other words, **it is crucial that you get emotionally honest with her and speak your Truth**, which ideally will make it emotionally safe enough for her to turn around and do the same with you.

Having a life and a relationship that are not caught up in Survival Mode is a goal not easily achieved, especially with all the stress of making a living and maintaining a certain lifestyle—stress which we very often create for ourselves. It does involve choosing to learn new information—especially about yourself as a man—and how to bring a deeper sense of masculinity that is mature and courageous to your relationship. This might at first be uncomfortable, but it ultimately will lead to a healthier partnership and a deeper appreciation of the woman you love.

∞ *Dr. He ~ Dr. She* ∞

Boyfriend Feels Jealous

Dear Dr. He Said, Dr. She Said:

I am a 35 year old man who, I would say, has everything I need to be happy...a good job, good looks, I work out all the time, I'm very healthy and very likeable and social. I own a house and have a great car!

My problem is that when I get involved in intimate relationships I get very obsessed with the relationship and very jealous and I've always had this problem. I feel like if I'm not with her then she must be out with another guy and it causes me to be very possessive and paranoid. I've currently started a new relationship and I can already feel myself starting to seethe when I'm not exactly sure what my girlfriend is up to. The other night we were out and she smiled at this really good looking guy and it drove me crazy. I don't want to feel like this anymore and I'm trying hard to be up front and talk about my history of jealousy with my new girlfriend, but I can tell she is starting to get annoyed. What should I do?

Bob, Carmel Valley

Dr. She

Hey Bob...I'm glad you are reaching out about this because your jealousy seems to be a big deterrent to getting what you seem to want, which is a committed relationship. It seems you keep getting in your own way by setting up and playing out what I imagine to be your biggest fear, which is losing what is important to you and being alone.

Jealousy is an emotion that is deeply rooted in how we feel about ourselves and not so much about what is going on externally around us. I can hear in your question that you work hard to "have it all" but I hear it more on an external level than internally. I am wondering if your self-confidence is lower than the "persona" you may be exhibiting to the world. If you did have "all the confidence in the world" as you portray in your inquiry then jealousy would not be a historical problem for you.

We all, as humans, have a desire to belong and feel safe in the world and if what helps us to attain that connection feels threatened we all have feelings of jealousy or fear. However, the extremity and longevity of the jealousy you are experiencing seems to have deeper roots. I am wondering if you've experienced a deep sense of abandonment and/or betrayal in your childhood or early romantic relationships. A child can feel a personal sense of betrayal when one of his/her parents is unfaithful to the other and the marriage is ended as a result. As an adult that same child can choose partners with whom they will play out that sense of betrayal to "master" or redo the wound, but inevitably end up recreating the same wound over and over unless it is consciously attended to. One way you might be doing this is by subconsciously choosing women who are beautiful and flirtatious...who get a lot of attention from other men and perhaps don't have great boundaries when they are in a committed relationship. Or by choosing women who are not emotionally available and always seem "somewhere else." Sound familiar?

Also, if you were betrayed in a relationship that was important to you and that you became emotionally vulnerable in, you may have made a commitment to yourself to never feel that vulnerable

again, to not be made a fool of, or to not trust again so you have developed a hyper-vigilant radar about every subsequent relationship in order not to get hurt.

Bob, I would highly suggest that you get in to see a professional who can help you ferret out your feelings of jealousy. Identifying them and coming to terms with what is fueling them will help you to change your behavior, become more confident in who you are, and traverse a relationship more successfully. Good luck!

Dr. He

Dear Bob,

I hear the confusion in your letter that despite all the things you have come to own and what you have accomplished, you have yet to find happiness. You also describe yourself as becoming obsessive, possessive, and paranoid when you find a woman you are interested in. These are the two points that I would like to address.

Your statement about having everything needed to be happy and yet are not, almost conveys a sense of surprise that you feel a lack of fulfillment on the inside while all kinds of cool things are happening on the outside of you. It seems you are having a first-hand experience of an inconvenient truth we must all face—that the quality of our lives cannot necessarily be measured by the quantity of what we possess. Gaining financial and material prosperity is quite an accomplishment. But gaining happiness is a whole other learning curve. I suspect your belief system about how you view Life is very much challenged by this humbling reality. And yet, it does point out the need for ALL of us to continue to strive to do whatever it takes to find happiness from the inside out—even if it means writing a letter to an advice column like ours!

More concerning for me, Bob, is your anger with women and how you seethe when you feel out of control in a relationship. Look to understand the insecurity and mistrust that fuels your inner demons of obsession, possessiveness, and paranoia or your chances at succeeding in an intimate long term relationship will be slim. While I normally would encourage you to continue to talk to your girlfriend about his issue, I think it would be much more helpful for you to talk to a professional about these issues so that you can first understand it all better. That way when you talk to her about this you can let her know what you are learning about yourself and how you are already working on it, rather than putting it in front of her as something that you need her to help you with. Best of luck!

∞ *Dr. He ~ Dr. She* ∞

Angry Husband

Dear Dr. He Said, Dr. She Said,

My wife and I have been going through a very rough patch lately. We're not very good at communicating with each other. She refuses to deal with me when I am angry, and she tells me that I am always angry and in a bad mood when I come home from work. I agree that I feel a lot of stress lately, and that I probably blow up more easily these days, but she makes me feel like such an ogre (her label for me actually). I am so tired of wondering what is going on for her behind that everything-is-always-just-fine smile that she wears. I know she must be angry at times, but she is so afraid to show it, and it makes me crazy that she won't be real with me. I am tired of being the ogre, and in the meantime we're not feeling very attracted to one another. While I am committed to working this out with her, it is very hard not to feel discouraged by the lack of closeness and the anger. We have two wonderful kids and I really want our family to survive this crisis. Do you have any suggestions for us?

Dan, La Jolla

Dr. She

Dear Dan:

I greatly appreciate you reaching out when you are the one being labeled the “bad guy” in this situation. It seems you are aware of the fact there is an imbalance in both your relationship and your wife's *relationship to anger* and how you communicate that anger. It also sounds like you are not ready to buy into the idea that this is all about you, and it certainly does not sound like it is!

All of us, as human beings, have a wide range of emotion, including anger. Anger is most often, in relationship, a defense mechanism against feeling the vulnerable emotion of hurt or rejection. Dr. He and I get very concerned when couples come in to see us who are having difficulty in their relationship and they tell us they never argue. When this is the case, we know the couple is swallowing their anger/hurt and no conflict resolution is happening between these two separate individual who are consistently bound to have differences.

It sounds like both you and your wife are very protective of feeling vulnerable and hurt but manage that fear in different ways. I am guessing that your wife tries to be very even keeled in order to suppress or manage her anger. It sounds like you may overreact and push away your wife in order to protect yourself. It is also possible that the lack of balance of emotion in the relationship along with your wife's lack of expression of anger leaves you with the job of carrying the anger for both of you.

It would be important to investigate and understand both your relationship and your wife's relationship to anger. By that I mean, what have you learned about feeling and expressing anger throughout your life. Usually, if people are exposed to very unhealthy expressions of anger growing up they either continue that pattern or make an agreement with themselves that they will never be “that out of control” or “that crazy” or whatever they have labeled the expression of anger they witnessed to be. Until you figure out your personal relationship with anger and how out of balance the

emotional expression is in the relationship, you won't be ready to develop a healthy way to express your anger and communicate more effectively. These seem to be some of your stumbling blocks at the moment.

Dr. He

Hello Dan,

I think Dr. She's overview is very astute, so I will focus on two specific points that I think could help you and your wife with the way you both deal with anger. The first point is that I think you will be perceived less as an ogre if you can learn to talk to her about the feelings *underneath your anger*. For example, I know that for myself, eight or nine times out of ten when I get angry, that my anger is the result of some way that I feel either hurt by someone or scared by a situation. It is easy for me to quickly roll right through the pain or fear and get straight to feeling my anger, but acknowledging and talking about the original pain or fear is really the best thing that can happen for me at that moment. Try it for yourself. The next time you get angry, ask yourself if you are also feeling emotional pain about something, or are afraid of something. The more you both can talk about those core feelings to each other, the more honest and direct your relationship will become. The goal of creating more honest and direct communication does not mean that you both have to agree with each other. It means you must learn *how to disagree with and stay respectful toward one another*—even when you are both angry. This leads me to my second point.

The most difficult thing for a couple to practice as they are getting used to “allowing” anger to be expressed more freely in their relationship, is *validating each other's anger*. This is the key to making it okay to express anger in a relationship. For example, validating your wife's anger does not mean that you have to abandon your own feelings, but rather that you learn how to put yourself in her shoes and wonder what it must feel like to be her in that situation. *Validating another person's anger, however, does not mean consenting to the other person being judgmental or aggressively critical toward you*. It means that you take the time to see why the other person feels the way they feel—whether it be pain, fear, or anger—about that situation. When you are both able to say to each other, “Even though my feelings about this situation are different than yours, *I can see why you would be feeling angry about this right now,*” then you will be making the relationship a safe place for anger to be expressed.

∞ Dr. He ~ Dr. She ∞

Husband is a Perfectionist

Dear Dr. He Said, Dr. She Said,

My husband is—by his own admission—a perfectionist. The problem is that he not only drives me crazy with his neat-freak tendencies (museum-like cleanliness in the living areas, spit-polish shining of all the appliances, dust-free tops of the door jambs), but he expects me to take up his mission to rid the world of all that is dirt and grime. I am no slob, but I am in no way as obsessed as he is, and I had no idea before we were married that he was like this. We have battled over this for 10 years. Please give me some direction about how to cope with this better.

Kelly, Del Mar

Dr. She

Hi Kelly,

Usually someone who is a perfectionist is trying to manage an underlying anxiety about being out of control or trying to manage their own internal chaos. Your husband needs to be able to identify the purpose of his obsessive compulsive behavior for himself so that he can help you understand why being so clean is important to him. If you have an understanding of what lies beneath your husband's need to have everything neat and tidy it may help you to have a little more empathy and less of a tendency to take it personally and engage in a power struggle with him. You do need to be able to have a conversation with him about what are reasonable and unreasonable expectations in the context of the marriage and set healthy boundaries with him around this.

It is also very reasonable for you to ask him to ferret out what mistrust he brought into the relationship and what mistrust he has developed in you specifically that has to do with some behavior you have been exhibiting. Since his pattern of perfectionism developed long before he met you, he obviously brings most of his mistrust in from the past. However, in the spirit of *relationship* it would be important to look at behaviors that you are displaying that may push that button for him and that trigger him into more obsessive behavior. If it is *reasonable* for you to manage things better in the household, then that might be your part of being more helpful in the relationship. This is really the most you can do on your side other than encourage him to get into some therapy and take a look at what is going on for him. You both must be exhausted!

Dr. He

Dear Kelly,

The supreme challenge of living with a perfectionist is how to keep from feeling inadequate about your own flaws as they are commented on by the perfectionist. Despite whatever your husband may believe about your less than perfect habits, *you* must find a way—especially in the heat of the moment—to not only remember that you are doing your best, but also that his “way of doing things”

need not define and become *your* way. Similar to how women struggle with the message our culture gives them of attaining perfection with regard to physical beauty, you must stand up for your own “way” that honors who you are in balance with *what is realistic and healthy for the marriage*. It is crucial that you ask him to uphold a similar standard *for the good of the relationship*.

Speaking of standards, we can assume that—being the perfectionist he is—he holds himself to just as unattainable a standard as he does others. Perfectionists are usually harder on themselves than on those around them. *The truth is that you are both imperfect people who are married to each other*. If he has a hard time either believing or remembering that, then you must remind and reassure him that it really is okay for you both to be the imperfect beings that you are. That *together* you both can figure out a way of living with each other that works *for both of you*. Some middle ground of each of your cleanliness habits seems a reasonable and do-able goal. If he balks, remind him that we are all in the same boat here, and that we all—including him—have limitations we must learn to accept and deal with.

∞ *Dr. He ~ Dr. She* ∞

Husband's Passivity Drives Wife Crazy

Dear Dr. He Said, Dr. She Said,

My husband's passivity is driving me crazy! He rarely if ever gives me his opinion about anything. He always waits for me to express my own opinion before he ventures out with his own, and this includes when we have to decide what to have for dinner, how to deal with the children, how to deal with finances, when to make love. I am so tired of having to make all the decisions for us as a family and would love it if just once he could have the courage to say something genuine—even if it would make me mad. My women friends all have the same complaint about their husbands. Why are so many men like this?

Sheila, Oceanside

Dr. He

Hello Sheila,

Your husband is like many men in America who have been trained by our culture to “take care” of the woman he loves by *making sure that she is happy*. Unfortunately, “keeping her happy” from our perspective usually means we feel we need to give her whatever she wants or asks for. We easily translate this into providing her with what she needs *materially*, but it is not as easy for us to translate this into providing her with what she needs *emotionally*. What I hear you asking from your husband in your letter is his *emotional participation* in the relationship simply by *his expression of what is important to him*. It also sounds like you need to be able to trust that he is there beside you contributing to the family decision-making as your partner, rather than as another child-figure looking for a mom to lead the parade and show everyone the way.

Another way of saying all this is that, as men we don't feel on solid ground when it comes to attending to our woman's emotional needs, especially when she is feeling angry, or hurt, or sad, or scared. Those are emotional places we don't go to very readily *within ourselves*, so it makes sense that this territory is just as or *even more unfamiliar* for us when our loved one goes there. We love it when our woman is happy, because then we can feel like we are being successful at taking care of her, which gives us a feeling of competence at being a man. Sheila, you must explain to your husband that—as counter-intuitive as it might feel for him to express an opinion that you may not agree with or like—that it is absolutely necessary for this to happen in order for the marriage to survive. Please help him understand that a healthy relationship is one where *both people courageously speak their truth to each other* as a way to feed the relationship. And whatever fear keeps him from doing this is fear that he must confront—for the good of the marriage.

Dr. She

Dear Sheila:

Many men have grown up learning to avoid conflict and emotional pain by being the “good boy,” or not rocking the boat, so the people around them will not be angry or disappointed with them. Men also learn that pleasing a woman leads to receiving love. Men who have grown up experi-

encing negative consequences for making others angry want to avoid it at all costs. Men who have learned that pleasing is the way to a woman's heart want to reinforce that at all costs...including compromising his awareness and verbalization of his own needs. Remember that feeling *competent* is a high priority in a man's life and leads to a high need to make sure others around them are not dissatisfied with them. These men tend to use their woman as a barometer to gauge how to respond rather than trusting their own ability to say what is true for them and to maturely cope with a situation in which strong emotions might arise in their partner.

To add to the chaos, men as a whole are paralyzed in their confusion about how to blend their collective understanding of a "traditional" male partner with the modern woman's expectations of her man—especially since those expectations seem to fluctuate in some very broad band between macho and emotionally available. Women have taken on being competent *and* emotionally aware for many years. Men are still learning not only how to be *both*, but also deciding one at a time whether there is *value* in understanding and verbalizing their emotions. Men's confusion can add to their fear of disappointment, which can perpetuate their passivity.

I *do* understand, Sarah, how your husband's passivity can drive you crazy and make you feel very *alone*. I would encourage you sit down with your husband and let him know that you are overwhelmed and need his help. Delegate areas of your life where you will each be the *primary* decision maker and *follow through* person for a period of time. Of course you can still consult with each other, but your husband will respond to you *needing* his competence and you *trusting* in his abilities. Expressing appreciation for his efforts, as always, goes far in the way of encouragement!

∞ *Dr. He ~ Dr. She* ∞

Overly Sensitive Husband

Dear Dr. He Said, Dr. She Said:

My husband is so overly sensitive that I can't even goof around with him and slap him or punch him or he'll get really upset. I have told him time and time again that I am a tomboy and that I grew up with brothers and I love to horse around. I also can be very animated, talk loudly, and I do let my anger show when I am angry because I think it is a natural thing to do. He has told me that anger above a certain octave is "not allowed" so I have been feeling very shut down by him and unable to be myself. He also makes me feel like I am a monster for expressing the smallest of angers. I know he grew up in an abusive household, but so did I and I am tired of lugging our "sad stories" around with us, and I want to be free to express myself. Am I being unreasonable?

Julie, Rancho Santa Fe

Dr. She

Dear Julie:

It sounds like you need to understand that your husband may be recovering from his abusive history at a different pace or in a different way than you and it sounds like your husband needs to understand that you are ferreting out playful from aggressive and that you have grief around not being able to be "your brand" of playful with him.

Your husband sounds like he is a bit unaware of his emotional "buttons" since he easily gets triggered and personalizes your banter. His reaction is a more regressed defense mechanism (an intense reaction and defensiveness through excessive boundaries by saying anger is "not allowed") rather than trying to talk through the discomfort *and* the associations he makes between you playfully hitting him and his earlier emotional traumatic memories. However, I do caution you Julie... if there is *any* aggression in your playful horsing around your husband *will* pick up on it. If there is underlying anger in your playfulness, it is important for you to take a look at where that is coming from in you and to not make your husband feel crazy by denying that you are angry. If anger is *not* a part of your playful self, it is completely reasonable that you would be frustrated by the lack of freedom to be yourself in the relationship and confused about how to maintain your individuality and be respectful to your husband.

I imagine there are certain ways you express your true anger that your husband can tolerate and other ways that he cannot. Again, if you present your anger with respect attached to it, this will eliminate the *shaming* element which creates a deeply personalized relationship to anger. For your husband it means, "not only are you angry, but you think I am a bad person." It is important to identify the *behavior* that your husband exhibits that makes you angry and express how *that makes you feel* versus telling him what a bad person he is. I know none of this is easy but it sounds very important for both of you especially given your backgrounds. Good luck!

Dr. He

Hello Julie,

It is *very* reasonable that you would want to move on from the “sad stories” you and your husband grew up around, but it sounds like he does not yet share that same desire as you. If he can become motivated to learn more about his hypersensitivity to anger, it would give you *both* a chance to learn better coping strategies when the decibel level goes up between you two. While for you showing anger may feel like a natural thing to do, for your husband it may feel just as natural to make sure it is *not* expressed. Him “not allowing” you to express anger, however, is very parental (controlling) and demeaning. On the other hand, unless he actually calls you a “monster” to your face in reaction to your anger, I would suspect that judgment might be coming more from your own internal dialogue with yourself than from him, which means that there is work here for you to do as well.

Here are a few steps that I can suggest for *you both*: 1) look at events in his childhood that shaped his reaction to anger and physical play in order for you to better understand why he feels so emotionally and/or physically *threatened* in front of your anger or his own, so that 2) his reactions today can be seen by you both as old survival strategies he uses to protect himself that 3) can be adjusted to accommodate *today's reality* that there really is no “threat” present when his wife gets angry or physically playful. My hope is that he himself would have a desire to explore this—not only as a way to better relate to you in the relationship—but also as a way to deal with whatever personal pain he has yet to fully free himself from. Please find a qualified professional that can help you both navigate this bumpy terrain successfully.

∞ Dr. He ~ Dr. She ∞

Is Angry, Overworked Husband Cheating?

Dear Dr. He Said, Dr. She Said,

I am starting to worry that my husband may be having an affair. He has recently begun spending a lot of time at work. Prior to all this he had been complaining that I spent too much time focusing on our children and playing on the computer. Lately he has just been shutting me out, and he always seems to be angry with me. I don't know how to give him what he wants and still do everything else I need to do in a day. I would really like to keep our family together. Help!

Samantha, Olivenhain

Dr. He

Dear Samantha,

In previous columns we have talked about how—when the emotional connection of a relationship breaks down—quite often it is because one or both members of the couple seek to get their emotional needs met elsewhere. We call these extracurricular distractions *escape routes*. But an escape route can also be part of someone's unconscious “baggage” that they bring into a relationship to protect them from the possibility of getting closer—and therefore becoming emotionally vulnerable—to the other person.

Whichever is the case for you and your husband, your marriage sounds like it's full of escape routes. Quite honestly, Samantha, the condition of this relationship makes it ripe for either one of you to create the big daddy of all escape routes, that being an *affair*. The more you and your husband stay distracted away from each other, the more vulnerable the relationship becomes to this kind of betrayal.

If your husband has never felt like he's been a high priority to you, then you have to find a more effective way to communicate to him how important he is to you. If you've ignored him because you're angry or hurt, then you need to sit down and be straightforward with him about that. On the other hand, your husband needs to understand that he is doing damage to your marriage by shutting you out and staying away from you and the family. Find a counselor to get in front of to get the ball rolling into a healthier direction.

Dr. She

Hi Samantha:

I'm wondering if it is possible that you are angry with your husband, and if *your own resentment* could be fueling your lack of availability to him? We often withhold our attention if we are hurt, angry, scared, or feeling alone in our relationship. It is probably easier to put your energy and atten-

tion into your children and dull your senses on the computer rather than to deal straight up with the pain and confusion you may be feeling with your husband.

You also sound like you might be afraid to hear your husband's anger and disappointment. If you feel he delivers his anger in an unhealthy way *and/or* if you have your own button around anger, then both issues need to be addressed. Avoidance in a relationship only pulls two people apart. When unspoken pain and resentment slowly culminate into feeling alone and disconnected, a couple can become hopeless and start to assume that their only way to manage it all is to find some sort of an escape route—whether it is fading into the children, computer, alcohol, gambling, food, spending money, having affairs or, unfortunately, divorce.

It is really important that you take this opportunity to proactively reconnect with your husband. You both need to update yourselves with a fresh understanding of each other's needs, come *to a mutual agreement about how to address your individual needs*, then use that as a launching point to create a new and healthy phase in your relationship.

Distracting yourselves away from dealing with what really needs to happen for the relationship is escaping your responsibility to your marriage. *It's time to close all those escape routes and get busy with each other!*

∞ *Dr. He ~ Dr. She* ∞

Jealous of Her Girls Night Out

Dear Dr. He Said, Dr. She Said,

I've been married for five years and my wife still likes to go out a lot with her girl friends to movies and concerts. We both work hard running our own businesses, so I know we need to be able to let our hair down to de-stress. The problem is that I'd rather do that with her, and she would rather whoop it up with her girls. Whenever I bring this up she gets defensive and tells me that I just want to control her and keep her from having fun. I'm feeling pretty disconnected. What can I do?

Harry, Carmel Valley

Dr. She

Hi There Harry:

It sounds like you and your wife have both fallen into a pattern of living “**parallel lives**,” as if you were both still single. While it is important for both individuals in a relationship to have their own time and interests, it is vital to nurture the “**we**” aspect of the relationship. It is interesting that most all of us long for a relationship, yet when we make a commitment to another person it is the “**we**” piece that seems to be the last thing we take time to tend to. The “**we**” is the foundation of the relationship that is comprised of trust, love, support, understanding, working through conflict and the myriad of shared experiences two people have together. Without time well spent developing that there will be no sense of belonging to an “**us**.”

Your wife seems to continue to feel that most of her needs will be met outside the relationship. She needs to develop some trust that the relationship is a place where she can “fuel up” as well. Not that you will ever replace her girlfriends. We women do have our own way of processing information together that you needn't try to replicate...it's in our genetic makeup! However, planning a fun date each week where you can both blow off some steam together in a shared experience will start to address both of your needs and bring that feeling of “**we**” to the forefront. This will help you hold each other in your minds and hearts throughout the week....so let the “**we**” begin!

Dr. He

Dear Harry,

The only thing more stressful than trying to succeed at your own business is trying to succeed in your marriage! Trying to make two businesses work will challenge any relationship if you both don't *communicate your expectations very clearly from the get-go*. It's really important to sort out the different “pictures” you both brought into the relationship of what you each believe a married couple should look and act like. From there you can work out some mutually agreeable schedule that balances both “alone time” and “together time” in your busy lives.

You have every right, Harry, to expect your spouse to spend quality time with you, but the fact that your wife still gets so many of her needs met from her friends so early into this marriage is a sign that the marriage lacks (and maybe always has lacked) a solid foundation of trust. Are you able to tell her how you feel about all this without coming across as parental or controlling? Is she angry with you about some unresolved conflict from the past? The answers to these questions will help you both get onto the same team, perhaps for the first time in the relationship.

And finally, Harry, it's important for you to develop your own guy friends that you can hang out with from time to time. Placing all of your social needs onto hanging out with your wife may be putting pressure on her that feels stifling. The bottom line is, it's time for you two to have some *honest dialogue with each other* to take this relationship to a deeper level of connection.

∞ *Dr. He ~ Dr. She* ∞

Men and Emotions

Dear Dr. He Said, Dr. She Said,

My wife has always asked me how I feel emotionally about stuff, and I just haven't gotten why it's so important to her. Whenever she asks, I just kind of shrug my shoulders, stammer out a couple of "I don't know's" to her, and try to change the subject. Now she says she feels really alone and is unhappy in the relationship and that she can't imagine staying in the marriage if I can't learn how to talk to her this way. I know I get really confused and frustrated about all this, but I have no idea what to do. Can you help?

Drake, San Marcos

Dr. He

Dear Drake,

As a guy, it makes total sense to me that you would be confused and angry and lost about what to do. Your wife, however, is not the problem here. You were raised in a culture that taught you—and every other guy you and I know—that to feel manly, *you need to avoid being emotional*, which is code for “don't be a wuss.” This has set you up—and every other guy you and I know—to miss out on how to create emotional intimacy in a relationship.

I'm talking about the kind of intimacy that has nothing to do with sex. Your wife's aloneness makes sense because she's tired of being the only one trying to keep the relationship *emotionally healthy*. Look at this from a team perspective, Drake. Would you want to be the only member of a team striving to achieve something that other members of the team didn't seem interested in?

You have some work ahead of you, my friend. Open yourself up to new information about yourself! Just because you were taught that feeling your emotions wasn't a very manly thing to do doesn't mean that you haven't had them your whole life. This is a part of you that you've neglected, Drake, and I guarantee that if you take this on as a personal project for yourself, you won't regret it!

Dr. She

Drake,

As a woman, I can tell you that we are wired to feel good about our relationships through emotional connection. So I understand why your wife is feeling alone in the relationship if she is not getting any of that with you.

A couple of things need to happen here:

First, you need to really understand that the way you express yourself emotionally doesn't have to look or sound like your wife's version of emotional expression.

Second, your wife needs to understand that as well. If your wife is expecting you to relate in the way she does, she is setting herself up to be extremely disappointed.

What your wife is asking you to do is to “show up” emotionally, meaning she wants to know the way you think *and* feel about things in general. For example: what concerns you have about your Life; what excites you about your Life; and yes Drake—from time to time—how you are *feeling* about her and what is or is NOT working for you about the relationship. This is her way of wondering if you’ve been paying attention!

A simple “I’m feeling close to you” or “I liked our talk on the beach the other day” will feel very satisfying to your wife. And if you’re not talking much because you’re feeling a bit preoccupied, *just tell her that!* Or, the next time she asks you how you feel about something and you’re not sure what to say, tell her you want to think it over and *promise to get back to her soon with an answer* (within the next 24 hours) and make sure to follow up. Remember, she wants to know what the terrain of your world looks like. When she gets a glimpse of that, she’ll understand you better, and you’ll both feel closer in your relationship.

∞ *Dr. He ~ Dr. She* ∞

Men's Emotional Makeover

One of the patterns we notice on the Guy-side of the relationship equation is the lack of emotional development. Women may have their own version of this, but men are socialized in so many more ways than women to avoid knowing their emotional world. More often than not, this gets in the way of true intimacy being created in a relationship. So our article today is an attempt to speak practically to men about how to take some first steps in opening up to the territory of their emotional landscape.

Guys:

If you are currently married or in a relationship, do your eyes roll up into your head whenever your wife or girlfriend complains that you never talk to her about your feelings? Even if she explains to you what she means, are you confused about how to do what she is asking—much less wonder why it's such an important thing to do in the first place?

Being an emotional partner to a woman, being emotionally honest with her, means showing her the authentic and genuine stuff that's in your heart, not in your head. But that goes against the "training" men get from a culture that rewards them for being rationale, logical, and problem-solving. Emotional intimacy is a paradox for men and, therefore, very confusing. The paradox is this: **in order to create emotional intimacy, you must risk your emotional safety by saying how you feel**—by revealing what is in your heart. Another way of stating this paradox is: that **the one thing** men work hard at being GREAT at—i.e., survival—**is also the one thing** that gets in the way of creating an emotional connection with a woman because it requires us to be VULNERABLE (which goes against our survival instinct). It's no wonder why men are confused.

The gift that comes from this emotional type of vulnerability, however, is the building of trust and safety that all men really are looking for. Men need to become more emotionally independent and self-sufficient so that they don't expect and depend so much on women to carry the responsibility for their emotional lives. That's why women find it sexy and desirable to get and stay with a guy who can take care of himself emotionally, because it means a) he's not looking for a "mother" figure, and b) he has the guts to reveal his imperfections and vulnerabilities and still feel like a man.

The goal of an emotional makeover for men is getting to a comfort level with talking about a whole range of feelings, passions, and experiences that paint a true picture of what's going on inside us—warts and all. Risking the vulnerability of showing our emotions is at the very least a show of our humanity, and at the very best a show of our self-respect and inner strength. In other words, **being real means saying how you feel**. And by the way, an emotional makeover is NOT about creating a bunch of wussie-boys who kowtow to their women or about expressing feelings the way women do. It's about having the guts and courage to develop a part of ourselves that reveals the depths of who we really are. And we get to find a GUY way to express our feelings!

So what steps can a Guy take to get the ball rolling toward understanding his emotional world better that won't defrock him of his masculinity? Here are six things you can do to start down this road:

1. In a journal, write down this question, “What are the moments in my life from my past that I remember feeling: anger, shame, fear, pain, sadness, joy?” Each one represents a part of who you are that you may or may not be aware of. Don’t start by making an assumption that you have no fears or have no pain or have no anger. Begin by assuming you DO have these feelings rattling around somewhere inside you, and that this exercise is for you to give yourself permission to feel and identify stuff that you normally would not allow yourself to admit to be true. Try to remember at least two experiences for each feeling. Talk to a parent or older sibling that could help you remember what you were like emotionally when you were young. Share this info with the woman you love.
2. Make a timeline in your journal for as far back as you can remember about the significant moments in your life that shaped your personality, as well as what you can remember feeling emotionally in those moments. Share this info with the woman you love.
3. In the journal, write down the circumstances in your life today that trigger those same feelings or experiences. Distinguish what goes on in your head from what goes on in your heart and gut. Again, give yourself permission to feel and identify experiences you wouldn’t normally allow yourself to feel. DEFINITELY share this info with the woman you love!
4. Ask the woman you love for some honest, constructive feedback. Ask her this very specific question: “What are the ways you notice that I express my sadness, my fear, my pain, my shame, my joy, and my anger?” Write down what she tells you in your journal for each of these six feelings. Compare her feedback with what your own experiences are that you have already written about. Share all this info with her.
5. If you realize that you don’t feel some or any of those feelings, ask yourself whether or not you’ve ordered some voice in your head to override, avoid, negate, downplay, dismiss, or criticize those experiences and minimize their existence because they are “negative” and feeling them would be a “waste of time.” If this is the case, then write in your journal about how you came to believe why it’s been important for you to protect yourself in this way from feeling these feelings. Share this info with the woman you love.
6. Read a book (like Daniel Goldman’s *Emotional Intelligence*), take a seminar, take an online emotional IQ test (Google: EIQ test), or talk to a therapist to get an idea of how to identify a whole range of feelings that are possible. Share this info with the woman you love.

Finally, notice how the woman you are sharing this info with is regarding you as you take this journey into your own heart. DO NOT do these exercises with the intention of impressing her or winning her favor. Do them simply because they will help you learn more about who you really are, which is the ultimate gift we can give ourselves.

Best of luck,

∞ Dr. He ~ Dr. She ∞



Money

Financial Stress on a Relationship

We have talked about some of the effects of financial stress on a relationship in the past, but feel it deserves further examination in a full column. Money anxiety can be a formidable adversary to a marriage when its insidious presence triggers a cascade of underlying dynamics that cause mistrust and disrespect between a couple.

We've all been there in one way or another: having too little of it; disagreeing on how to spend it; where more of it can come from; who should make it; even how we can mislead ourselves into thinking that we should or would be happy simply having plenty of it. Because financial problems can deeply threaten our personal needs for safety, when any of the above problems arise, the resultant lack of safety gets thrust onto the relationship and both people get ready to do battle.

The truth is, when there is financial stress happening for a couple, it will most often trigger other lingering problems in the relationship that have yet to be dealt with. For example, quite often money problems are a way for couples to act out their issues around power—and therefore, control—in the relationship. One person earning more income than the other can become an ongoing battleground for who feels entitled to having control over the decision-making process for a marriage. It can also trigger mistrust and anger that one person isn't "pulling their weight," so to speak, regarding the needs of the family. Either of these situations quite often produces a domino-effect wherein other overlooked power issues between the couple get reactivated and raised to help bolster the case for the one who feels disempowered or unfairly burdened with responsibility.

It is also not unusual for either one or both people to *regress* in the way that he or she deals with this stress. *Regression* is a defense mechanism we all use when we are faced with a situation that is so anxiety provoking that we can't deal with it rationally, and so we protect ourselves by retreating to an earlier stage of development or to a more primitive coping skill. Money issues tap into our basic survival needs. What this means is that when our financial stress is high, it almost feels natural for us to get into a fight or flight mode of dealing with the situation with our partner, much as a scared child would act when feeling threatened. Whether this means stamping our feet and screaming or emotionally shutting down, the couple immediately cuts itself off from communicating in a healthy way, which in turn elevates the stress even more.

When you and your partner find yourself under financial stress, we suggest you try one or all of these strategies in order to avoid creating a major crisis for your relationship:

1. Put off making any major decisions about the relationship until the financial issue feels better managed.
2. Meet with a financial advisor—an objective third party—who can separate the emotional issues that you and your spouse have attached to the finances and holds them at bay. This always helps to give couples a reality check of themselves and their projections of blame onto each other.
3. Make a specific time *once a week* to go over the finances together. Checking in with each other often increases the trust and reduces the feeling of being alone, which in turn helps to reduce the need to go into survival mode.

4. Each of you needs to take a look at your emotional relationship with money. Are you realistic with your spending? Or do you use money impulsively for the immediate gratification of feeling better about yourself? Do you not feel you deserve to have it? Do you feel entitled to it without working for it? Be honest with yourself so that you can be honest with your spouse about your relationship with money. This will help you both support each other to deal with the emotional needs that money fulfills in a healthier way.

Financial stress cannot help but challenge you as a couple to clarify the power, survival, and safety needs of your relationship. Once you do the work of clarifying what these needs are, you both will have a template from which to build a solid and more trusting relationship.

∞ *Dr. He ~ Dr. She* ∞

How Relationships Emotionally Survive a Financial Crisis

It doesn't seem very long ago that it was hard to imagine all the gloom and doom we are all feeling these days. Just when you think the news one week could not get any worse, BAM, more bad news hits us upside the head the next week as we free fall into the worst economic chapter of our country's history since the Great Depression. Apparently, we are not bullet-proof after all, and it certainly seems like this is some sort of huge wakeup call about how we become truly accountable for our financial lives both individually and as a nation.

It is hard for each of us not to feel a sense of dread of what the future holds, which in turn triggers our day-to-day attitudes into full-on Survival Mode frazzle. Our worst fears rear their ugly heads and feed on our insecurities. *Will my family be all right? Will we lose our house? Will I lose my job? Will my business survive? How long will this financial mess last?*

It makes a lot of sense to us that when times are tight like this, that it is pretty easy for the anxiety and financial stress to leak out onto our families—in particular our spouses/partners—in the form of sleepless nights and angry outbursts. From our perspective—while we know we cannot alleviate any of your financial concerns or stress—what we *can* do is to remind you of a few pointers about how to get through this mess in the best possible way *for the relationship*. By that we mean, how to help you all stay connected to your partners so that you can at least **feel like you are on the same team** throughout a very difficult time. The only thing worse than dealing with the financial pain of an upside down economy is dealing with it *alone*.

Here are five things we want you to remember to do during this “economic downturn” in order to stay on the same page with each other and hopefully come out on the other side at a level of connection even better than when this whole thing started!

1. Remember your willingness and feed your desire to work together as a team in order to face the “threat” that financial stress poses to your family. In other words, even when you are gripped by “survival” try to look at the big picture together without playing the “blame game.” When we are in fear mode we tend to lash out to those closest to us. Come up with many different scenarios about how to deal with the current market *together*.

2. Practice open communication. Rather than isolation—more openness about stress. Again, usually when we are in fear-mode we tend to shut down and isolate and experience our fear alone. Check in with each other once a day regarding how you are managing your anxiety, steps you are taking to cope and new ideas you have thought of during the day to problem solve.

3. Show compassion for each other. We all deal with stress in different ways, and rather than be judgmental about how our partner is handling their anxiety, it is much healthier to “be there” for them as a sounding board. You no doubt will need that same kind of understanding and compassion when it's your turn to melt down! Remember that you both need to be the giver and receiver at different times during this crisis and make sure and take responsibility for doing both!

4. Involve the whole family in coming up with ways to cut spending. Without involving the children in the specifics of your financial situation, let them know that it is a time for all American

families to work together like a team and be on the lookout for ways to adjust spending. Include the children in recycling, collecting change, having picnic dinners on the lawn versus going out to eat, pitch a tent in the backyard and roast marshmallows as a fun night out versus going to the movies, etc. Have your children come up with new ideas of their own.

5. Remember that this too shall pass and use this time as an opportunity to reset old patterns of unconscious spending that get us all into trouble.

The bottom line is, don't let the gloom and doom keep you from keeping your relationships strong. As one of your "natural resources," utilize this as a time to tap into the love and energy of your family.

∞ *Dr. He ~ Dr. She* ∞

How Economic Downturn Affects Relationships

Dear Dr. He Said, Dr. She Said,

I am having a very difficult time with my husband's lack of presence in our lives because of his job. He feels that I have no empathy for him and his stress level given the economic downturn and his fear of losing his job. I understand that he is under stress, but it is costing our family in the sense that he is never home and when he is, he is checked out emotionally. I'm sure he feels I don't appreciate him, but I don't even feel connected to him. How can we see each other's side of this?

Emma, Rancho Santa Fe

Dr. He & Dr. She

Dear Emma:

Your husband's stress is a result of his unchecked and fundamental **fear**. Try to remember that he is scared out of his mind—as you yourself must also be—that his family won't survive. For a man who may not be very emotionally aware of himself, that **survival fear** is the primary motivator of his life and is what drives most of his behavior. This lack of emotional awareness (unfortunately) keeps him clueless about the effect his fear-based behavior has on his family, as well as keeping him cut off from those exact relationships. This is how he “justifies” his behavior in his own mind. His survival system is wired to focus mostly on quantity (i.e., make sure my family remains alive to see tomorrow and the next day) and to ignore quality (i.e., I'm too busy to bring my time, attention, and awareness to consider the value and worth of my relationships). Obviously, he needs to remember that the quality of his relationships with his family members is as important as their physical survival. But that also puts you both in the same boat and gives you something to empathize with each other about. Talk to him about your own worst financial fears these days—including how scared out of your mind you must be about possibly losing your marriage!

As we have talked about in our columns many times, communication is the key here. Setting aside time to talk about *where you are each coming from and what you each need* is very important. Understanding each other's worlds is the most important connection you can make during this very stressful time. The opportunity here, Emma, is that a financial crisis can pull you and your husband together through this time of adversity and compel you both to learn some much-needed conflict resolution skills, as well as how to be partners on the same team. You both seem very clear that things have to change moving forward, so resetting priorities and spending habits together can become a united goal that you both support one another to achieve. You both can also see this as an opportunity to get creative about how to spend quality time together that doesn't cost much money.

Point out to him that if the financial pressure he feels now is so all-consuming, that the cost of a divorce would skyrocket his stress right through the roof. Many couples these days who want to divorce each other are continuing to live in the same house because they simply cannot afford the added expense of a physical separation. Whatever differences you both have in terms of spending, saving, and accounting for money can be re-negotiated and agreed upon to create a sense of not

dealing with this stress alone! That is the big reminder that he needs, Emma. Despite his internal wiring that has convinced him that he has to manage all this pressure by himself, he needs you to send a very clear message that that approach will blow up your marriage. He has a willing team player and partner in you, and as you remind him of that, maybe he will be able to open up and hear your concerns a bit better. You also need to remind him of the value of the connection in the relationship with you and the children. That connection can help him manage his stress better, and it seems like he has forgotten that for the moment.

You say it yourself at the end of your letter: he needs to feel appreciated, and you need to feel connected. As partners, your ability to navigate this kind of quid pro quo is crucial to learn because that is what will keep the team forever functioning well. Sit down together and ask him what he needs in order to feel more appreciated. Then tell him what you need in order to feel more connected. ***Then do that for each other!*** Find a financial advisor and come up with a plan to get yourselves through this recession as a team. And finally, find a marriage therapist to help you both identify and deal with all the fears that are paralyzing your family.

Best of luck,

∞ *Dr. He ~ Dr. She* ∞

Wife Financially Dependent on Husband

Dear Dr. He Said, Dr. She Said,

I'm a stay at home mom and my husband is the financial provider for the family. Before the kids came I worked full time and I was used to making my own money. Now I feel guilty when I spend money and I also feel resentful when I have to "report" to my husband every dollar I spend. I've started to lie to him about what I spend, and I'm not sure how to work my way out of this.

Janet, Oceanside

Dr. She

Dear Janet,

Part of building trust in a relationship involves both partners feeling like they are *adults in the relationship* and that they are being treated as an adult by their partner. This means that one doesn't hold a "parental" style authority over the other, and the other doesn't act like the subservient "child." If you are lying to your husband, *you are playing the child role*, and if he needs an accounting of every dime you spend, *he is playing the parent role*.

It seems that both you and your husband need to get on the same page about respecting and appreciating the equal distribution of labor you have created in your lives. By feeling guilty it doesn't sound like you give yourself credit for the tremendous amount of labor you do with your children and attending to household matters. It is difficult for us as women today to not compare ourselves to our mother's generation who were not respected for being stay-at-home moms.

You have made a choice—*an honorable and crucial choice*—to parent your children, which really is the most important job there is. I'm wondering if you and your husband have agreed on *that*. It seems it would be helpful for you and your husband to sit down together and have a meeting of the hearts about the value of what you each contribute to the family and to the relationship.

Dr. He

Hi Janet,

When a man is the sole income provider for a family, it is crucial for him to learn the team approach of being a Provider-as-Partner vs. The controlling approach of being a Provider-as-Parent. It is very important for your husband to understand how he naturally falls into the parent role with you around money because he is the one bringing home the bacon. If one of the relationship goals for you and your husband is to have more of a "partnership" however, you both need to sit down and work out a few agreements.

For example, we often have the couples we work with “create the habit” of having a Sunday night weekly meeting without the kids underfoot. This is a great way to start and end the new week on the same page. It’s the time—even if it’s only for 10 or 15 minutes—to coordinate schedules and logistics for the coming week. This is also a time to talk about upcoming expenses beyond the fixed monthly costs you both have. Here you have an opportunity to talk to him as his adult partner who is responsible in her spending activities. If a purchase is needed for non-necessities over an agreed upon amount, then a conversation with a mutually satisfying solution needs to emerge.

I am wondering who pays the monthly bills. If your husband typically does, you could make sure to sit in with him when he pulls out the check book and starts writing checks. It might also be a responsibility you could take over for a certain amount of time as part of a good-faith effort on your part to stay up-to-speed on your household financial status. This will give your husband the message that you are taking an active, responsible adult role with the finances and that his wife is also his financial partner.

∞ *Dr. He ~ Dr. She* ∞

Wife Holding Financial Worries

Dear Dr. He Said, Dr. She Said:

I am freaking out about money! My husband is withholding information about what is going on with his business, and I find out much later that we are in debt and that he is using money from our equity line to cover a lot of his expenses. I am coming to a place where I can't trust him to make good business decisions. I am a stay at home mom with three children, and I feel so stuck holding all the financial worries alone. We have always handled money differently, and I think I've about had it. What can we do?

Laura, Del Mar

Dr. He

Dear Laura,

I will address your concerns from the perspective of what might be the role your husband is playing in all of this financial tumult. The good news is that he is willing to play the role of being the financial provider for the family, especially given the fact that you have the (more than) full time job of taking care of the household and three children. The not-so-good-news is that your husband does not understand *how crucial it is for you to be able to trust how he manages the money that he makes*. There are two possibilities here:

If he is withholding information from you because he is a controlling person who needs his wife to just back off and give him room to unilaterally make the financial decisions, then you need to let him know whether or not that jives with your idea of what a partnership looks and feels like. Controlling behavior by a person is quite often a sign of fear, but in an equal partnership it usually translates as arrogance and disrespect to the other person. If this is what you are experiencing, Laura, then you must find a way to paint the picture for him of the *price your marriage is paying* for his unilateral decision making. Better that he talk to you about his fear rather than be so controlling.

If he withholds information from you because he hates to disappoint you or he fears your judgment or criticism, then likewise, you must communicate to him how crucial it is that—despite whether or not you like whatever financial report he gives you—a healthy partnership with him requires that you be involved in all decisions that affect *the family*. His fear only becomes destructive if he keeps it inside to himself and does not let you in on what is stoking his anxiety. He needs to build your trust in him. Remind him that you will end up trusting him more and more in the long run whenever he talks to you about difficult financial details, and that is the most important thing that can happen between you two right now.

Dr. She

Dear Laura:

I completely understand that you have a lot of reasons to be freaked out right now. The fact that you have three children and a husband who is withholding critical financial information has got to put

you in a position of feeling unsafe and betrayed by his secrecy. When money problems get out of control, the relationship can also get out of control and can lead to damaging mistrust and skewed views of one another. Here are a few things I would suggest to help you two get on a better track with each other and your relationship with finances:

1. Initially, it is very important, as Dr. He mentions, that you paint a picture for your husband of the helpless position he is putting you in by making huge decisions that impact the whole family without your knowledge and how *that* impacts your feelings about the relationship. If you have historically been uninvolved in the finances then it would be very important for you to take a look at why you have played such a passive role and change that role to a more active one. Help your husband understand that you need to be equally involved and re-create a new structure to manage the finances together.

2. It would also be a good idea for the two of you to hire a business and financial consultant in order to have a third party mediate the differences in your priorities around spending money and to support your husband in his business decisions. A financial consultant can help to pull *some* of the emotional charge out of the equation and focus on just the financial facts.

3. Keep all finances documented and available for both partners to view at any time (e.g., Quick Books or Quicken are great programs). This builds trust and helps everyone stay on the same page around spending. Even if one partner pays the bills, the other should always be aware of the cash flow. When we don't stay aware of the financial flow it is easier for us to go into denial and a bit of fantasy about how much money is really available.

4. Meet once a week to talk about finances. This will help with the consistent reminders to keep the finances in control and help you each stay connected to the big financial picture. Agree to talk to each other before making any purchase over a certain amount of money (e.g., \$100). Always talk about the big bills that are on the horizon, e.g., income taxes, property taxes, insurance, vacations, etc., so that these will not come as a surprise to anyone.

5. When talking about finances practice your effective communication skills by talking about how you each are personally feeling about the current money situation and what you each need to feel better about it. Recognize and understand your two different spending styles and find a compromise in the middle.

6. Make a budget and get specific. Discuss where to cut back and how much to spend in various categories.

If your husband is unwilling to engage in a partnership around money I would encourage you get some counseling *together* to help figure out what his fear is about involving you.

Good luck!

∞ *Dr. He ~ Dr. She* ∞

Husband Spends Too Much Money

Dear Dr. He Said, Dr. She Said,

I am crazy with frustration. My husband is spending so much money. He has started all these new expensive hobbies, like horseback riding and fixing up old classic cars, and he's away from home so much of the time. He has worked really hard his entire life, but the spending is over the top, and when I try to talk to him about it he says I'm controlling him. He resents my complaining and says I should do fun things too. I feel like I can't talk to him. What am I supposed to do? I feel like I don't even know who he is anymore.

Alexandra, Rancho Santa Fe

Dr. She

Dear Alexandra:

From the way you describe your husband working “so hard his entire life” it sounds like he has hit that mid-life point that involves a lot of reflection and a lot of reacquainting himself with his own aliveness. Is your husband's spending unreasonable given his income and retirement/savings or just different than his spending patterns have been over the years? Probably from his perspective he is making a new investment in the time he has left on the planet. Horseback riding and fixing up classic cars seem like pretty benign hobbies, yet good food for the soul.

The change involving your husband being away from home and you not understanding “who he is anymore” is probably the biggest threat of his new spending habits. I'm guessing that you must be scared about feeling a “disconnect” from him and that you are wondering if you can count on him the way you have in the past. I'm also wondering if you are missing what is familiar, especially if you are unsure how to connect with this “new guy.”

Perhaps your husband is trying to tell you something when he is suggesting you “should do fun things too.” Maybe he is not only looking to reacquaint himself with his own aliveness, but is also in need of infusing the relationship with some new energy. It sounds like you are both in different spaces right now: you needing to count on what's familiar while he has grown tired of the familiar. I would encourage you to join him in some of his fun, e.g., going horseback riding together. I think when he sees you coming towards him he will feel less controlled and more willing to listen to your needs about the spending.

Dr. He

Hello Alexandra,

Despite whatever mid-life transition your husband is going through, what I am concerned most about is whether or not he is acting as a separate, unilateral entity in his relationship with you. If he needs to explore his unmet needs from a life he finds unfulfilling or attain some sense of value about why he is here by pushing his personal limits, more power to him! My hope is that he does

not start to behave like he is not married anymore and begin to feel that he is entitled to making independent decisions about his lifestyle as if he were a single person. Not only can this type of thing do damage to the relationship, but it can—and often does—lead to an affair. This can become very disrespectful to you and your marriage if he moves into reckless territory with his choice-making. If you have not expressed this feeling to him yet, you will need to find a way of getting through to him before that kind of situation develops.

I also think what Dr. She suggests above is a good direction for you, i.e., to find some way to join him in his desire to seek fun and find meaning in his life. Even though he may be the one having the “mid-life crisis” and pushing for all the change, perhaps there is an opportunity here for you to explore something new and different about yourself that might help to revitalize the marriage. But the bottom line I think is that—no matter which one of you is pushing the growth curve for the relationship—it is crucial that you both let each other know what your personal limits are before the marriage takes a hit that may do irreparable damage. This will require you both to learn how to communicate with each other in a way that up until now you have never done. Get some professional help to learn how to talk to each other and you will come out of this with the least amount of wear and tear.

∞ *Dr. He ~ Dr. She* ∞

Wife Overspends

Dear Dr. He Said, Dr. She Said:

I am a woman who overspends. My husband controls the money by allotting me a monthly allowance, and he makes all of the major financial decisions unilaterally. He does make all the money, and I enjoy not having to work. I am involved in a lot of community projects. I don't really see the point of working since he makes plenty of money as a business investor. What makes me so angry is that he gives me only so much money when, as far as I know, there is a lot in the bank. I'm angry about how stubborn he is, and so I spend on my credit card. Of course he eventually finds out and gets very angry and won't speak to me for days. There is a huge distance in our relationship but I sort of don't care given how controlling he is with me. Is there any hope for us?

Carol, San Marcos

Dr. He

Dear Carol,

I appreciate the honesty of the opening sentence in your letter. And it helps put the second sentence into a context that makes sense in terms of the unhealthy dance of control you and your husband have both created. What you refer to as his being “stubborn” I see more as his lack of trust in you as a responsible financial partner. And I would guess that you don't have a whole lot of trust in his ability to value whatever your needs are. So here is your dance: He seeks to control the situation directly by limiting your spending, which compels you to seek control indirectly by doing the credit card thing behind his back.

You both have managed to create a classic parent-child relationship around this “financial arrangement” and this kind of interaction goes very much against any feelings of what a healthy intimate partnership could look and feel like. Obviously you are both very frustrated with this current situation, but it can be resolved once you both start to open up to each other as *two adults who are willing to be accountable for what your relationship needs*. One of the main ingredients a successful relationship needs is trust, and you and your husband don't trust each other yet around money.

I certainly wonder if your husband feels appreciated by you for all the ways he provides the lifestyle you both have. I'll bet that part of his anger comes from feeling unappreciated. As a first step toward rebuilding trust with him, I would suggest you make sure he understands how much you value and respect the efforts he makes to provide for your family. You could then explore the unrealistic expectations you both have had of each other around spending and earning money. Let him know that in order for you to become a more responsible financial partner that you need to know what is happening in the overall fiscal picture. This will take you out of the child role and put you into an adult role with him as your equal. As you carry the weight of responsibility with him about your financial health, he will hopefully begin to trust that he doesn't need to keep such a tight grip on the purse strings.

Dr. She

Dear Carol:

In response to your question “Is there any hope for us?” ... Yes, of course there is! There are a few things I would encourage you to do to help your marriage. First, you need to step up to the plate and take responsibility for your needs and expectations around money and talk directly to your husband about them. Your passive-aggressive behavior and the tone of your inquiry sounds like you are handling your husband a bit like a rebellious teenager who is not getting her way. If that tone comes across in your letter I imagine that is the attitude your husband is reacting to. Often, when we are met with a sense of entitlement from our partner it causes a reaction in us of withholding. If you approach your husband as a concerned partner whom he can trust to co-handle the finances with responsibility, then I would imagine he would be open to a dialogue with you and help you meet more of your financial needs.

You two also need to revisit the distribution of labor conversation to ferret out any resentment your husband might carry about you not contributing financially to the relationship. If you prefer not to work but have an expectation of getting an unlimited amount of money I have to wonder how you came to that assumption. Did you and your husband agree that you were welcome to spend an unlimited amount of money? If so, then either his expectation has changed and he hasn't communicated that to you *or* you were never on the same page to begin with and you've been running on two opposing assumptions.

However, if your husband is being very tight and controlling with the budget and it is not a reaction to a power struggle between the two of you, I am wondering how he is experiencing the finances. Often where there is control there is fear. Your letter indicates that you don't have a clear view of the financial picture so I imagine you don't know whether your husband has concerns or fears about money. This is a conversation that is important for all couples to have and if it leaves you feeling controlled then something is going astray in the way you are approaching your husband or in your husband's trust around opening up to you. Be a concerned financial partner! Good luck.

∞ *Dr. He ~ Dr. She* ∞

Wife Turned Money Hungry

Dear Dr. He Said, Dr. She Said:

My wife is driving me crazy with her need to have a bigger house and to have more and more things! In the beginning of our relationship her needs were very simple. She came from an underprivileged background and had a very modest desire to spend money. However, she began hanging around a group of women who are extremely caught up in the way they look and what they have, and she has slowly been changing over the last two years. It seems like she has drunk their Kool-Aid and now is concerned more with what she has rather than who she is. I feel like I've lost the woman I married. Recently she has been talking about getting plastic surgery, which is so out of left field for her. I know I'm not around as much as she would like because I work a lot, but now I feel like I must work overtime in order for us to live within a comfortable budget. I don't know how to get her back.

Marcelo, Carmel Valley

Dr. She

Dear Marcelo:

First I think it would be important for you to understand what may be going on with your wife emotionally that is causing her to overspend and to be *more* focused on material things and her appearance than she has been in the past. It sounds like your wife began to feel a stronger sense of self-worth as she acquired more things and began developing an identity with this group of girlfriends. What this most likely indicates is that she was not feeling admired, accepted, or empowered *before* and this is how she is coping with those troubled feelings. Even though your wife was previously a modest spender, I wonder if you were aware of any feelings she was having of self-doubt or self-disappointment.

I would also consider the idea that she may have tapped into a deeper, old sense of deprivation that she wasn't aware of until she started to feel good, powerful, in control and safe through acquiring things. Often, when people grow up in a more impoverished environment and then have access to more means they overcompensate for all the years of not having by overspending. It is a great possibility that your wife could be avoiding a myriad of internal feelings by numbing out with external "things."

In regards to the relationship, as you suggested in your inquiry, you haven't been around much and I am wondering how loveable or important your wife is feeling. Your wife, of course, is responsible for communicating her feelings and needs to you and it doesn't sound like a lot of communication is happening between the two of you. In order to "get her back" you are going to need to explore a deeper understanding of what is going on with her, be more emotionally present in her life, and communicate more effectively.

Dr. He

Hello Marcelo,

Along with trying to understand your wife's emotional journey better, I think it would also be helpful for you to take a look at your own "emotional map" over the past couple of years. There must have been some sort of parallel process going on inside of you during this time period that also played a part in how this whole situation evolved to what it is today. Your letter only describes her behavior, but I certainly wonder how this was affecting you along the way and how you were talking to her about it.

You admit that you work too much, but was it always that way? Was the guy she married a workaholic, or did that kick in at some point after the honeymoon? When you started to feel pressure to make more money and you got overwhelmed at work, did you talk to her about your turmoil? Or did you just put your head down and begin to work harder and longer hours? In other words, did you "leave" her back then?

If your wife was feeling the support, admiration, and love from you that a spouse needs from a partner, we certainly wonder if this situation would look differently today. You can't be responsible for any lack of self-esteem she may have struggled with her whole life, but you must ask yourself some of these questions as a way to fully make sense of these circumstances. *It is important for you to be accountable for whatever part you may have played in this dance.* Your wife is not the only one who shifted her values. Somewhere along the way you probably also decided to not stand up for what you believed in by going along with her new lifestyle. If so, then you put yourself in the part of being an enabler in how you have made it possible for her to evolve into this standard of living. Before you can "get her back" Marcelo, you must first find your own way back to what you believe in and be accountable for your own shortcomings. Then speak to her from your heart and remind her of what you both have probably lost sight of in the last couple of years, and hope that she still trusts you enough to hear you and do the same thing for herself.

∞ *Dr. He ~ Dr. She* ∞

How to Celebrate the Season During an Economic Crisis

Given that we are in this holiday season at a time of high financial stress and fear, we thought it might be a good idea to write a column that keeps us mindful of what we truly value about the essence of this season. We asked friends how they were keeping the spirit of the Holiday Season alive during this economic crisis. It seems we could all use some reminding of what this time of year can be about by remembering how the holidays can bring us together. Here is what some had to say:

“I’m finding the economic crisis/recession a positive thing in many ways this Holiday season. It’s causing me (and my husband) to focus more than ever on the art of giving, to one another and others, from the heart, from our creative core(s), and thinking daily of ways we can help give back to this earth and the people struggling upon it. It’s causing me/us to talk more with our children about reaching into their creative centers for ideas about how to give to one another, and it is more enlivening and interesting than ever to help spur that process. They respond so readily! I want to keep this kind of focus around our holidays from now on, and not get caught up in the frenzy of consumerist spending and waste. It just feels so right.”

“Over the years I have found the consumerism end of things very frustrating at times. There have been years where it could be considered something that created disconnect because we try, as a couple, to decide what to spend on whom. My husband has a very large family and we had to buy for everyone and I have a small family and we would do a name draw and just buy for one person. The gift side of things just held way too much energy and potential negative conflict between us. These days, especially with the economic crisis, we are all more on the same page about turning our attention away from big gift giving to enjoying each other’s company more and remembering how to just be together without the focus being on gifts! Whew!”

“I find that I struggle with the idea that we shouldn’t be spending money because of the financial crisis. We’ve put into place this way of giving gifts at Christmas to our children and I am afraid of their disappointment and loss of feeling of magic if there are not a lot of presents under the tree from Santa. I guess if I am being honest, it has become a way for me to express my love and selfishly I love watching the joy on my children’s faces when they open their gifts. I know I need to try to wean them off “stuff” and get their heads more in the game of giving to the less fortunate but it is a struggle for me and, honestly, I know I will still indulge them a bit this year.”

“Even though I feel confused and angry about how our country got into this financial mess, I know that the most important thing for me to do during this time is to remember what I have to be grateful for and all the ways my life could be so much worse than it is right now. My wife and I still have jobs (barely). Our 401(k) has lost a lot of money. We are almost upside down with the value of our house. And as I look ahead to 2009, I am filled with dread and wonder how long it will be before we join the millions of others who are standing in unemployment lines. However, despite my anxiety about money, I am recognizing the value of growing up in the family I was born into. It has taken me a long time to get past the anger and disappointment I have felt my whole life about my parents, but they tried to teach me to be frugal and not focus on “things.” I still don’t agree with a lot of their methods, but I appreciate that they valued the simple things in life, and I see now what an important skill that is to have learned.”

“Our family has challenged ourselves to make this year “the most Christmas-y Christmas ever” despite the fact we are in difficult financial straits and have experienced some recent traumas in our lives. It has been very eye-opening because the essence of what makes it “the most Christmas-y Christmas ever” has had nothing to do with buying and giving gifts! It has to do with lights, rituals (making cookies, singing Christmas carols, sitting around the Christmas tree with friends, watching Christmas movies, etc.), listening to beautiful music, and recognizing everyday as containing something a little special in it. We have all felt completely uplifted by focusing on the spirit of Christmas despite our recent challenges, and rallying around this vision has brought us closer as a family. We will be sad to see the season go, but we have learned how to focus a little more on what is important.”

Happy Holidays to All!!

∞ *Dr. He ~ Dr. She* ∞



Sex & Passion

8 Myths About Sex

We've researched some myths about sex that we thought we'd share with you.

We know there are a lot more of these out there, so write to us and let us know if you have any. Hopefully in doing so we can demystify one other big myth: that sex is a taboo topic not to be discussed in a forthright manner!

Myth #1 The most important pleasure zones are in the lower region of the body.

Remember that your brain plays a huge part in how you feel about yourself, your partner, and sexuality in general. Feeling turned on by your partner's personality can be as arousing as touching certain body parts! Both you and your partner's presence and enthusiasm for love making is what really turns up the heat.

Myth #2 If you are in a long term, loving relationship, sexual desire should come easily.

The sexual relationship with your partner requires as much time and energy as anything you are passionate about in your life. Remember that as with anything, you need to attend to the growth, nuances, and changes of the relationship. Don't ever assume that you know 100% of your partner's needs because that does not give them room to grow and change what they might be interested in exploring. Keeping passion alive means staying interested in what makes your partner feel great about him or herself.

Myth #3 Hormonal changes such as menstruation, pregnancy, and menopause cause a decrease in sexual desire.

Many women who are experiencing hormonal changes find ways to manage them through exercise, diet, hormone replacement, etc. that allow for a healthy sexual appetite. Women who are menstruating, pregnant, or menopausal can be just as interested in sex as any other time. It depends on how comfortable they are with their body as these times and how comfortable their partner is with being intimate under these circumstances.

Myth #4 You shouldn't have to ask for what you need because you both already know each other so well.

This comes under the heading of "No Mind Reading." Asking for what you want and need is a crucial piece of a healthy sexual relationship, as well as being part of the healthy communication that every successful relationship requires. And remember: what your partner needs changes over time, so don't assume your partner always wants or needs the same thing.

Myth #5 Men are always in the mood.

Both men and women experience fluctuations in their libido throughout the day and weeks. Both men and women's readiness for sex is influenced not only by hormones but diet, sleep, stress, health, self-confidence and how they are feeling in the relationship at the time. By the way, when couples

we work with tell us they are not having much sex, what becomes obvious to us more often than not is that these two people are very angry at each other. So if there isn't a whole lot of "action" happening in your bedroom with your partner, ask yourself whether or not you're riled up.

Myth #6 Women always want sex to be about "making love" and connecting emotionally rather than just being about "having sex."

Although the emotional connection is more important to women over all, sometimes women just want to get physical and have fun too! Women, it is important to let your partner know if and when you are "feeling it" this way so he understands you can enjoy sex from a purely physical standpoint from time to time.

Myth #7 All men are into pornography.

While most men are very visual not all men need or want pornography to stimulate or satisfy their sexual appetite.

Myth #8 As people get older they are not as interested in sex.

Again, we are talking about the idea that relationship connection is important at any age, as is intimacy and romance. What might get in the way of interest in sex in later years might be more related to hormonal deficiencies, depression and anxiety, medication side effects and lack of connection in relationship.

∞ *Dr. He ~ Dr. She* ∞

What is Sexy?

(Rated: PG)

Dear Readers:

One of the things we have come to realize about Valentine's Day is that it has evolved into a day fraught with expectation around the notion of what love and connection "should be" all about—most of which revolve around our fantasies, making most of those expectations unrealistic. We wanted to address—not the stereotype that we believe Valentine's Day has become—but rather the stereotype behind what we believe "being sexy" has become, because we have discovered that "what is sexy" can mean many different things to many different people. So we sought feedback from a cohort of people asking them a simple question: "*What is sexy to you?*"

We didn't define what sexy meant, and we didn't put any parameters on the answers. We have grouped the unedited responses into different categories, although you will find cross-over in most responses. We offer them to you in the spirit of fun and (hopefully) validation of what you might already feel to be sexy yourself! Enjoy!

Family/Home

"I find my husband sexy when he is leading our kids in a family activity—driving our ski boat, playing a sport with the kids. It's the combination of feeling his love for our family and seeing him actively enjoying life. Very sexy!"

"Helping out around the home without being asked! I mean, come on, smart men realize they live there too!"

"It is a turn on to watch my husband vacuum the house! Having your man show up as a full partner is sexy!"

Mental

"Wit and confidence..."

"Confident word-play (double entendres, puns, semantic twists) that run the gamut from ambiguously to overtly sexual."

"A sense of humor."

"Sexy is someone who knows and enjoys the art of conversation."

"Intelligence and exquisite aesthetics."

Emotional

“Someone who knows me well enough to read the mood and act on it or allow some simmer time for me to make things happen. A give and take.”

“A quiet confidence, interested, playful nature, great lips and eyes that truly see you.”

“Sexy to me now is not related to looks (or youth). I find warm eyes, intelligence, similar core values, good communication skills, spiritually and emotionally on a path and at a place that I resonate with, good with money, good pacing/not too aggressive, good hygiene, pleasing smell, considerate, kind, and loves Nepal!”

“Sexy is someone who is comfortable in his/her own skin and you can tell he/she feels that skin feels good!”

“Sexy is someone with humble confidence.”

“Total devotion and care to every inch of me, while my man has complete self confidence, integrity, strength of character and physical hotness!”

“It is very sexy to me when I experience my wife taking responsibility for her own happiness in her life. Seeing her stand there in her own self-confidence, unwilling to sell out or betray her integrity makes me want her even more.”

“It’s the way he looks at me sometimes and I can see he’s looking *in*.”

“It’s his relaxed confidence when we are talking alone.”

Visual

“A thin, white v-neck t-shirt with nothing underneath leaving just enough to the imagination.”

“Beautiful lips that swell when she kisses. A tight booty in worsted wool slacks. Delicate fingers with modest but natural nails. Wavy, long natural hair.”

“Hubby’s wearing an Alfani tank top, and his nice bootee walking down the hall in bikini undies!”

“Sexy is someone who has their own unique style, and wears clothing that expresses who they are.”

“Sexy is watching my wife undress at night before bedtime.”

“Sexy is the Dante shower scene in the *Sex in the City* movie!”

“Sexy is Mariska Hargitay as Detective Bensen on *Law and Order: SVU*!”

“When she does a fashion show—strips and dresses for me—of newly purchased clothing.”

“Bear arms and shoulders with subtle muscular definition. A beautiful, warm smile that exposes the lines of experience about her eyes. A comfortable naked pose through a clear shower curtain as she bathes.”

“Sexy is my husband just back from a run, shirt off, body glistening with sweat.”

“It is the way he stands sometimes...there is something sexy about when he looks really grounded.”

Sensual

“When he gazes into my eyes, and cuddles me sensually.”

“I love her smell and taste when she comes home from yoga class all sweaty. Nuzzling her neck at that moment is quite a turn on to me.”

“A subtle sideways glance in a conversation with others that says to me, ‘I’m so yours’. A comfortable meshing of thighs during a slow dance. Her hand on the back of my neck and her fingers stroking my hair.”

Thank you to all who were willing to share their personal view points with us. We appreciate your willingness to help broaden the stereotypical definition of “sexy.” From this small sampling we will make the assumption that there are as many definitions to “sexy” as there are people on the planet. Now, that is interesting!

Best Regards,

∞ *Dr. He ~ Dr. She* ∞

Valentine's Scrooge

Dear Dr. He Said, Dr. She Said:

I don't know what to do. My girlfriend wants me to wine and dine her and buy her gifts and flowers for Valentine's Day because "all of her friends' boyfriends" treat her girlfriends that way. She says that I must not think she is very special if I don't want to do that for her as well. I hate Valentine's Day! I think it is a stupid, made up, Hallmark holiday, and it drives me crazy to be out there with everyone else celebrating a phony holiday. I'm really okay with anniversaries and birthdays, but this is one I can't wrap my head around. She was so upset last Valentine's Day because the only thing I did for her was to make her dinner, but that wasn't enough! She takes it so personally and accuses me of "not following protocol," but she doesn't even want to understand my point of view. We are at an impasse. What should we do?

Tom, Carmel Valley

Dr. He

Dear Tom,

It seems to me that you are spending more time trying to convince your girlfriend how right you are about the superficiality of Valentine's Day rather than demonstrating to her *what it looks and feels like for you to truly give from your heart*. If you are so vehement in your opposition to the commercial aspects of Valentine's Day—and there are many people who will agree with your perspective on this subject—then I will also assume it means you are equally as vehement about what sincere romantic love is and the most authentic ways to show that to someone. I will assume that you are as passionate about talking about how this Hallmark Holiday misses the point in capturing the true meaning of what love and connection between two people are really about. And I will assume that you have invested at least the same amount of energy in communicating your deeply held views on love to your girlfriend as you have your disgust for Valentine's Day.

If, however, all she hears from you about Valentine's Day is how oppressed you feel, then a) it will sound like you are making an excuse for not having the desire to show her your true feelings, and b) it will make you look like you are on a campaign to enlist her to join your personal protest against the Madison Avenue advertising moguls. For her to compare your expressions of love to anyone else is not fair. On the other hand, I have a feeling that if she is feeling truly cherished and loved by you throughout the year, that she could more easily "understand" your point of view about Valentine's Day.

Dr. She

Hello Tom,

I agree with Dr. He's thoughts and just want to reiterate that I would have to assume your girlfriend is not feeling she is "special" to you on a regular basis if she is so upset about one time, out

of many, that you are against expressing yourself on cue. If you are consistently spontaneous in your expression of your affections then it seems your girlfriend would trust that she is important to you and give you some understanding and leeway around the Valentine's Day myth.

If you do show your love and affection on a regular basis then I have to wonder how insecure or entitled your girlfriend is to need it all to go her way in order to be okay. I would be worried if you are expressing your feelings and 1) it still isn't enough for her, and 2) she doesn't have the generosity of heart to understand your feelings about Valentine's Day.

I'm also wondering how long you two have been together and if it is possible that Valentine's Day is bringing up some need of your girlfriend's to have the future of your relationship more defined—as in a possible engagement. Holiday markers can bring up feelings for some women who are ready for a longer term commitment. If you find yourself thinking, yes, she is ready for a ring, then you might have the answer to the impetus behind your girlfriend's reaction and you might want to have a direct conversation with her about where you are with the idea of marriage. Good luck!

∞ *Dr. He ~ Dr. She* ∞

Sexual Attraction Missing

Dear Dr. He Said, Dr. She Said:

I am finding myself so attracted to other men right now. This is very confusing for me because I love my husband and our three children dearly, but I feel like there is no sexual chemistry between him and me. I don't know if we've ever really had that much strong passion together, but we've always been good friends and companions. I struggle now with really missing the sexual part of who I am, and I am getting scared that I might have an affair. I don't want to sabotage our relationship because we have spent 10 years building a family that means the world to me. I feel like I am in a pit of despair over this, and I'm not sure how to get out. Can you help me?

Maggie, Poway

Dr. She

Dear Maggie:

First, I think it is important that you sit down and have a heart to heart with your husband and let him know that you are feeling very disconnected from him sexually and that your desire is to find a way back to, or even *recreate* a new sexual relationship with him. If you re-direct all the energy that you have put towards fantasizing about other men back to dealing directly with your husband you will feel lined up with what is true for you and feel like you are doing your best to deal with the situation rather than avoid it. My guess is that your wandering eye would relax a bit. In a loving way, it would be important to emphasize the seriousness of the situation for you. Explain that the sensual/sexual part of you is craving expression and has felt unseen, unacknowledged and unappreciated. As a woman (and as a man, of course) we like to trust that we can access our sensual selves with our mates even if our hectic lives get in the way at times.

It will be *very* important for your husband to explore his own blocks to the sexual aspects of the relationship. It is *as* important for you to explore your own blocks. For example, how difficult is it for you to access your sexuality given the fact that you are a busy mother of three? Are you completely depending on your husband to bring the sensual/sexual part of you out or are you finding ways to access it and bring it to your husband as well? Have your desires and sexual needs changed over the years regarding what turns you on or gets you in the mood? Have you identified those changes and shared them with your husband? Is it possible that you are feeling a need to break out of your routine in general and you are filtering that need for change through the relationship with your husband?

The other questions you need to explore are whether there is any unexpressed anger or resentments lying dormant in the relationship (anger does kill sex drive) or if there is a parent/child dynamic in the relationship (it does not feel sexy to see your mate as a parent figure). Does your husband find it difficult to see you as the mother of his children and a sexy woman all at the same time?

All of these factors will affect the sexual connection and are at least a place to start exploring! And if you can, while you are getting to the bottom of the disconnection, try flirting a little bit with your husband every day...tell him he looks nice, make small flirtatious gestures, make an effort to have some alone time together. Children often draw all our attention away from our spouse and when we wake up from dealing with our children and find ourselves disconnected from our partner we think something is wrong with the relationship versus realizing we need to refocus some attention back to the relationship for it to flourish again. Good luck!

Dr. He

Dear Maggie,

I get that there is probably something that needs to shift inside of you in order to feel a different and “better” way with your husband. I also understand that this issue is something that you *both* have to work on together. For whatever reasons, neither of you have been able to keep sex as a high priority for what the relationship has needed in order to thrive and succeed.

On your husband’s side of things, my hope is that he can hear and see your side of this being more about your fear or pain or anger at what is missing in the relationship rather than being about his inadequacy as a man—but that will probably not be very possible. At least initially, most men have a very difficult time not hearing this as being about his personal shortcomings or not being very adept at “keeping his woman happy.” He will be able to stay open to what you need if you present this to him as *something you have both created* rather than just something that is *wrong with him*. It will help if he can start to identify how less-than-fulfilling your sex life has been for him as well. He needs to get in touch with his own dissatisfaction about not being physically “connected” to you and talk to you about that. I certainly wonder if he is feeling angry or resentful for how unimportant your relationship has become to the both of you. As Dr. She and I have said before in this column, couples who are angry at each other are not having much sex with each other.

Having three children and very busy lives is a challenging journey for any couple to navigate through back to each other. I will assume he is probably as dissatisfied as much as you are, but has not been willing to say or do anything about it up to this point. His ability to access his own libido and bring that to you is something that he has to become proactive about. But if sex for him has become another *task to perform* rather than an *experience of pleasure with you*, he must refocus some of his masculine energy away from being a provider and toward wanting you emotionally and physically once again.

∞ Dr. He ~ Dr. She ∞

Husband Not Having Enough Sex

Dear Dr. He Said, Dr. She Said,

My husband has been complaining that our marriage is in jeopardy because we are not having enough sex. I feel we are having plenty! Why is it that men need sex to feel loved, and how do I deal with my husband's concerns about our marriage?

Gladys, Bay Park

Dr. He

Dear Gladys,

The jeopardy of your relationship is a little more complicated than being just about the different needs you and your husband have for sexual contact. A healthy, long term relationship thrives when there is a balance between both sexual AND emotional intimacy. *This balance is indeed a delicate one that requires participation from both of you.* Sexual intimacy feeds emotional intimacy, and emotional intimacy feeds sexual intimacy. Plenty of both are crucial for a marriage to succeed.

To generalize, one of the challenges is that men and women approach intimacy from different directions. Sexual contact is a comfortable and familiar way for men to make a connection that opens them up emotionally. Women, on the other hand, more easily seem to open up sexually once they are emotionally warmed up. It sounds like you and your husband need to *learn how to make these two kinds of intimacy complementary to each other* and not relegate them to the battle ground of your power struggles.

Explain to your husband how building up the emotional connection between the two of you will help build a better quality sexual connection, even if you still have different needs for frequency of sex. Regarding frequency, it is really important for you both to come to an understanding of *what works for the relationship*. It might not be enough for what he needs, and it might be too much for what you need, but at least come to an agreement that you both can live with.

Dr. She

Hi Gladys:

The basis of a healthy relationship comes from developing a strong sense of *partnership*. Being a good partner to your spouse requires that you BOTH take on the responsibility of enhancing the quality of your emotional relationship, the fairness of the division of labor and finances, the consistency of your parenting, the safety of your home, and the juiciness of your sex life.

A healthy relationship cannot be gauged *exclusively* on the frequency of sex. If your husband is soothed and feels loved exclusively by sex, then this speaks more to the narrow bandwidth of ways

that he is capable of feeling connected to you. It may also speak to the ways he might not feel loved by you, appreciated by you, and connected to you *outside of the bedroom*. As women, we often complain of feeling under-appreciated by our men, yet we ourselves can fall short of being good providers of love and appreciation towards them.

I would suggest you pay attention to how you stay connected outside the sexual relationship by showing him your appreciation through one of these very simple acts.

Notice things about him: how nice he looks, how you love his eyes. Touch him lovingly from time to time, and let him know you were thinking about him during the day, that you missed him. Let him know verbally that you appreciate how hard he works and how good of a dad he is to the kids. After a week of doing one or two of these once a day, notice whether his *anxiety* about the amount of sex you are having relaxes. This will NOT mean that he won't want sex, but he MAY become more relaxed about the frequency of it. Hopefully, he can begin to trust that there are more ways to feel soothed by you and connected to you other than by just "doing it." You may also find that as *you* continue to stay open to him in these ways, you just may feel your own sexual desire increase!

∞ *Dr. He ~ Dr. She* ∞

Molested as a Child

Dear Dr. He Said, Dr. She Said,

I've been married for four years, and there are so many ways that my wife and I get along well and have much in common. For the past year, however, she has withdrawn from me sexually, and every time I try to talk to her about it, she gets very angry and accuses me of trying to control her. I just try to tell her that I want us to enjoy each other physically like when we were dating. I'm not trying to control her. She has alluded to an uncle she thinks was inappropriate with her when she was a little girl. I've suggested that she talk to someone about it, but she won't even consider it. I'm really confused and angry about all of this. What can we do?

Phillip, Carmel Valley

Dr. She

Dear Phillip:

The way you describe your wife's resistance to taking a look at an important part of your relationship indicates there is something deeper going on for her. You seem to have a gut feeling that it's not about the relationship feeling unsatisfying or emotionally distant and you don't indicate any suspicions of an affair. I'm wondering if there are any other indications that your wife might have been sexually molested as a child other than her mention of an inappropriate uncle.

If your wife was molested as a child and has not dealt with the emotional ramifications of that, then it is very possible that she is distancing from you because she is feeling more emotionally vulnerable as you become more important to her. She may feel the need to be more in control in order not to feel so vulnerable and is setting boundaries in your sexual relationship where she possibly has her deepest triggers of mistrust.

In general, someone who was sexually molested as a child has an interference of natural emotional development. Sexual invasion at a young age destroys the natural development of trust. I imagine that your wife has hit her limit in her ability to emotionally trust you and that presents itself in her unwillingness to open up and reveal her darkest emotional issues to you.

Also, sexual abuse at a young age can affect a person's ability to have a normal, enjoyable sex life. Your wife may construe sex as your desire to control and manipulate her rather than your desire to feel close to her in a physical way. Sexual abuse can make a woman doubt her own abilities to know what she wants sexually (versus what she is supposed to do) and cause her to doubt her own ability to set boundaries. Remember that when the adults in your life who are supposed to protect you take advantage of you, all boundaries are lost and confused. Sometimes to overcompensate for this confusion a woman will back away completely and avoid dealing with sex altogether.

If your wife indeed has a history of sexual abuse, until she deals with the emotional affects of this it will be very difficult for her to trust her own ability to distinguish your love from your desire to control her sexually. I would strongly encourage her to get into some counseling. Good luck!

Dr. He

Hello Phillip,

I will address the question in your letter from the perspective of how to be the best possible support to your wife assuming that she indeed has identified the fact that she was sexually abused as a child. As Dr. She said in her answer above, it is really important for you to remember that—for someone who was molested—sex became closely associated with a loss of personal power over her own ability to be in control of what happens to her body. Unless she understands this internal correlation about herself, she will be destined to feel that lack of control and power in any sexual relationship she enters into. Opening up sexually to a man will feel like giving up control of her body, which will inevitably compel her to shut down to him.

Given this scenario, part of your challenge will be to remember three very important points: 1) You must find a way to encourage her in her need to stay in control of her life—especially sexually—without sacrificing your own needs as a person, simply to placate her, 2) Remember that her rejection of you for “trying to control her” doesn’t have a whole lot to do with you. This is easier said than done, but I hope you can remember how this early experience really wired her up to not trust even the most important people in her life, and 3) Individual and couples counseling are crucial for both of your abilities to navigate this very precarious emotional terrain. You cannot “make her” get into therapy because that would be just another experience for her of feeling controlled. You have to paint her a picture of how counseling *would benefit the quality of the relationship* by giving you both new tools to help you feel closer. Best of luck, Phillip!

∞ *Dr. He ~ Dr. She* ∞

Passion Matures

Dear Dr. He Said, Dr. She Said:

I am feeling like the passion in my marriage is gone. We used to have so much physical and emotional passion for each other, and now it's all very "nice" but not intense the way it use to be. I'm starting to feel we are not meant to be together. Can you please let me know your thoughts?

Susan, Del Mar

Dr. She

Hi Susan:

I think one of the biggest mistakes couples make is to believe that when the high passion/infatuation stage of the relationship fades into a more mature, steady version of the relationship that it means something is wrong. We've mentioned this idea throughout our articles but let's take a deeper look into the phenomenon of infatuation versus healthy/mature love.

Most of the intense chemistry during the first part of any relationship is about *projection*.

Projection is how we see others and the world through the filter we've developed from years of personal experiences, stories and belief systems that are hard wired into our thinking and feeling selves. When we are first attracted to someone there is usually an element of familiarity about the person or a way they fit into our mindset or filter. When we don't know somebody but like the "idea" of them, we tend to project (or see them as) someone who we think they are or who we need them to be.

The infatuation or highly passionate stage of the relationship feels intense because of the fantasy aspect of who you think that person is, versus the real human being they are, warts and all. Projection is la-la land where our partner can do no wrong and, if they do, it is overlooked or denied. So when the high wears off and you start to understand who that person really is, the real work of a relationship begins.

What also happens in the more mature phase of a relationship is the *uncoiling of enmeshment*. A lot of people get trapped in the "love addiction" feeling and the discomfort of moving on into unknown, more "grown up" territory is scary. The infatuation/passionate phase is filled with *immediate gratification* while the more mature phase is the *long term gratification* of a mature love where both people are taking responsibility for their own happiness and learning how to balance their own needs while supporting (but not swallowing up) their partner.

When the enmeshment phase diminishes and we begin to see our partner as a separate individual, we start to see how they are *different* from us. If you are one to be addicted to the feeling of enmeshment, then the sense of being separate or "different" will feel threatening, rather than enriching, to the relationship. When couples feel threatened by the differences between them, they start to ar-

gue. If couples don't argue, or resolve differences *well* then, again, the relationship feels threatened. Learning to be okay with differences and argue well is a good sign of a healthy relationship.

Don't get me wrong, I understand that the first phase of a relationship is a euphoric, fun and exciting part of life. It is! However, the unrealistic expectation that the passion and romance needs to be sustained at a high level or "something is wrong" is what sets couples up for disappointment and leads to..."maybe we shouldn't be together." What couples overlook is that **now** a possibility of an emotionally deeper and long sustaining partnership is possible...in this next phase. Bottom line: We get into trouble when we try to manage a long term relationship through the *immediate needs gratification filter* and don't upgrade to a long-term gratification filter.

Dr. He

Dear Susan,

As you can imagine, we hear this complaint very often in our practice working with couples. You seem to be in a defining moment of your marriage because you assume that a lack of intensity must mean something is missing between the two of you. It is very natural in this after-the-honeymoon-is-over chapter to believe that whatever is wrong with the relationship probably has more to do with what is lacking in your spouse than with yourself. This can trick you into thinking that you must be with the wrong person, which can in turn push you toward that slippery slope of the 50% divorce rate that exists in this country. The reality, however, is that the change occurring within the marriage is that you are (as Dr. She points out) growing beyond your need to do the "dance of projection"—which really prevents you from getting what is in your best interest—and needing to be more authentic in how you relate to your husband.

What this also does is it puts you and others in this same situation at risk for having an affair. When you think about it, everything that Dr. She wrote about regarding infatuation at the beginning of a relationship is exactly what also happens in an extramarital affair. While you did not ask our advice regarding this topic, Susan, I will just mention here the similarity between the beginning, "juicy" phase of a relationship and the fantasy, "juicy" allure of infidelity. An affair is another example of projecting fantasy onto someone that you have little familiarity with, who is in effect a "blank screen" onto which it is easy to project all the "positive" things missing in your marriage because your spouse now holds all the "negative" things that turn you off. It is very rare that an affair can represent a genuine, balanced understanding of another person when the only shared reality is a limited, Disneyland experience of what mostly feels good. The mundane drone of life's daily challenges is avoided by the high intensity of illicit infatuation.

This actually is an opportunity for you to do some self-introspection in order to identify

whatever wants and needs you have that you haven't had the courage to admit to yourself, much less say to your husband. Believe me, risking the vulnerability of talking about your deepest pain, your darkest fears, your brightest hopes, and your highest aspirations will stoke the passion fires once again in your marriage. But the difference is that it will be coming from the maturity you experience when you deal with this lack of fulfillment *by changing yourself—rather than by trying to change your husband.*

Hang in there, Susan. Dig deep and figure out who you really are and what you really need. Sit your husband down, look him in the eyes, and lovingly paint that picture for him. Then let him make a choice about whether or not that picture is something he can live with. Have him do the same thing back to you. You have nothing to lose by doing this. It also *gives him the opportunity to step up and become the man he knows himself to be*. If he jumps on board, your relationship will change for the better. If he can't hang with you, then at least you put it out there and didn't hold back. Best of luck.

∞ *Dr. He ~ Dr. She* ∞



Trust

Husband Tells Little White Lies

Dear Dr. He Said, Dr. She Said,

I don't think my husband has ever cheated on me, but I also don't believe that he is totally up front with me either. I have caught him telling "little white lies," and he rarely tells me what he is thinking or feeling. He downplays my concerns and thinks that I should just trust him. Well, it's a big deal to me because the boyfriend I had before my husband lied all the time and ended up cheating on me. My husband thinks it's unfair for me to not trust him, but I think it's unfair for him to treat me the way he does and then expect me to find him trustworthy. Why is he like this?

Yvonne, La Jolla

Dr. He

Dear Yvonne,

When it comes to making a relationship work, men can't help but have certain **blind spots** as a result of what we have been taught to believe about ourselves as men. A blind spot to me is an area or subject about which one is uninformed, unaware, or unappreciative, and for men, the biggest blind spot we have in relationships is under-estimating how important *emotional honesty* is in creating trust and intimacy between two people. As men, we have learned to avoid knowing our emotional world in order to feel masculine, and so we come into our adult relationships with very little emotional awareness, which means we have very little to offer in terms of emotional honesty.

Since your husband hasn't taken the time to get to know himself—or you—emotionally, he will be hard pressed to know how to successfully create trust with you. *He needs to understand that his blind spot has become an obstacle to the emotional health of the relationship.* Emotional honesty, i.e., sharing the truth that lives in your heart, creates the confidence and trust two people need to have in order to count on each other as well as to create intimacy. And it doesn't just happen because you love someone. It is something you both have to work at and learn how to do and practice every day. Get yourselves in front of a marriage counselor, Yvonne, and learn how to talk to each other this way or this relationship is headed for a very rocky road.

Dr. She

Hi Yvonne,

Well I certainly understand your confusion and frustration. In relationships blind trust is a romantic fantasy, just like the notion of falling in love and living happily ever after without putting any work into the relationship! If your husband is not forthcoming with what is going on for him *and* he is prone to lying, it gives you room for speculation. However, as Dr. He suggests, often men are *afraid* to speak their truth because they do not want conflict or they lack emotional maturity, which diminishes their ability to know who they are and what they feel. Usually, men don't want to appear

incompetent in any area of their life so they will deny their lack of self-awareness to themselves and their partners. This is very perplexing for women overall because we are accustomed to being encouraged to know and express how we feel. We are also encouraged to admit it when we don't know something.

I hope you can help your husband understand that trust is earned over time and experience of the other in the relationship. You also need to take a look at the mistrust you brought into the relationship. We all bring our own bag of mistrust to our relationships as a result of our personal life experiences, and it is important for us to ferret out what is old and what is uniquely about our new partner. In order to trust your husband you will have to separate out your previous issues of mistrust from your current mistrust of him. You will also need your husband to understand that your trust *will* build over time as he values helping you understand what makes him tick. Good Luck!

∞ *Dr. He ~ Dr. She* ∞

Wife Having an Affair

Dear Dr. He Said, Dr. She Said,

Can I work on my relationship with my husband and not tell him about the affair I have had for the last six months that I am trying to end? I think I want to work on my relationship with my husband now, especially because we have two kids together, but I don't think he will work on it if I tell him about the affair. He has suspected for awhile, and I have lied to him about it. What should I do?

Sandi, Solana Beach

Dr. She

Dear Sandi,

Different therapists have different philosophies about the infidelity issue, but we are really clear with how we feel on this one. Relationships don't work long term unless there is mutual respect between both people. A respectful relationship includes being honest with your partner, *even when it is really difficult to do so*. The integrity behind this is that you give your partner all the information they need to make a choice about their own lives. *This includes whether they choose to work on the relationship with you*. If you are not forthcoming you are being deceptive and painting a false picture for your husband.

Also, if you really want to work on the relationship with your husband, you would have to be feeling a level of remorse about choosing to have an affair over trying to work things out with him. If you are indeed feeling that remorse, your husband needs to know that so that he can begin to trust your intentions to repair the marriage.

One of the most disrespectful things one person can do to another is to make them feel that they are crazy. If your husband has had suspicions all along and his gut is eating away at him the most respectful thing to do is to confirm what is true so he can resolve his internal conflict.

Dr. He

Hey Sandi,

From our side of this situation, as a couple working with couples, we have adopted the policy of not working with a couple if either one of us finds out that either one of them has been having an affair *and is unwilling to let their partner know*. Taking or keeping this kind of couple in our practice would put both of us in a compromising position.

On the one hand, neither of us could reveal this piece of information in the session due to client/therapist confidentiality. On the other hand, neither one of us could keep silent about the affair without becoming complicit with the "secret" being kept from the other partner. This would un-

dermine any and all trust we would need from the couple to help them climb out of the emotional sinkhole they both probably came in to fix in the first place. It would also be hypocritical of us to attempt to help the couple achieve integrity between them in order to save the relationship if the process became one where there was a lack of integrity on our parts by keeping the secret.

Because of the deep pain and betrayal that an affair creates in a relationship, it is an understandable deal-breaker for most couples. But our belief is that an affair is a symptom of an already unhealthy relationship. So even if a couple hangs in there and resolves the affair, there is still the underlying unhealthy relationship that remains to be looked at and dealt with. It's not easy, but we've seen it happen any number of times where a couple has survived an affair and come through to the other side where both courageously create a stronger and more solid partnership.

∞ *Dr. He ~ Dr. She* ∞

Husband Had an Affair

Dear Dr. He Said, Dr. She Said,

I have been married for 20 years and I found out that my husband was having an affair for four of the last five years. I have worked with him in therapy to overcome my mistrust of him because he swears he wants to be in the relationship and faithful. Honestly, I have not been able to overcome the betrayal, and I'm not sure I ever can. He lied to me constantly for four years in ways I never imagined he could, and I can't trust that he's not still lying to me day to day. He tells me it's my problem now, and I feel guilty that I can't get past this. What should I do?

Mary, La Costa

Dr. She

Dear Mary:

First off I am sorry for your pain and I can hear the inner turmoil and struggle you are in. As we have said before in this column we believe that the state of the relationship **before** the affair is the responsibility of **both** partners. We believe the choice to have an affair is the responsibility of the partner who has been having the affair.

If your husband was able to lie to you straight faced for four years it makes sense that you would have a deep sense of mistrust that would not be healed in a year's time. A lot of the work lies on your husbands' shoulders. This requires a deep look at himself, a lot of accountability, and a patient ability to help you understand what led him to his choices.

He will also have to deeply understand and apologize for making you feel crazy for four years. From your description, it sounds like you had suspicions along the way that he discredited over and over. He will need to understand that making you doubt what you felt to be true to cover his own tracks is one of the worst betrayals one human can do to another.

Lastly, if your husband has been making amends to you in all these ways and yet you are not developing any new trust for him than you will need to look at what is getting in the way. Was the betrayal too deep for you to open up to your husband emotionally again? Were you invested in the relationship before this occurred? Are you trying to stay in the relationship because you truly want to reconnect with your husband or out of fear of changing what has been familiar? It is important to check out your own level of desire to be in the relationship and to invest many years of re-building trust and to decide whether you feel your husband is capable of making the necessary changes to rebuild the trust in the relationship. Learn to listen to and trust your own intuition.

Dr. He

Dear Mary,

Please show this to your husband.

Dear Mary's Husband,

If you really do have the desire to be married to Mary and faithful, then gaining back her trust is *THE most important job you have right now and will remain so for some time into the immediate future.* Your four year betrayal will require much more than a few months time for Mary to recover from.

It begins with using your couples counseling sessions to assure Mary that you fully comprehend why you did what you did to her. What is needed here is not merely an admission that you "... *screwed up, but that was in the past, now let's move on.*" You also need to understand and explain to her why you made the bad choices you made *based on your own psychological history.* Her ability to trust you again hinges on her ability to trust that you even want to figure out how and why you didn't have the courage for four years to confront the inadequacies of your 16 year marriage in an honest way.

You have a big mountain to climb here. Hopefully you are also in your own individual therapy to help you with this process. Couples counseling alone will not give you the opportunity to figure this individual stuff out. Proving your trustworthiness is *your responsibility*....not Mary's problem.

∞ *Dr. He ~ Dr. She* ∞

Rebuilding Trust After an Affair

Dear Dr. He Said, Dr. She Said:

I am trying so hard to get over my wife's infidelity but the images in my mind are so difficult to let go of and it is so hard to trust that she won't lie to me again after she did for over a year. I don't know how to rebuild the trust that was destroyed or if it is even possible. Please give me some suggestions.

Tom, Del Mar

Dr. He & Dr. She

How to Build Trust After an Affair:

If you are the one who had the affair...be predictable: Be consistent in your intention, your words and your actions to heal the connection and to be a "we." If you make a choice to do this your partner will see your behaviors and begin to believe and trust you again. If something is not consistent between your intentions, words, and actions then be proactive in helping your spouse to understand what is happening. If you feel that you are losing your identity because your partner needs to feel your consistency, then you are really losing your accountability. If being accountable to the relationship and your own individuality cannot happen in harmony then you need to take a look at the dynamic between the two of you and your own need to hide out. Be an open book. Be ready to answer all questions that are legitimate for your spouse to ask. Be ready to cut all ties to anything having to do with the affair.

Believe that your spouse can handle the truth if you are the one delivering bad news. Also, if you are the spouse that has been cheated on, you need to have a belief that your spouse can change and be consistently truthful, in the "we," if *she/he* chooses to. If you don't hold out any hope your partner will change then your hopelessness might become a self-fulfilling prophecy. This doesn't mean you need to give him/her blind trust, it just means that you have to hold out hope that your partner can/will/wants to change.

The person who has cheated needs to figure out what needs are missing in their life and how to fulfill those within the context of the marriage. You have to identify what led to the affair...if you do not it is very likely it will happen again. If the person who has cheated is not doing a deep soul search, nothing will change. The person who has been cheated on needs to take a giant step forward with their own needs, thoughts, and feelings. Often the person who has been cheated on has suppressed a lot of their intuition, or ignored signs that the relationship hasn't been doing well, has tried to overly attend to their partner to make things good without expressing their own needs. This build up of resentment spirals into a dance of building walls, feeling rejected, etc.

Take an inventory of the relationship with the partner who has been cheated on is ready. You absolutely need to know who each other is and what your needs are in order to know what needs/expectations you have of yourselves and each other so you know how to support each other (without giving up your identity! Even if you are cheated on, you have to hear the needs of your partner. Give

yourself (and your partner must choose to give you) time to adjust to the painful information, time to decide whether you want to try and rebuild the relationship before you venture into a dialogue about each partners needs. If you are the partner who had the affair, do not attempt to dictate the length of time your partner will need to recover.

The partner who has been unfaithful to the relationship does need to feel and express genuine remorse. However, the fact that you cheated doesn't give your partner the right to treat you badly. There will be initial pain, hurt, questions, more pain...but there can't be an ongoing feeling that you are being punished. If this continues over a long period of time then it becomes obvious that your partner cannot find a way to forgive you and you need to move on. If your partner does not express sincere remorse then it is unlikely your relationship will heal from this. If your partner does not exhibit patience in your process of recovery then it is unlikely the relationship will survive. If the partner reacts in a defensive manner when the affair is brought up this is not a good sign that she/he is ready to do the work required to heal and rebuild.

Remember that there is a magical opportunity in going through a dark journey with your partner. It is totally possible that you may come out the other side 100% stronger and better but you both better buckle in for the ride!

∞ *Dr. He ~ Dr. She* ∞

“No Secrets” Policy in Couples Counseling

Dear Dr. He Said, Dr. She Said,

My wife and I have been married for over 12 years, and recently we decided to get into marriage counseling to try to save our marriage. What I am having difficulty deciding is, I have been having an affair with another woman for the past 2 years. I have not broken it off yet because quite frankly I am not sure that things will work out with my wife and me in marriage counseling. Our therapist, who has seen both my wife and I separately once since we started therapy, told us both that he would not hold any secrets—like an affair—that either one of us may have from the other. Divulging my affair to my wife would devastate her. I don't understand what purpose it would serve to tell her this information other than to hurt her feelings and totally derail our counseling. What is your policy and am I off base here to think the way I am thinking?

Tomas, Del Mar

Dr. She

Dear Tomas:

We—like your therapist—have a “no secrets” policy for the couples we work with, and I will give you a few of our reasons for believing in this guideline.

First and foremost, when we agree to work with a couple, we consider the *couple* to be our patient. This means that we are always asking and challenging both members of the couple to make choices that would be in the best interest of developing mutual trust and respect *for the relationship*. Emotional honesty is what best creates the foundation for a healthy and long term relationship, and therefore is what we believe always serves the best interest of the relationship.

Secondly, for us to “hold a secret” that one person might have *that is not in the best interest of the patient*, i.e., the couple, would in essence mean that we would be working against the success of the couples therapy. How could we help two people build trust if there is deception between them that we agreed to support? In our hearts, this would not only be unethical and create a conflict of interest for us, but also antithetical to what we as therapists try to accomplish with our clients. We know that respect can only grow in an environment of emotional honesty and accountability. And it is a huge sign of courage and respect for a person to reveal an issue that would cause distress, but in the long run would help rebuild the integrity of the relationship.

We would ourselves be showing disrespect to our clients if we held a secret from one of them that would be relevant to the core foundation of trust in the relationship. We are not saying that a partner needs to disclose all the sordid details about an affair. Our belief is that an affair is a symptom of an emotionally unhealthy relationship *that was created by both partners*. Helping both partners identify and understand the pain and distance they were experiencing when the affair began can help begin the reconstruction of the connection—if there is willingness on the part of the person who was cheated on.

Please know that other therapists may work differently, but we have never seen holding a secret result in the creation of a successful relationship.

Dr. He

Hello Tomas,

To illustrate Dr. She's line of reasoning above, I will focus on one particular sentence in your letter that is very telling to me. It is the part where you say that you are reluctant to break off the affair because you are not sure that "things will work out" with your wife. If this is truly how you feel, Tomas, then you should not be in couple's therapy with your wife for the following reasons:

You are in essence holding on to the affair as an escape route (a "plan B" if you will), which means that you will never be as emotionally vulnerable as your wife is being in couples therapy. This is hugely unfair to her and to your marriage. This to me says that in order to guarantee a soft landing for yourself no matter what happens to the relationship, *you are unwilling to take the same emotional risk that your wife is taking*. The only thing this will guarantee is failure for the marriage. On the one hand, letting her know about the affair might devastate her and compel her to walk out. On the other hand, full disclosure might also compel her to make her own decision to hang in there and fight for the relationship. By keeping your secret, *you are taking away her right to make that choice—one way or the other—for herself*. It also means she will never truly get an accurate sense of whether or not you are trustworthy, and for what it's worth, as long as you hold on to the affair while you are still married, Tomas, you are not trustworthy.

Put yourself in your wife's shoes for one minute. What would it feel like if you were to find out—after say three or four months of couples counseling with her—that she had been having an affair the whole time that you had been putting in genuine effort to make the relationship better. I suspect you might feel betrayed and foolish and tremendously disrespected by your wife. I suspect you might also have difficulty trusting your therapist if he kept her secret from you.

By the way, have you thought about the fact that the woman you are having the affair with is also probably wondering how trustworthy a person you are since you are cheating on your wife? If you are truly interested in seeing whether or not your marriage can make it, Tomas, you must give it your all, i.e., no escape routes. If not, then the only reason for you to be in couple's therapy would be to work out an amicable separation from your wife.

∞ Dr. He ~ Dr. She ∞

Why People Don't Trust Marriage

The U.S. Census Bureau reported that in 2010 the number of married couples in American households has dropped below half for the first time ever. We offer our thoughts here as to why trust in the institution of marriage has diminished in the 21st century as well as some of the causes of the negative filter that marriage is being viewed through.

1. No matter how you slice it, marriage is expensive.

The ring, the ceremony, the life and health insurance, the house, the kids, the retirement fund, the college fund, your daughter's wedding, etc....all of it can cause pit-of-your-stomach anxiety. People will always be affected by a sputtering economy and make decisions based on their immediate survival needs, much less try to figure out how to best approach and create a sound financial future for a marriage. Do you need that huge ring, big wedding, or Ivy League school tuition when you're already having to squeak by trying to pay your monthly rent? While we believe that love—if an option—can always trump the practicalities of money, that doesn't mean that many, many marriages have crashed and burned as a result of financial hardship.

2. Women and men have different roles now when it comes to finances.

Women are better able to support themselves and their children these days on their own if they need to. So, not as many women are willing to stick around in an unhealthy marriage as they were when there were fewer career opportunities available. For men who want a more traditional role in marriage as the breadwinner while their wives raise the children at home, it is a challenge to find a woman who has not advanced her thinking regarding the changing roles for women. This can be very discouraging for men who are challenged to change their mindset about conventional social norms.

3. Men are much more leery of getting into a financially binding agreement due to the fear of divorce and the loss of half of their life assets.

The word “pre-nup” has become a very commonplace term in our relationship lexicon today. It has also created a pre-marital battleground for couples that exposes pre-existing mistrust and forces them to wrestle with suspicion and uncertainty about each other at a time when they normally are trying to celebrate the joy of their love. This fear has hijacked many well-intended engagements from making it to the altar.

4. In a “me” society, there is an overwhelming lack of commitment to a “we.”

This is the age of choices, and for many people, the freedom to make those choices is very alluring. For some, commitment seems analogous to imprisonment and lack of choice. The first part of falling in love and finding a “soul mate” fulfills the fantasy aspect of marriage, and the “me” in all of us gets a big charge from this. But once the hard work of a relationship becomes necessary, the feeling of confinement can recur unless one is able to remember the bigger picture of what can be learned in a long term committed relationship. Now that people are living well into their eighties, the idea of living with and sleeping with the same person for sixty years is not quite as appealing,

especially when the differences that were acceptable at first inevitably start to feel threatening and unacceptable. Unless there is some effort on the couple's part to learn relationship skills of how to overcome those differences and become more of a "we" the self-preservation imperative of the "me" takes over, and the "we" connection is damaged.

5. Pathology is accepted less in a marriage.

Alcohol/drug abuse, domestic violence, child abuse, infidelity, etc., are all bright blinking lights on the marital radar screen and less tolerated these days than in previous generations? None of these dysfunctions should be tolerated in a marriage, but the reason they always were was to keep the denial in place that served the co-dependent concept of what marriage used to be. While there is less tolerance today for these marriage-busters, quite often this translates for many people as a lack of tolerance for marriage itself.

6. Men and women are confused about what the value and meaning of marriage is and they are confused about what their roles in marriage are supposed to be.

The divorce rate in and of itself is scaring people off. We are in a transition period of what a healthy, mature, long term marriage looks like, sounds like, walks and talks like. The survival-mode, co-dependent model of marriage taught to us by our parents no longer suits a new generation of men and women who want the quality of a married life to be something better than what they grew up around. Many people come from broken homes and don't want to repeat what they witnessed and experienced through the trauma of divorce, so they reject the idea all together as a safeguard.

7. Many still marry young when there is a lack of emotional maturity.

Statistics indicate that the most successful marriages these days are the ones where both partners are educated, started careers on their own, had time to be on their own, and married at a later age. This profile creates a possibility for a much more realistic and mature approach to marriage, but it also points out how the deck is stacked against young people who venture into the marital poker game of life. And when you come right down to it, isn't the lack of maturity really the underlying cause for all the above marital bugaboos? Not to oversimplify the intent of this article, but it seems that a good stiff dose of emotional maturity really is what makes marriage something that feels do-able—at least it does to us.

∞ *Dr. He ~ Dr. She* ∞



Health, Substance Abuse & Addiction

Stay-at-Home Mom Burnt Out

Dear Dr. He Said, Dr. She Said,

I am a stay-at-home mom with two toddlers, and my life feels like I constantly have to give, give, and give to everyone else. There is always someone who needs me to attend to their needs, including my husband who often is as needy as our kids. I am starting to have irrational thoughts—like just picking up and leaving for a few days—but I know I would never do that to the children. I am so tired of having to take care of everyone else. My husband says he understands, but he makes little to no effort to help me, and he is not open to marriage counseling. How do I get through to him before I end up doing something drastic?

Paula, Carlsbad

Dr. She

Unfortunately, Paula, your husband is either not taking you seriously or is incapable of attending to anyone else's needs but his own. Is your husband overwhelmed with his own responsibilities as well, or does he not have enough resources to help you out? Your husband needs to understand the level of your distress and to proactively come up with a plan to give you a little breathing room. He may say he understands, however, his actions show that he is really not coping with your needs. I would suggest you sit him down one more time and help him understand the seriousness of your distress. Please be very forthcoming and blatant about your irrational thoughts. If he is still unable to devise a plan with you about how to be more of a partner and alleviate some of your burden, I would highly suggest two things. First, come up with a plan on your own to alleviate some of your stress...you are obviously the only adult in the relationship who can manage this. Do you need a babysitter for a few hours a week? Are there family members or friends that can help you out? Can you get a housekeeper in a few times a month? Can you *delegate* tasks to your husband? Secondly, if your husband refuses to get marriage counseling I would suggest that you seek out therapy on your own to have a place to develop your strength and decide how you will work with your husband on developing a more reciprocal partnership.

Dr. He

Dear Paula,

A lot of times men need some specific direction when it comes to helping with the workload around the house and family. For example, you could let him know that your stress would be greatly alleviated—*and your marriage would run a lot smoother!*—if you could count on him to take the kids at least two evenings during the week right after work so that you could have time on your own to do whatever you need to take care of yourself. Does he help with the bedtime ritual of putting the kids down to sleep? If not, ask him to at least read to them every night or he could put one child down while you took care of the other. This also goes for the weekend. If you could count on him to be with the kids on his own for at least a couple of hours on either or both Saturday and Sunday, this would probably give you some hope about your situation. If the kids are in school, is there part

of the drop-off/pick-up schedule that he could help out with. You also need to get his buy-in on the cooking, laundry, and house cleaning duties.

You both should have a short meeting every Sunday to look at the week's schedule up ahead to make sure that you both have a realistic understanding of what tasks need to get done for the week. The point here is to get him to see that the division of labor is unfair as it stands now and that there are specific things he can do to help out so that you both can work as a team and feel closer as a couple.

∞ *Dr. He ~ Dr. She* ∞

Step-Daughter on Drugs

Dear Dr. He Said, Dr. She Said:

I have been married to my husband for 12 years. This is his second marriage, and he has a 25 year old daughter from his first marriage. Unfortunately, she is out of control on drugs, she won't get a job or go to school, and she is totally disrespectful to her father. He continues to allow her to live in our house out of the guilt that he feels. He believes her problems are because he left her mother to have a relationship with me. I have put up with this for as long as I have out of guilt for breaking up her family. My husband and I have one son together, and I am really close to leaving the relationship. My husband's daughter creates never-ending drama in our home, but my husband refuses to kick her out. What do I do?

Jessica, La Jolla

Dr. She

Dear Jessica,

I am wondering if you or your husband have ever sat down with your step-daughter and made amends for breaking up her family. I'm also wondering if you have ever allowed her to do some therapy or encouraged family therapy as a way to address the underlying pain that is sitting beneath her addiction. Directly addressing the underlying pain of the addiction might be the first step you and your husband need to take before you consider that your step-daughter can never change or get better.

If you *have* attempted to deal directly with her emotions personally or with therapy and she has continued in her drug abuse then I am wondering if you have considered finding a way to get her into a rehabilitation center. If she is living in your house and is a danger to herself or others you might consider making the stay in your house contingent on her getting into a rehab program, even if it is an outpatient program. Having her best interest in mind is important, but if she is unwilling to participate in her own healing process you cannot continue to sacrifice the safety and well being of your family.

Lastly, it seems important that you and your husband deal with your pain and guilt so it does not overtake the relationship you have with each other or give your step-daughter all the power in your household.

Dr. He

Hi Jessica,

I can tell by your letter where this is all going. If you haven't said it to your husband yet, it sounds like the "either-she-leaves-or-I-leave" ultimatum from you is just a slippery slope away. In the meantime you both have become prisoners in your own home as a result of your consuming guilt,

which as a result is also enabling your husband's daughter's drug addiction. While she may be creating "never-ending drama," it sounds like she has two very willing participants in whatever crisis *du jour* she may conjure up. The guilt you and your husband are feeling from your affair together sounds very toxic and is devouring the harmony of your family. Until you and your husband free yourselves from that guilt, she will continue to have ALL of the power in your household.

Your affair with your husband is obviously something you both have to come to peace with, despite how destructive it was to your husband's first family. But your husband's 25 year old daughter's ongoing drug habit is way out of the realm of being his or your responsibility at this point. Taking back the power of the household and drawing healthy boundaries in order to keep your son and yourselves safe from her drug addiction is the most important thing you and your husband could do right now. I would guess that she knows how guilty you both feel and uses that knowledge to manipulate you both with her drama. Please take Dr. She's suggestions above to heart, and also check out Codependents Anonymous meetings around San Diego (you can Google it) for yourselves so you can understand all the ways you and your husband enable her disease.

∞ *Dr. He ~ Dr. She* ∞

Too Much Alcohol

Dear Dr. He Said, Dr. She Said,

My wife has always felt that it is my responsibility to make her feel good. Ever since we dated, we've always enjoyed going out and partying and having a good time. But now she wants me to stop having a beer in the evening so that I don't tempt her to drink. I think she's the one who has a pretty bad drinking problem, but I am getting resentful that she is laying this on me and not taking care of herself. What should I do?

Dennis, La Jolla

Dr. She

Well, Dennis, it sounds like your wife has become pretty dependent on you. She may also have some underlying resentment that is causing her to lay the blame on you and not take responsibility for herself. Her part of the equation is to figure out what she is holding you hostage about and take responsibility for attending to her feelings and address her addiction.

Your part of the equation involves a few ideas:

1. Notice how you may encourage your wife to be dependent on you. Do you tend to be the primary decision maker? Does your wife feel she has a voice in the relationship or do you take control?
2. If your wife has a drinking problem that is out of control, I would encourage you to read a book on co-dependency or go to an AA or Alanon meeting to gather more information regarding how you can be more helpful and to help you to understand the dynamics occurring between the two of you.
3. It sounds like it is time to encourage your wife to attend some AA meetings. By going to an Alanon meeting yourself, she will see that you are taking her drinking seriously and also taking your part in feeding the unhealthy dynamic that is occurring between you seriously.
4. This would be a great time for you to get some counseling.

Dr. He

Dear Dennis,

Another way of looking at this is that it sounds like your relationship with your wife needs to grow into something different than what it's been. We see this in couples all the time—and we have had to do the same thing with our own relationship! In other words, as two people grow and develop over the years, their relationship cannot help but need to change also. The problem most couples get into, however, occurs when they both expect the relationship to function the same way that it

always has despite their growth as individuals. For example, maybe your relationship with your wife has always been based on making each other feel good about yourselves. This is what we call living life from the “outside in,” where your personal happiness is dependent on what is happening in your environment. The problem with this is that when your environment changes, so does your happiness. Living life from the “inside out” — that is, creating a foundation for happiness based on how you feel about yourself as a person, makes you less vulnerable to whatever chaotic conditions you might encounter that would pull you away from that foundation. This is a very natural growth progression that *every relationship* needs to go through, Dennis, and it seems like it’s now time for you both to challenge each other to learn how to achieve some “inside out” living. All of the above suggestions from Dr. She would help a lot, as well as getting into some counseling for you individually or together as a couple.

∞ *Dr. He ~ Dr. She* ∞

Eating Disorder

Dear Dr. He Said, Dr. She Said:

I told my husband a year ago that I had stopped my eating disorder (bulimia). I went to therapy for a year and curbed my obsession with my weight and my body distortion and was only binge/purging from time to time. However, over the last year I have been back in it full on, but I haven't told my husband about it. I don't think he can really understand what I'm going through because he tells me I just need to have "the will power" to quit. I don't want to worry him, and I'm afraid he'll think I'm disgusting. Isn't this something that I can just try to work through myself and not tell him?

Julie, Rancho Santa Fe

Dr. She

Dear Julie:

I bet you already know the answer to your question. There are definitely some things that we can keep private from our spouse, but something as big as bulimia is not one of them. The secretive aspect of the bulimia is a big part of the attachment to this coping mechanism. Bulimia gives you the opportunity to feel in control over an aspect of yourself when you might otherwise feel out of control. It gives you an opportunity to feel like you are nurturing yourself when you might not otherwise know how to *genuinely* nurture yourself or allow yourself to be nurtured by others. It gives you a mode of expression through the energetic taking in and releasing of the binge and purge cycle. All this creates an attachment and dependence on something that can cause a lot of physical damage and can create very negative obsessive-compulsive behavior and thinking patterns. Can *you* imagine your husband hiding something like this from you? Probably not.

If you want a relationship with your husband that is supportive, understanding, and connected you need to help your husband understand what is going on for you at a deeper level. I imagine your husband thinks you just need to "white knuckle" it because he doesn't comprehend the deep psychological underpinnings that are attached to your need to binge and purge. I would first suggest that you go back to therapy to recommit yourself to understanding what is going on for you and begin the journey of recovery. I would then bring your husband into therapy with you so that he can better understand what bulimia is all about, and more particularly, what it is about for you. The relationship can only benefit from the insight you will both gain into your patterns of behavior that I am sure affect the ways you are in relationship with your husband. The best of luck to you!

Dr. He

Hello Julie,

You are probably correct in thinking that your husband will not be able—at least initially—to understand what you are going through. Eating disorders are confusing and scary for men. But as

your spouse, it is his responsibility (I hope he remembers the “for better or for worse” part of the marriage vows) to try his best to imagine what you are struggling with. If he has any of his own out-of-control behaviors that come up for him when he himself gets stressed, then hopefully he can begin to at least empathize with your bulimic behavior as a need to feel in control of *something* in your life. I can appreciate your fear of his judgment, but I can also imagine him feeling terrified of the risk that the bulimia poses to your health. I will assume that he will also feel very helpless about what to do and how to show support to you since eating disorders are probably very unknown territory to him. Be that as it may, he does deserve the right to choose to step up and be a supportive partner to you, *but only if you give him that chance by telling him*. I understand how risky that feels to you, but you’ll never know what he is capable of if you don’t give him the chance to show his true colors. Maybe you could think of this whole situation from his side and how hurt and even disrespected you might feel if he withheld important information from you. While this is a very challenging moment for your relationship, Julie, it is also an opportunity for your relationship to grow in a way that it never has up until this point.

∞ *Dr. He ~ Dr. She* ∞

Husband Doesn't Trust Wife Just Out of Rehab

Dear Dr. He Said, Dr. She Said:

My wife got out of 30 days of alcohol rehab about a week ago. In and of itself, that is a good thing. However, I am not trusting that she has licked her addiction, and she wants to watch our two year old daughter while I am away for a business trip next week. I had already arranged for her to be with my parents (because, actually I thought my wife was doing 45 days in rehab), but she is insisting on being solely responsible for our daughter while I am gone saying, "Why did I even go through rehab if I can't be with my daughter?" I have a lot of fear and mistrust that she could relapse while I am gone. So many lies and manipulations have happened over the last year to make me feel like this. She is a great mom when she isn't drinking. I want to trust her, but this feels like a lot for her to take on so soon out of rehab. I am also afraid of making her angry because in the past her anger always led her to drinking. I really want our relationship to get back on track, but I also want to protect our daughter. Should I let her take care of our daughter so soon out of rehab?

Mike, Del Mar

Dr. She

Dear Mike:

Unfortunately, I think your gut instincts are correct. It is too soon for you to feel a renewed sense of trust in your wife's behavior around whether she has truly conquered her addiction yet. I also believe that having the safety of your two year old child as your number one priority is morally and legally the most responsible thing you can do.

I imagine that in rehab the counselors prepared your wife for the mistrust others might have towards her due to her past behavior and how that trust needs to be re-built over time based on consistent actions that indicate a strong commitment to her sobriety. I am concerned about your wife's comment about "why did I even go through rehab if I can't be with my daughter." Though being with her daughter is a powerful reason to get sober, it is important that your wife has a deep and personal dedication to her sobriety, completely understands that she first needs to build whatever trust she has broken, and feels her daughter's safety is first and foremost in her mind.

I would suggest that you and your wife come up with some agreement on how she can spend some time with your daughter along with your parents over the weekend. I would also encourage you to reassure her that your desire to have your daughter stay with your parents has little to do with your belief that she is a wonderful mother when she is sober but more to do with your fear that her alcoholism is still running the show and that she may relapse.

A big part of the trust building that will need to occur requires that both you and your wife develop a contract and agreement indicating what behaviors and communications need to happen to give you faith that your wife is turning a corner in her addiction.

Dr. He

Hello Mike,

I am going to address Dr. She's comment above about how "*...trust needs to be re-built over time based on consistent actions that indicate a strong commitment to her sobriety.*" I will try to paint you a specific picture about how trust can be created between you and your wife *starting now*. I know that until you see and hear something different coming out of your wife's mouth other than "you need to trust me because I just got out of rehab," you will struggle with the issue of your daughter's safety.

The main point here, Mike, is that *your expectation of what your wife is capable of showing you* in terms of her trustworthiness *must be very realistic and measured*. In other words, the only trust rebuilding that is possible to expect from her right now must be in small, incremental, baby-steps. *You will both need to be realistic with how long the trust-building process takes.*

So the best trust-building issue for you both to deal with for now is her ability to follow through on what she commits to or promises. And this means you must be very specific about what *small actions you need her to follow through on* that will rebuild your trust one step at a time. You must be very clear to her that the worst thing she could do right now is to not follow through—even on her commitments to do the small stuff. She needs to understand that her lack of follow through even on something small like stopping at the store for milk or making a phone call to the bank will continue to deteriorate your trust in her. A trust-building exercise to ask your wife is for her to communicate with you on a daily basis regarding how she is feeling—including and especially if she is craving alcohol. Another way she can participate in gaining your trust is to help you understand what she has learned from rehab about the pain and anger in her life that has caused her to drink as a coping mechanism. This will be evidence to you that she has gained awareness and perspective about her addiction, and hopefully she will see this as a very crucial piece of the trust-rebuilding phase of her sobriety.

∞ *Dr. He ~ Dr. She* ∞

Pregnant Wife Worried About Husband Just Out of Rehab

Dear Dr. He Said, Dr. She Said,

I am in my sixth month of my first pregnancy and my husband has just finished 30 days of rehab for alcohol addiction. I have tried to be very supportive of him because I know he wants to get better for himself and for me and the baby. However, it has been really difficult for me to not be resentful of how depressed and anxious he is since he stopped drinking. I'm glad he stopped, but why can't he be more happy and excited about our pregnancy? I thought he would feel much better after rehab, but his moods seem to be almost worse than before he went in. What advice can you give me about how to handle this better?

Jennifer, La Costa

Dr. He

Dear Jennifer,

It must be very confusing and scary for you to be supportive of your husband's recovery from alcoholism, only to discover that his recovery also distracts him away from "being there" with you during your pregnancy. Having both of these events happening at the same time is very challenging because both pregnancy and addiction recovery require focused daily attention. Your husband's depression and anxiety are quite natural responses right after rehab due to the fact that he no longer has a crutch (alcohol) to use as a way to cope with his everyday stress. This is actually good news in that he is finally learning how to deal directly with his feelings rather than numbing himself with alcohol. Coming out of rehab is just the beginning of an enormous learning curve for him, so hopefully he is attending AA meetings and has a sponsor and is working a 12-step program as a way to continue the work he did while in rehab.

Because *you both* are in very vulnerable positions, it is crucial that you two find a way to communicate on a daily basis about what you are experiencing individually. Even if he is too caught up in his own pain to share in the everyday joys of your pregnancy, you both can "be there" for each other by taking 10 or 15 minutes each day to sit face to face and take turns downloading about the high and low points of the day. If your husband has been self-medicating with alcohol for a long time, it means that he is having to learn—maybe for the first time in his life—how to trust his own ability to deal with his life (and his wife) straight up without the crutch, all the while fighting the demons in his head that push him to go back to drinking. Bottom line, Jennifer, is that being done with rehab doesn't mean he is done with his demons.

Dr. She

Dear Jennifer,

I imagine you must be feeling very overwhelmed going through two huge transition periods of your life simultaneously: your first pregnancy and being with your husband during his recovery

process. As Dr. He suggested, you will need to understand that your husband might not be in a position to provide as much emotional support as you need for the time being. He is going through radical changes in the ways he perceives and operates in the world and this all requires a lot of focus and attention to emotions that he is not familiar with.

To help you through your first pregnancy, I would highly encourage you to call on the support of all the women in your life who have children and have fresh memories of their first pregnancy. I would also encourage you to read books and take birthing and parenting classes. I encourage *you* specifically to do these things because these extra measures will help you to not feel as alone in your pregnancy as you might be feeling now. In time your husband will become more present and emotionally available to you and the baby.

Secondly, I would encourage you to attend some Alanon meetings. Alanon is a group run by Alcoholics Anonymous geared towards the loved ones of alcoholics. These meetings are intended to help you better understand what your husband is going through emotionally, psychologically, and physically as he faces the world newly sober. They will also help you learn to identify any co-dependent behavior you may have around his addiction, how to communicate more directly with him, and how to take care of yourself more effectively. These meetings will provide you a lot of support as you identify with other women going through similar experiences.

Thirdly, I would also encourage you to get into some couples counseling with your husband. You are both learning how to take on new roles in life that require being responsible adults in a way you have not faced before. As you grow and go through these huge internal changes, you will need to create a new way of interacting and communicating with one another that isn't currently in your repertoire.

Although this is an extremely challenging time, I applaud your husband for taking these steps now. You have four months left to hunker down and take extremely good care of yourself. I wish you all the best!

∞ *Dr. He ~ Dr. She* ∞

Wife is Overweight

Dear Dr. He Said, Dr. She Said:

My wife has gained about 35 pounds since we were first married 10 years ago, and I am not feeling attracted to her anymore. I've really been trying to get past it. She's a great woman, but she's just been struggling with her weight. She can obviously tell I'm not as amorous with her as I used to be, but I just tell her that I'm stressed out with work. Is there a way for me to talk to her about this?

Dave, Encinitas

Dr. She

Hi Dave:

There are a couple of pieces to this complex puzzle for you to explore. One is whether you are both in agreement about the personal responsibility you each hold to care for yourselves physically, emotionally and spiritually as a way to honor the relationship. The other piece is to check out whether your personal expectations of your wife's appearance are realistic.

If your wife is struggling with her weight, she may need to explore what the emotional piece is behind her eating. We all do some degree of *eating as a result of emotional stress*. But if there is a significant amount of eating, there is most likely a consistent and significant emotional issue underlying the pattern. She also may be stuffing some feelings she has about the relationship. Weight can often become a symbolic barrier we build between ourselves and our partner. How is the emotional connection in the relationship? If that is lacking she may not be open to the physical intimacy herself and may be unconsciously putting up a "weight wall."

A good way to approach the weight issue with your wife is from a place of concern regarding what emotional stress she might be dealing with *versus* her physical appearance. Talking to her about her emotions is a way to create a safe venue to discuss a sensitive issue. The lack of physical attraction can follow as a secondary concern.

In addition to feeding the emotional safety of the relationship it would be helpful to check out your expectations of your wife's appearance. Aging, birthing children, and life stress all have an impact on our bodies, yet we all tend to have media-hyped, unrealistic expectations of maintaining the body of a twenty year old. Our ideas of what is attractive can mature as we grow and open our minds and hearts to a wider depth and breadth of appeal.

Dr. He

Hey Dave,

This topic is such a mine field for couples to try to navigate without getting a limb blown off. *The truth, however, is that we all deserve to be physically attracted AND attractive to our partners.* Heck, it's

a big part of how we all get together in the first place, right?! Just because a few years have passed doesn't mean that we have to lose that sense of what is stimulating to us about our partners. And when it comes to sustaining a long term sexual connection with someone, *wanting to feel physically attracted to your partner is okay.*

As we have talked about before in this column: Being men, we tend to be more visual when it comes to sexual attraction, while women may be more emotional in what turns them on. So again, it is reasonable for you to want and need some level of physical attraction toward your wife. But there is another side of this, Dave. *Are you holding up your end of the relationship bargain by contributing to the emotional intimacy between you and your wife?* (By the way, if your answer to this question is either, "Huh?" or "What does that mean?" then your answer is "no.") If you are not, then she has just as much a right to complain about your shortcomings in the desirability department. As partners, it's important for you both to *sit down and talk about what you both need* to sustain your sexual attraction to each other.

∞ *Dr. He ~ Dr. She* ∞

Husband Looks at Pornography

Dear Dr. He Said, Dr. She Said,

My husband likes to look at pornography on the Internet. This is something that feels kind of sick and disrespectful to me personally. He minimizes it by saying that “all men do this” that it has nothing to do with me, and that it’s not as if he is having an affair with some other woman. We argue about this and never get anywhere with it. Please help us!

Laura, Oceanside

Dr. He

Dear Laura,

Both Dr. She and I have often heard men make this argument as a way to justify their need for a fantasy life that is stimulating. As a generalization, we as men are probably more wired to be sexually stimulated visually, while women are probably more wired to be sexually stimulated emotionally. Despite *whatever* predispositions we may have, however, what we are also talking about—and what we write about a lot in response to the letters to this column—is *how a couple creates and maintains a feeling of partnership between them.*

When men view pornography, they don’t usually take the time to consider how they might feel if their wife or girlfriend looked to feed her sexual fantasy life by seeking emotional stimulation, (i.e., *emotional interaction*) with some other guy, and how betraying and disrespectful that might feel. Creating a fantasy life in one’s mind based on a visual image other than what or who you are being intimate with at the moment, keeps you removed from that immediate connection. The same goes for creating a fantasy life around an emotional feeling for someone else in order to feel stimulated sexually. It just doesn’t help to feed the connection with the person in front of you.

Unless a couple can come up with a shared fantasy life that they both create together and feel mutually satisfied by, we believe hanging out in Fantasy Land keeps two people from dealing with each other straight up and in the moment.

Dr. She

Hi Laura,

Men are hardwired to believe their sexuality is focused outward physically. Most men also are socialized to believe looking at porn is a “manly” thing to do. Women are hardwired to associate their sexuality with their inner senses and emotions. Because of this, many women feel men are objectifying women by looking at porn sights for their sexual stimulation, *that a man is disconnecting his emotions from his sexuality.*

A woman will begin to mistrust a man who is emotionally cut off in lovemaking because it doesn't feed the connection. Many men make the argument that while they can be disconnected emotionally from porn involving women they don't know, they can be emotionally invested during lovemaking with women they care about. Women often don't have or understand this on/off switch and are unable to compartmentalize the way many men can which again, keeps them from trusting men who can disconnect from their emotions around sex. To women, if men can switch their emotions off while watching porn, it means they can just as easily disconnect from them while making love.

As Dr. He mentions, we are talking about how to develop a respectful partnership. If a woman does not feel respected because her husband or boyfriend looks at porn, her feeling about this needs to be taken into consideration for the partnership to work. If the porn is more important to the man than the relationship, then that man is probably emotionally capable of only being a "me" for the time being. Considering what feels respectful to your partner is a huge part of making a relationship work and you have every right to feel the way you do. Good luck!

∞ *Dr. He ~ Dr. She* ∞



Age, Religion & Culture

Age Difference in Relationships

The acceptance of large age differences in relationships is very much imbedded in the attitudes, values and beliefs of particular societies and is not a universal (e.g., many arranged marriages in different cultures are between older men and younger women). But how do we make relationships with large age differences successful and what are some of the roadblocks we need to be aware of? How can we approach the relationship so it is successful?

1. Make sure your values are similar.

Red Flags: It is difficult for a 25 year old to really know who she/he is and what he/she wants/needs as compared to a 40 year old who has lived more life, had more experiences and more opportunity to emotionally mature.

2. Make sure you are equally matched in your emotional maturity.

Red flags: Don't get together because you want to be "taken care of," or one in which you are looking for the father or mother figure you never had. Starting out in a parent-child relationship is starting out in a relationship with a strong inequity of power. That person who is in the child role will eventually grow up and feel resentful. Make sure both partners have an equal voice in the relationship. Also, don't get in a relationship with a younger person to avoid a mid-life crisis. It will be a short-term distraction, but eventually we all have to deal with the issue of aging and what that means to us.

3. Make sure that despite your age differences you are in a similar stage of life and want the same things.

Twenty-five year olds may feel they never want children but may change their mind 10 years later. If they married a 40 year old, then that 40 year old is 50 when they change their mind and may feel they are too old to start a family. Also, younger partners who are in a stage of life where they are career driven may find their older partner in a mid-life crisis, or winding down their energy and feel they can not relate. Being conscientious and aware of the differences and accepting them along the way will make a big difference in creating a successful relationship. If distance, resentment, and lack of appreciation about those differences grows without being addressed it could pull the relationship apart.

4. Think ahead and try to get in touch with the idea that at age 60 you might be vital and your 80 year old partner will have lost some of their vim and vigor.

How are you with the idea of taking care of an elder partner? We are all faced with this question whenever we enter into a relationship because you never know what injury or illness may develop in any of us at any given time.

Age differences are similar to gender differences in that we might not be able to really know what is going on with our partner in that we didn't grow up their same gender but we can grow and learn

to appreciate those differences and how we enrich our lives from being around someone who is different than we are. The same is true for age.

∞ *Dr. He ~ Dr. She* ∞

Born Again Christian Feels Duped

Dear Dr. He Said, Dr. She Said,

I am a born-again Christian, and I married a man five years ago who at the time told me he considered himself to be an “okay Christian,” but that he could also see himself becoming more and more deeply involved in his Christian faith as a result of being with me. This was an important piece of why I agreed to marry him. When we dated he would often accompany me to services. In the time since we’ve been married, however, he has not followed through and has always found some excuse to give me about why he won’t attend worship or bible study with me. I feel like I have been deceived. I have prayed and prayed and talked to my pastor about this, and he has even tried to talk to my husband as well—all to no avail. I didn’t marry this man to get divorced, but I need to know what else to do because I find myself getting more and more depressed and angry about our marriage. Can you help me?

Rachel, Cardiff

Dr. He

Dear Rachel,

While Dr. She and I are not qualified to give you spiritual guidance regarding your religious beliefs, we *can* comment on what you have written about concerning your feeling deceived by your husband’s lack of follow-through on the “promise” you feel he made when you both got married. You don’t say in your letter, Rachel, but I certainly wonder how he justifies himself saying one thing to you and doing another. I also wonder whether you just assumed he would change for you once you got married.

I can see why you feel duped, but there must have been red flags (concerns) happening in the relationship before you got married that you may have ignored. Five years is enough time to assume that your husband is showing you his genuine feelings about his Christian faith despite whatever promise came out of his mouth back then. While your feelings of depression and anger about his religious shortcomings make sense, I have to believe that most of your pain must have to do with the fact that he lied to you seven years ago and has never been accountable for that lie. Has he been a follow-through kind of guy in other areas of your married life? Or is this one example of any number of ways that he says one thing and does another? The type of mistrust and disrespect created by his lack of follow-through on this kind of commitment from him *before you got married* would rock the foundation of any marriage. Rather than try to convince him that he should “see the light” and spend more time in church with you, Rachel, talk to him about how disrespected, betrayed, and—as a result—mistrusting you feel about his duplicitous efforts to win you over seven years ago.

Dr. She

Dear Rachel:

We could insert many different values into the space where you are referencing your husband's "Christianity" and realize that what we are really talking about is: 1) perception and expectations at the beginning of a marriage versus the reality of what unfolds in the marriage and 2) individual differences and how they affect a marriage.

As Dr. He suggests, we all have a strong filter during the dating phase of our relationships in which we see what we want to see in our partner. Our partner can also be good at projecting onto us what they think we want to see. As the intimacy and routine of life becomes more consistent, what starts to show itself are the realities of who we married and who we are in intimate relationship. So, your husband was either really good at hiding the truth from you *and/or* you were really good at seeing what you wanted to see. It is also probable that your husband *really* wanted to be who you wanted him to be, and he later discovered that Christianity was not as big a priority for him as you or he had hoped. Another possibility is that he has changed his belief systems over time as he has had his own experiences with Christianity. I'm wondering if you have explored any of these possibilities with him.

So now you are faced with the fact that you and your husband have some fundamental differences in your belief systems... so what to do about that? It would be a similar question if you had distinctive differences in your political, philosophical, or child raising beliefs. The question is: Can you see your differences as being complimentary or do they feel threatening to the core of who you are? Can you appreciate whatever your husband's spiritual beliefs are or do they get in the way of your quality of life together? Can you find a way to connect around your differences and continue to grow as individuals and as a couple consequently? Could you agree on how you would raise your children spiritually if you were to have children? Also, is religion the only issue that needs to be considered in your marriage?

If you are able to work with the differences in your marriage you could still develop a strong union. If your tolerance for the differences between you is low then you will struggle to stay connected. I would encourage you to get some counseling to flush out these questions that both Dr. He and I have posed. Good luck!

∞ *Dr. He ~ Dr. She* ∞

Boyfriend Sending Inappropriate Text Messages

Dear Dr. He Said, Dr. She Said:

I have a boyfriend who I am crazy about, and we have considered taking it to the next level and getting engaged, but there is one big concern I have about him. He tends to text message a lot and some of his texts to other women I find to be inappropriate. I have inadvertently seen a lot, and they have some sexual overtones. I wonder about the texts I haven't seen. My boyfriend said that it is innocent banter with women he knows and that it is just part of the new "texting world" and "texting language," and it is only for fun. He dismisses my concerns and tells me I am just being insecure. I have also seen some of his Facebook messages to other women, and he will begin them with "Hi Gorgeous," which makes me have a pit in my stomach. Am I completely out of line to have concerns and is this just a part of the new world that I am not use to or do my concerns have any merit? I would appreciate your perspective.

Donna, Del Mar

Dr. She

Dear Donna,

Thank you for your inquiry. You pose an important question for today's times. I think that your boyfriend's reasoning that talking with sexual overtones in texts is part of the "new world" philosophy probably comes from a place in him that is caught up in the intrigue and "quick hit" those types of texts provide. The instant gratification of one's ego is what comes into play with those types of interactions so you might need to take a look at your boyfriend's security within himself. Is he comfortable with himself or does he need a lot of that external stroking of his own ego? Does he need to have a private life of "virtual relationships" that you are not a part of? What does this mean about his ability to be forthcoming and honest in his relationship with you? If his needs stop getting met through texting will he turn somewhere else out of habit and patterning of behavior?

Your concerns are very valid and it is concerning that he not only dismisses your feelings but that he rationalizes having a sexual overtone with other women as "part of the new world." He justifies his behavior this way because he is desperate to get his own needs met through other avenues but the downside is it comes at the expense of making you doubt your own judgment and intuition and it threatens the integrity of the relationship. The biggest concern I have is that you doubt your own sense of what commitment looks like in a relationship and that you would be willing to marry a man who doesn't share your same sense of what commitment walks and talks like. I would greatly consider slowing the train down until you two have developed an agreement about what being a "we" means and your boyfriend is able to be more accountable for his words and actions.

Dr. He

Hello Donna,

What it comes down to is the fact that this kind of sexual text messaging, also known as “sexting,” is not one bit different than if you and your boyfriend were together at a bar and he started to hit on another woman who was standing right next to you. I think you are very clear with how you would feel about that happening, right? If that were the setting and he threw the old *if-you-were-more-secure-as-a-person-you-wouldn't-feel-threatened-by-my-behavior* line at you, would you buy that? Or the obviously manipulative *there-should-be-nothing-wrong-with-me-wanting-to-have-a-little-fun* line? I would hope that you would not tolerate that kind of treatment in that kind of setting. Well, I don't see your situation with your boyfriend texting other women as being any different at all from that bar scene scenario, Donna. I don't know your boyfriend, so I realize that he may be the best guy in the world. However, respect is respect is respect. It doesn't matter what communication medium we are talking about, (texting, email, voicemail, snail mail, web cam, twitter, Facebook, Morse Code) sexual flirtation with someone other than the person you are currently being intimate with is disrespectful and a betrayal.

My big concern for you is the fact that you talk about taking things “to the next level” and getting engaged to a guy who is either, a) addicted to sexting and can't imagine giving it up, or b) totally clueless as to what constitutes respectful behavior in a relationship, or both. If he is addicted—and I use that word deliberately—to getting the “hit” he gets when he knows he has other women out in the world that he can “keep on the line,” then he needs to get out of denial about that and be honest with you about whether or not he is willing to give up the “hit” he craves from other women. If he is clueless about what respectful behavior looks like, then he needs to grow up and start to learn how to treat a woman that he supposedly loves. I suspect he is some combination of both a) and b). From my vantage point, being engaged to a guy who is doing what he is doing to you and to the relationship right now is just a recipe for heartache—for you.

∞ *Dr. He ~ Dr. She* ∞

How Technology Affects Relationships

Dear Readers:

Technology has created a paradigm shift in the way we all communicate and connect with one another. As computer chips have gotten smaller and faster, it seems as if we have access to the whole world at our fingertips in our everyday lives.

When it comes to meeting potential life partners, the internet provides a huge array of opportunities for people to introduce themselves to one another, but with that opportunity also comes a whole new set of challenges and responsibilities. Looking for a soul mate on an internet dating site in the comfort of our own Wi-Fi connection can at least keep all of our insecurities in check until the first meet-and-greet. But the fun *really* begins when the ideal online profile and photo runs into the reality of the first face-to-face impression! If the real person we meet ends up being far different from the ideal person we've read about, then it's pretty hard not to mistrust someone who has misrepresented themselves—*before any kind of relationship has even been established!*

Because of the whiz-bang speed that technology has served up to us to access information, we have become hooked on immediate gratification. Press a button and you have an instant connection, feedback, affirmation, and update on relationship status all through texting, Facebook, Twitter, chat forums, blog sites, instant messaging, and e-mails. This sets a low bar for frustration tolerance when it comes to getting our needs met in relationships because *it actually takes time to establish trust with another human being*. If someone in a face-to-face moment with their partner is not feeling they are getting their needs met, it is much too easy to run to the internet to satisfy that need for affirmation. The problem is that accessing the internet has absolutely nothing to do with accessing *self-respect*, which *really is what is needed* in those frustrating relationship moments. While the internet is here to stay and has a productive place in our lives, the energy we direct toward the internet—when it becomes a distraction from our partners—takes energy out of our intimate relationships. The internet has become a huge escape route for many.

Marriages suffer as couples sit and stare at their computer and phones at the expense of conversation and connection with their mate. How many of us can get through a dinner without checking our cell phones? Receiving text messages and voicemails triggers our need to make sure we don't miss out on something important—all the while forgetting that the most important thing in our life is sitting right across from us. So in addition to having the separate experience that sitting and staring at the TV or movie screen is with our partners, we now contend with an additional distraction with electronic devices.

The amount of time that adults and children spend on the computer has reduced the communication between parents and their children due to the lack of quality time they spend together. Children are not learning the art of socializing, conversation, and connection. Theirs is a generation of multi-taskers and video-gamers. All of these distractions heighten the development of ADD while at the same time lowering the experience of being present in the moment with themselves and with others.

While electronic devices and the internet have probably helped us all organize our lives in many ways, we also need to take steps to minimize the negative effects of technology on our relationships. So at the very least: a) make agreements about how much time everyone spends on the internet aside from work or school, b) agree to have “offline” days and see how the energy shifts towards each other and with your children, c) devote time to talking at dinner where everyone is unplugged, and d) teach your children through example and talk to them about the importance of personal connection.

Whatever the future holds for us in terms of technological advances, we cannot imagine a future that substitutes technology for good old-fashioned, face-to-face, human interaction.

All our best,

∞ *Dr. He ~ Dr. She* ∞



Grief & Midlife Issues

Still Grieving After Two Years

Dear Dr. He Said, Dr. She Said,

It will be two years since my wife died this coming November, and already I am feeling dread about the upcoming holidays. We were married for 17 years and have two children who are wonderful. My friends tell me I should get out more and try to meet somebody, but it still feels like she died just yesterday. Part of me wants to move on, but another part of me can't imagine being with someone else yet. Will I ever get over this?

Tony, Rancho Bernardo

Dr. She

Dear Tony:

After 17 years of marriage, missing your wife two years after her death is **completely** natural and normal. Initially, you had to grieve the loss of your wife in your life. You didn't mention how much time you had to prepare for her death, but the less time you had, the bigger the shock probably was to your system. Since then, you have had to completely adjust to day-to-day life without your partner, who was the one other person in your life that you shared every day and a myriad of intimate moments with.

In addition, you will have to adjust to a completely new life style—that of being a single father and a single man in the world—facing each day from this very new vantage point. *This all takes time.* Spending time with your children, establishing a new relationship with them, holding the memory of their mother now as a single parent, is all new territory ahead. *This may take a lot of time.* So, if you have friends that are encouraging you to bring a new partner into your life, I think they might not fully grasp what it is you are going through. You need to continue to allow yourself to progress through the pain, become familiar with the newness of your situation, and find your ground again before you begin a new relationship. It *is* important that you stay connected to the people you love and who give you a feeling of being anchored in your life. I wish you the best of luck, Tony.

Dr. He

Hey Tony,

As Dr. She mentions above, two years is still a reasonable amount of time for someone to still be grieving the loss of a loved one. Based on what you've written, you seem to be in the middle of what we call the Grief Cycle, which has some very predictable stages. They are: Denial (trying to avoid the inevitable), Anger (frustrated outpouring of bottled-up emotion), Bargaining (seeking in vain for a way out), Depression (final realization of the inevitable), and Acceptance (finally finding the way forward).

If it is still difficult for you to imagine being with someone else, it sounds like you may still be in the Depression stage. It is very common for a person to “get stuck” in this particular phase of grieving before the reality of the situation sinks in and one reluctantly accepts what has happened in order to move on. Turning away from any solution and any help that others may offer can also be a sign of being stuck in depression.

Rather than try to talk you out of it, I would hope that your friends could just “be with you,” *even to accept you in all your sadness*. You must be feeling very alone, and I imagine that you could use some unconditional companionship as well as a steady stream of support. Ask one or two good friends or family members to help you through this, Tony. And hang in there. There is light at the end of this tunnel, and I want to encourage you to keep reaching towards it.

∞ *Dr. He ~ Dr. She* ∞

Grief and Loss Over Death of Daughter

Dear Dr. He Said, Dr. She Said:

My husband and I lost our daughter to a drunk driver a year ago. She was twenty-eight. We have, of course, been deep in grief over our loss. Now we are struggling to keep our marriage together. I've heard that grief can cause divorce, but I also know we struggled even before the death of our daughter with our emotional distance. I realize our grief has exacerbated the problems that we've already had, and I feel I can't really share with my husband my pain as much as I need to. I think down deep we don't really want to end the marriage, but neither of us has much energy to put into it. I'm stuck and not sure whether to give up on the marriage and start a new life. Any advice?

Lois, Carmel Valley

Dr. She

Dear Lois:

As a mother, my heart goes out to you in the sincerest way possible. I am truly sorry for your loss. As you know, losing a child is the most difficult grief to bear and the process of grieving a child might take an entire lifetime. The pain of your tragic loss will become more manageable over time and the business of getting on with life will become more imaginable. This first year, as you know, had to be the most difficult as you were managing not only grief, but shock as well.

The most important thing for you and your husband to grasp at this point in time is that *this is **not*** the right time to make a decision about the relationship while you are in the disorienting depths of grief. Here are a few things to consider:

1. Each partner of a couple grieves and copes with their loss in different ways and men and women tend to grieve differently. For example, a man may feel he needs to be stoic for his wife. Men know the physical and emotional bond of a mother and child is primal so assume the grief is deeper. Men also tend to feel they have to step up and take charge in a crisis situation. So your husband may be more of a silent mourner and perhaps has gone into *survival mode* to manage his own overwhelm of emotions. This may lead him to be less available to process the ongoing grief with you. Giving each other permission to grieve in your own ways is important but also finding ways to come together around the loss of your daughter is vital for the health of the relationship.

2. Also, if either partner is shoving emotions down and not processing them with their partner, friends, or support system they might start to *displace* their grief and sorrow onto the relationship with their partner versus acknowledging the real grief they feel for their child. Experiencing uncomfortable grief and depression may lead one or both partners to believe running away and starting a new life will make the pain go away. At this point each partner might come up with a historical list of resentments to back that theory. You both need time to ferret out the grief of your daughter from the pain that exists in your relationship that the two of you only created.

3. Many men and women feel they have to reinvent themselves as a person when they lose a child. Parents feel a part of their soul has been cut out and they feel the need to reassemble themselves into a whole again without this part. The relationship also needs to reinvent itself in order to assimilate all the effects the loss of a child has on the life of the partnership. This takes a lot of time!

Please let at least two years pass of active grieving with your husband, friends, support groups, and/or counseling that involves telling your story and honoring the memory of your child before making any rash decisions about ending the relationship. Use this crisis as an opportunity to reinvent the relationship with your husband by trying to communicate and connect in a way you haven't be able to do in the past. I wish you all the best!

Dr. He

Dear Lois,

I cannot imagine how drained and disoriented you both must have felt over this past year from the tragedy of losing your daughter. Given the enormity of the pain, it would be impossible for your marriage not to be affected by that energy drain and emotional disorientation. It must feel like a cruel paradox to have to grieve the death of your daughter and at the same time attempt to live your lives as fully as possible.

For some parents, it is all they can do to just keep from becoming cynical about Life, much less gain some amount of healing. Other grieving parents feel called to honor the memory of their deceased child by setting up a charitable foundation or some sort of memorial. Then there are those who attempt to rededicate themselves to living their lives more fully and honestly as a way to honor the gift of life their child came to symbolize for them.

As a course of action for yourself and your husband, this choice might include finally working on and resolving the relationship issues that you both have yet to address successfully. Since you said in your letter that the emotional distance between you and your husband was present before your daughter's untimely death, I would guess that your daughter's presence in your lives may have been a significant factor in what kept you and your husband together. Maybe your daughter's memory could help motivate you both to give the relationship one last shot, so to speak, to see if it could be possible for you two to achieve some sense of closeness for the first time in a long time. Would it not be worth summoning up energy from some deep place within yourselves to finally resuscitate the love that ultimately brought her into your lives? If it didn't work, then at least you could feel like you both did your best to try to salvage the same creative and loving force that created your daughter. My wish for you is that the gift of the memory of your daughter serves as inspiration to help you both achieve something that might not be possible without it. Best of luck to you.

∞ *Dr. He ~ Dr. She* ∞

Feeling Stuck

Dear Dr. He Said, Dr. She Said:

My husband and I have been married and living in Carmel Valley for 15 years. We have two children who are eight and ten. My husband wants desperately to move to another country because he is feeling «stuck» living in this suburban routine and because he wants to experience living in another culture. I, on the other hand, am not so excited about the prospect of uprooting and leaving everything we know and have built for the “unknown.” I have a really hard time imagining pulling our children away from their friends and the life they know. The bottom line is that my husband and I are at an impasse and have been fighting about this non-stop for over a year. I believe that he is going through a mid-life crisis and just wants a quick fix. I keep telling him that moving to a foreign country is not going to be the cure for growing older, but he just keeps telling me that I am keeping him from living his life. Where do we go from here?

Elise, Del Mar

Dr. She

Dear Elise:

I think it is reasonable for you to want your husband to explore where his desire to make such a big move is coming from. You didn't tell us whether he was able to give you a clearer explanation about his longing to experience living in another culture besides feeling “stuck” here. It does sound like he is unhappy with his life, but I am wondering what other options the two of you have explored to deal with his rut of “living in this suburban routine.” Moving to another culture could be a fantastic life experience, but if you are right—that he wants it to be the “cure all” for a deeper unhappiness—then he needs to understand that he is going through a transition period and making a big jump during a vulnerable time has the tendency to backfire down the road. As we know, wherever we go we take ourselves along for the ride. However, if he has always talked about wanting to move to a foreign country, then perhaps it is not an impulsive “fix” and more of a “now or never” attitude that has his tension running high.

Obviously the two of you need to feel a lot closer to make such a big move, and I wonder if this is why you are fighting so much, i.e., that because you don't feel close, the idea of moving so far away and into the “unknown” feels even scarier because your relationship is so unknown at the moment. As we mention often in our column, one key way to feeling closer is to really listen and understand where our partner is coming from. It doesn't sound like either of you have taken the time to do this with one another.

Of course, considering the children is a huge factor, and they are at a very conscientious age where a big move would make a big impression on them. It is so important for you and your husband to be on the same page in your decision so that the children feel they are connected to their roots (their family) whether in a foreign land or right here in suburbia. Good Luck.

Dr. He

Dear Elise,

Your husband sounds like he has not spent much time trying to uncover the root of his restlessness and his feeling of being “stuck.” Even if you both never find a way to move to a foreign country for practical reasons, it seems important nonetheless that he dig a bit deeper into his psyche and soul in order to identify what itch needs to be scratched by living abroad. I would like to think that if he could convey to you a deeper understanding of what it is he needed in his life that travel symbolized, that you could at least relate to what he was asking for here a lot better and not feel so separate in this process.

For example, you don’t say as much in your letter, but if he has never traveled before, then it might make sense that he would yearn to explore new places as a way of growing in new ways himself as a person. I will assume that you can in your own way relate to the idea of the importance of personal growth.

If he *has* traveled or lived in another country at some point in his earlier life, then he may be yearning to recapture some part of himself that came to life or “woke up” as a result of living wherever that was. Many people make the mistake of believing that just because they no longer live under certain circumstances or certain living conditions, that the “magic” of those moments had more to do with that particular place that they lived rather than the special-ness that was already there inside them that happened to “wake up” as a result of living there. The truth is, that special-ness never leaves us! It never left him! It may have gone dormant, but it is always there for him and for all of us to tap into whenever we are ready to acknowledge who we *really* are and how we *really* want to live our lives—no matter where we live on the planet! Please suggest to him to talk to someone that can help him identify the part of himself that he may feel like he “left behind” wherever he was previously. And find some way to help support him to “wake up” that part of himself here in San Diego.

∞ *Dr. He ~ Dr. She* ∞

Keeping Interest After Empty Nest

Dear Dr. He Said, Dr. She Said:

I am the mother of two children who are both grown up and out of the house. One is at the end of her college career, and the other is out working a full time job and living on his own. I find that lately I am questioning whether I want to stay with my husband, though I have never wondered this before. When I look at him now, I'm not sure what I need from him anymore, or what the connection is. Obviously raising our children was the longest and largest part of our relationship. Now, I have no idea how to have a relationship with him or whether I'm even interested. Does this happen to other couples? Thank you for your feedback.

Maria, Del Mar

Dr. She

Dear Maria:

It is amazing how we go through these sizeable transitions with no map or direction, yet the landscape has completely changed around us. I think the first order of business that you are approaching is to take some significant time to figure out who you are separate from being a mother. The biggest part of that job is done, and you need to acknowledge how hard you've worked and imagine how every cell of your being has been invested in that full time. The landscape of mothering may not always be clear but your purpose and function in day to day life is. When we lose our compass regarding the direction of our life, it is *crucial* to stop and reevaluate what is important to you now and to understand that your needs and values may be very different from what they were before. Remember that the entire landscape of your life is different now! Only until you address that question will you be able to begin to gain a new perspective of your life. Then you can evaluate how you might connect with your husband from this new place. You will have to decide whether your new values are complementary—i.e., the way you take care of yourselves, the way you want to be in the world, your level of emotional maturity, what you want to offer to the world—all need to have some alignment. Your job as a couple now is to work towards this new chapter and as things begin to line up again you will feel a renewal of desire to be together again.

Dr. He

Hi Maria,

There is no simple answer to this one, Maria, and yes, many couples go through this once their children have “launched” out of the nest. I certainly hear you wondering whether or not being in a relationship AT ALL makes much sense anymore. But since you haven't questioned whether or not to stay with your husband until now or haven't mentioned wanting to leave him, this could very well be a litmus test for you both to “update” your knowledge and understanding of one another. No relationship can last if two people assume and expect each other to remain the same over the

course of time. I also wonder how long you've been feeling disconnected in the relationship and whether you've been aware of how empty you've felt, even while the kids were still growing up. Were there ever times when you looked at each other as being more than just the other parent of your children? It is very common for couples who focus their energy on raising children to subvert their own needs—as well as the needs of the marital relationship—in order to tend to the needs of the kids. It makes sense that you wouldn't know what you need from him anymore because you probably never knew what you both needed from each other beyond being co-parents. It may feel strange at first, but take the time to talk with your husband about all of your concerns, and then learn to apply the focus and attention you both gave your kids to each other.

∞ *Dr. He ~ Dr. She* ∞

Menopause

Dear Dr. He Said, Dr. She Said:

My 49 year old wife is going through menopause and man oh man she is on edge! Her moods are all over the place and she is very unpleasant to be around. I have been married to her for 10 years and although she can get angry I have never seen her like this. She is pushing me further and further away every day and sometimes I'm not sure I want to hang around anymore. We have an 11 year old daughter together (this is the second marriage for both of us) and she is also going off on my daughter in a way that I don't like. Everyone in the house is tiptoeing and staying out of her way. She has been like this for about two years and I am wondering if it is really normal for menopause to be like this or are things just changing. It seems everything I do these days is wrong! I don't want to break up the family but I don't want to live like this anymore either! Do you have any suggestions?

Greg, San Marcos

Dr. She

Dear Greg,

Well, first off I can understand why you are feeling pushed away and confused! Even with so much progressive information available to us, menopause is still not discussed openly or with great clarity. The effects of menopause show up in each woman differently. Just as we all have unique sensitivities to medications or allergens, each woman metabolizes hormones differently and thus experience the shift of hormones distinctively. However, there are more commonalities than differences such as mood swings, irritability, hot flashes, anxiety, weight gain, etc.

First and foremost I think it would be prudent for you to educate yourself on the physiology and symptomatology of menopause. This way, you are involved in this transitional period that your wife is going through in as loving and supportive a way as possible. As you become your wife's champion instead of opponent around this huge shift in her life she will feel you on her team and hopefully be able to talk to you about what she is experiencing *versus* taking those internal experiences out on you. This is tricky though because, although many women can feel their moods shifting, often they don't feel they have control over those mood swings.

You didn't mention how your wife is dealing with her menopause and, of course, *her* part is to manage what she is going through to the best of her ability. She obviously needs to learn to manage her emotions so that she is not negatively impacting the entire family. Ways to support your wife are to encourage her to get the treatment that makes sense to *her*. Some women will take hormones (synthetic or natural) and/or herbs, some will take prescription medication to help alleviate difficult mood swings, and some rely on acupuncture and exercise, while others will choose to go through menopause with no assistance at all. Supporting your wife down the path that is in alignment for her is of utmost importance. You both need to understand that your wife is going through a physiological shift and that her mood shifts are a direct result of the hormonal imbalances. As you

understand that better you will learn not to take her edginess as personally and she will know to remind you that it is not personal.

Other ways you can support your wife is to encourage her to exercise and give her the time and space to do that. You could even do some yoga classes and meditation together which are both helpful in recalibrating hormonal effects. Please have a heart to heart with your wife about the way her behavior is affecting you and your daughter and encourage your wife to help your daughter understand what she is experiencing so that your daughter doesn't take on any emotional responsibility that might not be hers. The most important thing is that your wife does not feel alone in this so please communicate with her! Good luck!

Dr. He

Hello Greg,

I am glad that after two years you are finally writing in for some feedback to an important situation that has obviously been difficult for you and your wife to navigate in a constructive way. Dr. She gives you a great overall picture of how to be a supportive spouse in this challenging phase of your wife's life cycle, and I think you yourself have an opportunity to develop some important relationship skills that could benefit you both. For instance, I will assume that as she is unpleasant to be around or "going off" on either you or your daughter, that it is very difficult for you to not feel personally attacked. As you heed Dr. She's advice to get more information about menopause, hopefully you will also learn that your wife's tense disposition probably has less to do with you than it does her physiology. This is the best way for you to learn to not take her edginess so personally. I would also bet that you making the effort to understand more about menopause yourself would also be seen by her as being very supportive.

Sitting down with her and making some kind of agreement (when she is not on edge!) about how she might better take care of herself when she is feeling hormonal without taking it out on you or your daughter would be a good thing to do with her. Asking her *what would feel supportive to her* in those tough moments would also be valuable. Does she need you to just listen while she gets her anger out? Or does she need feedback from you at that moment? If she just needs to take her frustration out on someone, you get to let her know very clearly what your limits are around that: you don't have to agree to be her whipping boy. But you also have to let her know that you are willing to hang in there with her and follow through on your wedding vow to be with her "through thick and thin." I get that you are frustrated and may feel a little hopeless, but try to put yourself in her shoes and wonder what this physiological stress must be feeling like for her. I would guess that if the situation were reversed that you would want her to be patient with you and what you needed. Two years, however, is definitely long enough for you to have endured this situation without strategizing with your wife about how she and you and your daughter can live together without being on red alert and tiptoeing around the house. Best of luck, Greg.

∞ Dr. He ~ Dr. She ∞

Superwomen Gone Mad!

For Women Who Are in Mid-Life and the Men Who Love Them

I am almost 47 years old and I just recently realized that I am smack in the middle of mid-life. Admittedly when it comes to the topic of aging I am a slow learner, good at denial, and very resistant. As I sit with this new piece of information I am realizing the dawning of this new chapter has been slowly creeping in over the past few years. Yet, there was one particular day that I finally grasped the reality that I wasn't just having a bad hair day or feeling tired...this was the new, weathered me. My skin had softened, my wrinkles were undeniable, my 20-20 vision had radically shifted, I no longer had unending amounts of energy, and my grays were now growing in at a new lightening speed.

But what was the most disturbing to me was the internal unearthing that was taking place. I was beginning to feel like a caged animal in my life...a husband, one child, my work. Don't get me wrong, I have a very loving, supportive husband, I adore my daughter and I find my work very meaningful. But it was the endless routine of it all that was driving me bonkers. The classic "Is this it?" mid-life question was creeping into the crevices of my consciousness.

All of a sudden I felt this desperate urge for separateness from the life I was living, an identity that was separate. I began to focus my desire to break out onto my perception of my husband. I was questioning everything...who was this man I was with, who was I when I picked him and would I pick him now and by the way who the hell am I now? There was an ongoing internal battle between the old me that knew my husband was a good man and this new instinct to question everything old and shed a layer of skin.

So, this is when I began to see the correlation. My feelings of dissatisfaction and claustrophobia were inter-connected with my eleventh hour recognition that I was indeed in the middle of my life. I clearly recognized the relationship between the two when I heard my thoughts reciting something like this..."This is my last chance to feel sexy and to have men find me attractive. This is my last chance to do something really meaningful in the world. This is my last chance to break out and feel alive as a young vibrant woman! **This Is My Last Chance!**

Although I had walked up to the door of the second half of my life I was holding on so tight to what I felt was my last chance to fulfill all the expectations that had formed my identity as a young woman. But the **conflict** was that the "trophy" of being a superwoman now undeniably felt like the weight of the world: the external firewall that was keeping me from my real self. Deep down I was beginning to reject the "me" that had subscribed to being directed by societal expectations of women being "superwomen"... working hard to look good, being successful in business, being "good wives" and "good mothers" ("Superwoman" is the modern day version of "the good girl"). There was a deep, inner part of me that was pushing hard to sprout through the surface and see the light of day...the self that wanted to feel alive from the inside out, not the outside in. I was in a huge place of transition and ready to birth something new.

I offer the story of my internal initiation into mid-life because I know many women personally and in my counseling practice that are going through their own private version of internal chaos at this

same juncture. And like many things we don't understand, we don't talk about it. When we don't talk about it we traverse through uncharted territory alone and without a compass. I believe the mid-life crisis of today's woman is unique to our generation because women are so much more financially and emotionally independent from our men and because many of us are on the brink of burn out from taking on the role of superwomen. Burn out leads many women in our generation to spend money recklessly, have affairs, run away, divorce, start over in new careers, and have a lot of plastic surgery to maintain their youth. And sometimes it is necessary to make new choices when the old choices are not compatible with the person you have now become. But I believe if we speak of this new brand of life crisis, support each other in it and help our mates to understand it we can get through to the other side without a lot of collateral damage. We can find a balance in being present and loving for the people in our lives *and* consciously attend to the parts of us that have been cast off and forgotten. Perhaps if we attend to this period as sacredly as we do a birth we will then be alive on the other side in a full way that we've never imagined possible... in "full bloom."

I wrote a personal piece about women's mid-life because the power of this transformative period can deeply affect the way women perceive their relationships and their lives. If you have a story to tell about your mid-life experience please e-mail me at drmlissatrent@aol.com. I am compiling essays to put into a book. Thank you!

∞ *Dr. She* ∞



Endings

Wrong Reasons to Stay In a Marriage

We talk a lot about ways to build the strength of a relationship, but today we wanted to share with you what we believe to be the wrong reasons to stay in a relationship that has completely broken down in trust, love, respect and appreciation despite all your efforts to save the marriage.

1. For the children

We know that it is devastating to break a child's heart, and this is the number one reason couples who are unhappy in their marriages try to stay together. However, you must also remember that the tension, negativity, detachment and coldness that the children will feel from you if you continue to live in a miserable situation can be just as devastating and *more* confusing for them than separation. If you deal with the truth in a positive way and your children see that you have made a decision that you will take responsibility for, that carries their best interest in mind and makes you a happier parent... they will trust you more than watching you make a choice to live in agony. Teaching them that being in a miserable relationship is a good decision is not the message you want to send your children.

2. For financial reasons

This is a big reason couples stay together and there is a lot of fear wrapped up in this one! Yes, the finances get more difficult and life styles need to change for awhile. However, time and time again we see couples adjust and find their happiness to be far more valuable than tightening their purse strings. Children also adjust to a change in lifestyle if the parents become more authentic and relieved after making their decision. Money is not the great equalizer for happiness so a readjustment of values is necessary when it comes to tackling the financial changes that come with divorce.

3. Loneliness or lack of confidence

Staying married because it beats being alone only sets you up to be depressed for the duration of the marriage. Yes, it is scary to be on your own out there in that big world. Take this time as an opportunity to rebuild and retrieve the aspects of yourself that have been squelched in your unhappy marriage or never even allowed to emerge! There is a lot of support out there so you don't have to do it alone. Staying in a relationship due to loneliness and lack of self-confidence is a "known" factor that will make you unhappy. Taking a risk to rediscover yourself and who you are in the world is a courageous act that most likely will pleasantly surprise you. Of course there will be an initial grieving period, but this can be embraced as part of the journey of rediscovery!

4. Because of what others will think

Some people stay in marriages because of religious beliefs, what parents think or because it will break up a community of friends. All of these reasons are very difficult to face but if your religion, parents, and friends have not been able to influence the relationship in a positive way up to this breaking point, you have to take the reins of full responsibility for the decision. Remember that you are the *only* one who knows the true dynamics of the relationship and it is for this reason that it is

your decision only. Getting advice from friends can be tricky because they will tend to project their own reasoning due to their life onto you and it might not be an appropriate comparison.

5. Because you are co-dependent and feel it is your responsibility to take care of your partner even though you are both miserable

If you are the one wanting to leave and you are staying only because you feel responsible for the other person's feelings, the best thing to do is to encourage your partner get some help so they can have additional resources to assist them through the break up. If you stay in the marriage under these conditions you will either be miserable, act out (e.g., have an affair), or completely emotionally detach from your partner making you both despondent! Be honest with your partner along the way so they are not shocked by your decision in the end. People who are co-dependent tend to tip toe around their partners' feelings and tend to shock them when they finally reveal their unhappiness. Walking on eggshells will send your partner into a more difficult spin than disseminating information along the way.

6. Because your parents never got divorced

Holding on to the "forever" picture of marriage that your parents role modeled for you isn't necessarily a bad thing, unless it becomes another excuse for you to avoid facing your responsibility to yourself to live a genuine, authentic, and (therefore) happy life. In other words, if being married means playing the role of "dutiful-married-person-because-no-one-ever-gets-divorced-in-my-family," *then the marriage is empty as a result of the lack of authenticity required to play that role.*

∞ *Dr. He ~ Dr. She* ∞

Cheating Husband Wants Divorce

Dear Dr. He Said, Dr. She Said:

My husband shocked me a few months ago with the news that he wanted to move out of the house. Yes, we had been having some problems, and while he swore he wasn't having an affair, he could barely look me in the eye. Last month he told me he wanted to file for divorce, and he now spends a lot of time around a particular woman—including when he spends time with our two daughters. I am so confused because he won't talk to me, and he refuses to admit the fact he is hanging out with this woman. Now our girls are very confused and wondering who this woman is in the grand scheme of things. He used to be such a great dad, but I don't even know who he is anymore. What am I supposed to do to take care of myself and my girls?

Lois, Carmel Valley

Dr. She

Dear Lois:

It sounds like your life got turned upside down and I can only imagine the intense shock you are in trying to find steady ground again without having access to any communication with your husband.

Though your husband *has* pulled the rug out from under you, I am wondering if there were warning signs that you didn't heed. For example: Was he physically more distant in the recent past? Did you feel emotionally disconnected from him? Did he exhibit avoidance behavior when you might have asked him directly about the relationship? Did he express unhappiness? Was he drinking more than usual, etc.? You need to ask yourself if you didn't *want* to see the signs. Perhaps if you can be honest with yourself then his behavior won't register in your system as *much* of a shock as it is, and you can begin the healing process and deal with the reality of the new situation.

Secondly, your husband's lack of communication, complete disconnect, avoidance of trying to work on the relationship *along* with his sudden desire to move out, do point to an affair. He is obviously avoiding communication as a way to protect himself from the fall-out that would come via telling the truth

The most important thing in the present moment is how you take care of yourself and the children given the circumstances you are faced with. *Regarding the girls*, you need to appeal to the importance your husband places in the well-being of his children. As you know, it is much too soon to bring another woman into the picture. By placing the girls in front of a new relationship so soon your husband will be putting the girls in a position of feeling split about their loyalty to you and their father while trying to make sense of a huge shift in what they have learned to count on the most. The girls need more time and emotional support in order to make sense out of all this. The girls also need to see the two of you communicating amicably so they feel safe in the new situation.

As you are struggling with dealing with your own emotions around this I would suggest therapy, mediation or help from a friend or relative who is not as emotionally impacted as you are in the

moment. Obviously adjusting yourself to this new existence is top priority since you will now have the job of being single mom and the emotional beacon for your girls. Individual therapy could help you make some sense of the situation, heal through the grieving process and help you learn how to communicate with your daughters.

Dr. He

Dear Lois,

Since your husband is not communicating with you directly, try getting some kind of dialogue going with him by email. It might be a way that he could feel more open about whatever exchange needs to happen between you two. First, leave him a voicemail on his cell phone (I assume he does not pick up when he sees it's you who is calling) saying that you intend to try to communicate with him from here on by email in an attempt to sort out what is best for the girls. Then sit down and write to him as the mother of the two daughters you both will have to co-parent for the rest of your lives! In the email, appeal to him as their father, the guy you know as being their "great dad." That guy is still there inside of him somewhere that (I would hope) would be concerned about what is truly in his daughters' best interests and how this all might be affecting them. For whatever reason he made the decision to stray away from you toward another woman, I would hope that who he is as a loving father would still be intact to the point where he could finally open up to dealing with you realistically about the care of the girls.

You have every right to ask him to refrain from bringing the other woman around when he is with your daughters. Not to push this point, but if divorce is inevitable here, it might be worth your while to consult with a divorce lawyer or a divorce mediator to get information about what sort of leverage you have in asking him to keep the girls away from another "love interest" for some specified period of time in order to keep their confusion about this whole ordeal to a minimum. As Dr. She says above, your primary responsibility now is to take care of yourself and your children. Taking care of your children *includes* making sure they get their share of "daddy time," but you don't have to agree to let them walk into a situation that you feel is not right for them. I know that the most difficult part of this is to have to deal with your own grief about the loss of your marriage in the middle of trying to take care of the girls. My hope is that appealing to his higher sense of Fatherhood will at least compel him to reconnect with you about their care.

∞ *Dr. He ~ Dr. She* ∞

Husband Abandons Family

Dear Dr. He Said, Dr. She Said,

My heart is breaking because my husband of nine years has decided to move out just a few months after we have had our first and only baby. We planned for this child for over two years, and he was completely invested in the process. Now, he feels he is incapable of continuing in the relationship because he feels like he has fallen out of love with me. He says he has lost his passion and—although he claims to love our baby girl—I think he is running from his commitment as a father and blaming it on me. He says he plans to be a “full-on dad,” but I think he is kidding himself about the reality of what a “full-on dad” actually means. I will admit that I have been stressed out and preoccupied with our daughter and not really knowing how to do the “mother” thing, but I feel my husband’s reaction to our lack of connection over the last year and a half is way over the top. I don’t know how to reason with him because he takes everything I say so negatively right now. How do I even approach this situation to get to the best outcome?

Judith, UTC

Dr. He

Dear Judith,

The first question that comes up for me is, as you both “planned” to have this child for over two years, did part of the process that “he was completely invested in” include you both getting information about how challenging having a child would be to the quality of your relationship? If not, then his bailing out becomes barely understandable—and *still inexcusable*—only in that he probably feels blindsided by a reality that he was in truth not prepared for despite his ability to convince you otherwise. If you both did talk and prepare for the inevitable test to a relationship that accompanies parenthood, then it sounds like his fears have overwhelmed him. Did he talk about his fears as part of the preparation process? And by the way, your preoccupation with your daughter is not unusual for a first-time mother. It probably has also been very difficult for your husband, however, not to feel replaced for the first time in your nine year marriage.

Sometimes men can feel trapped and resentful of a newly restricted lifestyle that was barely imaginable when the couple led a less controlled life with fewer responsibilities. I certainly wonder if all of this stress translated in his system as pressure and anxiety that the only way he knows how to deal with and control is to walk away. If he has had the expectation that you would be as loving and available to him throughout pregnancy and childbirth as you have always been, then somehow he was in fantasyland throughout this process and didn’t let you know. Despite your feeling that his reaction to you is over the top, I still am willing to believe that he has some very deep pain that he has yet to identify for himself much less share with you. And I would like to hope that after nine years of marriage—*before he carries out any rash decisions*—that he would take the time to dig deep into his heart to see if his desire to leave really is about some lack of love for you—or about some significant pain and fear about his relationship with you that he would rather not face and work through.

Dr. She

Dear Judith,

First of all, I want to say that I can only imagine how frightening and surreal it must be for you right now. You are in the middle of a huge life transition and to have your foundation pulled out from under you in the middle of trying to figure things out must have *you* deep in survival mode. Please do whatever you can to get support around you while you are trying to make sense of all this.

It sounds like your husband's fear was triggered at a deep and extremely vulnerable place. A place where all he knows to do is run. Having a child is a huge emotional transition to a very deep sense of responsibility. That kind of responsibility can come with a loss of identity and freedom, fear of not having control over one's life, fear of not being important to your spouse the way you were before the baby, and fear of not being able to manage the job of protecting a family in both an emotional and financial way. In addition, I wonder if your husband had a good role model in his own father or a good relationship with his own father. If not, he may be panicked about not being able to find his own identity as a father, and especially frightened to raise a girl whose gender he doesn't even identify with.

When your husband says he has lost his passion, I imagine he is holding on tight to an old vision of love and passion that was connected to having a lifestyle less mired in responsibility. I also imagine he may have a difficult time knowing how to relate to you passionately now that you are a mother. For many men, seeing your wife as a whole, sexy, passionate woman as she is nurturing a child can be difficult. I would encourage you and your husband to get into some couples counseling to normalize his fears and start to develop a new relationship that can incorporate a child without it feeling overwhelming to either of you. Good luck!

∞ *Dr. He ~ Dr. She* ∞

Can Separation Help?

Dear Dr. He Said, Dr. She Said,

My husband is asking me for a separation and he is swearing he wants to work on the relationship but feels he really needs some space. We have two children and I don't think moving out, even if for a short time, is a good idea. Could you please tell me your thoughts on this?

Cynthia, Rancho Santa Fe

Dear Cynthia,

We get asked this question a lot by many of our couples who wonder if this is a productive strategy to help the condition of a troubled relationship. The answer that we can honestly offer is...it depends.

From our experience, talking about the issue of separation usually includes exploring with the couple the *why* and *what* of taking a “time-out” from each other.

Why couples start to talk about moving toward separation is usually the result of two things: 1) heartbreaking emotional damage to the relationship that has occurred from a serious betrayal of trust, and 2) a sense of hopelessness that a positive dynamic could ever be regained. Often times an affair, alcoholism, or abuse are the main incentives for a couple to consider separation, however, most often couples find themselves in negative patterns as a result of anger and resentment that has built up over an extended period of time that the couple has not had the communication skills to resolve.

In terms of *what* purpose separation serves, there are two possibilities here: a) when the hopelessness felt is past the point of no return, then separation serves as the “natural” next step on the way to dissolving the marriage. If the hopelessness felt by one or both of the couple is not overwhelming then, b) separation can be a desperately needed hiatus to “stop the bleeding” and clarify the issues that need to be worked on in order for the relationship to survive. When separation is used to take a step back from negative dynamics that are insidious in the relationship and difficult to stop, then separation can have great value when used to proactively create new patterns.

Example b) is not for the faint of heart, but it seems to be the one your husband is asking for from you, Cynthia. It potentially could serve a useful purpose for your marriage, but it is not easy. Hopefully this is not a cowardly ruse by him to just get out of the house so that he can make it easier on himself to leave the marriage. This kind of separation would require a very clearly spelled-out agreement from the both of you that *you both* would have to be willing to follow through on. If he is serious about wanting to work on the relationship while separated, then certain healthy boundaries (e.g., monogamy) and reasonable expectations (e.g., weekly dates without children, marriage counseling) would be crucial for you both to be in agreement about. If he does not follow through with these types of steps then you would be wise to wonder about his true intentions to save the marriage.

The other issue here, Cynthia, is your understanding about what emotional pain your husband is carrying and feels so hopeless about that he would want to pursue this most desperate course of action. Obviously the relationship has reached a point of great pain and you are both accountable for your participation in getting the marriage to this point. It makes sense that you would be afraid of this whole proposition, but you also need to assume that he has not arrived to this emotional place on a whim or by himself.

We can suggest that before actually making the step towards physical separation, find ways of giving him space while he is still living at home. Find out if he would be willing to go to counseling together as a final option before separation is considered. Even if he felt separation was the only option it would be best to get into counseling now to help guide you through the process of staying connected and recreating positive relationship patterns in your marriage during the separation phase. The best of luck to both of you.

∞ *Dr. He ~ Dr. She* ∞

Separated But Still Living Together

Dear Dr. He Said, Dr. She Said,

My husband and I have agreed to separate, even though we will still be living in the same house. Financially we can't afford to have two residences just yet, and we also want some consistency for our two children in terms of them having access to both their mom and dad for awhile. What we need to know is, how can we live in the same house and be civil to one another until we can afford to rent another place for either one of us? We seem to battle each other over every little detail we try to negotiate—even around parenting. We both still feel so much anger and resentment toward each other that we were never able to resolve in our marriage. Can you help us?

Lucinda, Elfin Forest

Dr. He

Dear Lucinda,

We have heard this story many times over the past couple of years as our nation's economy has forced many couples to become very creative in managing the financial squeeze of the Recession. Continuing to live with each other throughout a separation is a very challenging situation for a couple that requires some very important agreements in order to make sure that there is the least amount of drama in the household. One obvious challenge for you and your husband, Lucinda, is the fact that—not only have you both never learned how to communicate effectively—but it also sounds like you both are having a very difficult time treating each other with respect. It seems as if you both could benefit a lot from learning some basic couple's skills around *fair fighting*. For whatever ages your children are, these skills will come in handy as you both deal with each other in how you co-parent them for the rest of their lives.

Dr She

Dear Lucinda:

You are in a very challenging situation that can work for some couples on a short term basis and for some couples it creates toxicity and more damage than good. In your situation, unless you get your anger and resentment under control, at least in front of the children, it seems your situation will create more damage. You mentioned that you wanted your children to have more access to your parents, but I am sure you do not want them to have more *negative* access to your parents. Living together after letting the kids know you are separating is confusing enough for them...don't compound it with anger and tension.

If your hands are tied and you have no other choice then to live in the same house I would encourage you to:

1. Understand that this has to be a short term situation and that your eye is always on the goal of separating.
2. Create a schedule where only one of you is home as much as possible so that you lower the possibility of tension and volatility between the two of you. Meet once a week to determine the schedule that is necessary and possible for the needs of that particular week keeping the kids in mind first and foremost. Who will be with the kids, who will cook meals, etc.
3. If you have a family member that can help watch the kids it might be nice for the kids to have the energy between you and your husband diffused with a third party around. As long as that person has good boundaries and you and your husband don't pull her/him into the middle, their presence could be a good neutralizer.
4. Get creative about your living situation. Is there someplace close that has a room for rent. Often couples who are in a financial pinch will rent an inexpensive studio or room and one parent will stay in the rented space one week and the other will stay in the house with the kids and then switch every other week.
5. Put some energy into creating peace in your relationship for the sake of the kids. Whether this is counseling or reading books, etc. Remember that you will be co-parenting the rest of your lives and it is important that you find some way to communicate respectfully to each other and the kids.
6. If you are dating other people do not bring them around the house. The household has to be a respectful environment. The kids won't be psychologically ready for that anyway!

∞ *Dr. He ~ Dr. She* ∞

Almost Divorced and Still Battling

Dear Dr. He Said, Dr. She Said,

My husband and I are (thankfully) in the final stages of our divorce becoming official. He cheated on me and the kids, and now he is still making my life miserable by hassling me about how I parent our children on my own. He didn't seem to mind my parenting skills when we were together. It feels like the same old controlling behavior he always threw at me only now in a different form. His lack of sensitivity and honesty throughout our marriage keep me in constant "battle mode" with him to this day no matter what we talk about. I can't imagine being civil with him even though he apologized—not very sincerely from my point of view—for all his bad behavior when we were married. I know this can't be healthy for me, but I can't yet seem to calm down. What do you suggest?

Lindsey, Elfin Forest

Dr. She

Dear Lindsey:

Yes, you are right, Lindsey. It is not healthy for you to hang on to your anger or, as I'm sure you well know, it is not healthy for your children to feel and experience the constant tension between you and your husband. Anger is toxic to our systems, and if we don't find a way to let go of it, or at least manage to minimize it, it can become all consuming. I do suggest that you get into some therapy and find a way to really take accountability for your own part of the demise of the marriage, as well as to forgive your husband. Forgiving yourself and your husband's inability to find a way to work through your disconnect is very important for you to be able to move forward. Once you get strong in yourself and don't allow the anger to consume you, you will experience a lack of interest towards your husband's controlling behavior, and the fact that it will affect you less will probably diminish the amount of control he tries to have over you. If someone is immune or unaffected by someone else's controlling behavior, the dynamic has to shift. Yes, you will have to co-parent with him. It will also be important for you to set some boundaries and limitations with him around the quantity and quality of your interaction, but you can do this while still remaining affable, which will be important for your children to witness. It sounds like whatever power struggles you had in the marriage are now being played out with the children (given his new concerns about your parenting) and you will need to learn to manage those in an adult way...a way you never learned to in the marriage. I would even suggest the two of you go to therapy together to have a forum to air out parenting differences and come to agreements around the children with a third party that can be a forum to hold you both accountable to your commitment to be the best parents you can be in a divorced situation.

Dr. He

Hello Lindsey,

Your admission that you can't imagine being civil with your soon-to-be-ex tells me that the feelings you are probably feeling now of anger, betrayal, and mistrust—while understandable—are

also getting in the way of the much bigger responsibility you now need to stay focused on, that being the decisions needing to be made about your children's welfare. Being in "battle mode" all the time with him keeps you both caught up in each other's drama, when *what you both need to be paying more attention to is how to make sure that the kids' needs are being considered first and foremost*. It is NOT in the best interests of the children for their mommy and daddy to be beating each other up over every little power struggle that really doesn't take into consideration what might be best for them (the kids). If you are somehow trying to make sure that your pain gets validated by him or that you need to somehow "teach him a lesson" about what he did to you and the kids, then this will only delay giving the proper care and attention that is necessary to help the kids find their way through this very difficult transition.

I get that you are hurting, Lindsey. But staying in battle mode with him also delays you giving yourself some much needed care and attention. It seems like it is time for Lindsey to learn how to take better care of Lindsey. I will assume that you do a more than adequate job at taking care of your children, and I will also assume that you probably spent a good deal of time throughout your marriage trying to "take care" of your husband, unfortunately to no avail. So my wish for you is that you learn how to take some of the energy you waste on battling with him and redirecting it toward healing yourself, learning the lessons of this unfortunate loss, and not allow yourself to stay stuck in his world. Talk to him through email for now or through your lawyers, but find a way to detach from your need to keep making him the bad guy. Your children need you. So does your own heart, psyche, and soul.

∞ *Dr. He ~ Dr. She* ∞

Breaking Up is Hard To Do

Dear Dr. He Said, Dr. She Said:

I have to break up with my girlfriend, but I don't want to do it face to face. I don't like confrontation, and I don't want to have to deal with the crazy emotional drama I know will happen if I do this in person. I've been in this situation before a few times with other girlfriends, and I'm just not up for it again. I am so tired of being with women who are over the top emotionally! I want a woman who is more laid back.

I'm thinking of writing her an e-mail to break up, but I wanted to get your feedback about whether or not you think it's okay for me to do it this way. We have communicated a lot throughout our six month relationship by e-mail, so I think it's a pretty normal way for us to talk. I know it's not the best way to end things, but I think it will be way easier for both of us this way. What do you think?

Thom, Carmel Valley

Dr. She

Well, Thom...just from your e-mail I think you already know the answer to your question. If we are talking about a respectful conclusion to the relationship we are talking about a face to face interaction. I'm hoping that since you have dated this girl for six months it means that you have some respect for her. And, I hope you have some respect for yourself that will call on your integrity to do the right thing and not take the easy way out. You need to give her the opportunity to experience the conclusion of the relationship with you and *you* need to learn how to *deal* with ending a relationship. Despite the fact that we are in a technological age where so much communication is done over the computer, when it comes to intimate relationships we have to rely on our human qualities and emotions to move through and process changes in our lives. An e-mail would not provide a real human interaction that would allow the completion of the relationship to seem real and resonate at an emotional level for *either of you*.

I'm wondering why it is so difficult for you to be in front of others emotions, especially women's. We are most often afraid of *others'* emotions when we feel ineffective at knowing or dealing with our *own*. And the fact that there is a trend in your life of breaking up with women who have dramatic emotional reactions tells me that you have not been very effective at communicating what is going on for you while you are *in* the relationship (thus, the shock value and high emotions from the women you break up with) or you tend to pick women who are highly emotional because they reflect a part of you that you are not allowing expression...your own emotions!

It is an added confounding variable when men feel they are responsible for fixing a woman's emotions. This is so overwhelming for men because it is so unrealistic and unattainable but unfortunately this belief is a historic hardwiring for men who grew up wanting to please their mothers (which naturally is the majority of men on the planet!). Whatever your girlfriend feels about your decision to end the relationship is *hers* to process in the end and e-mailing her won't change that inevitable fact. Your job is to just speak your truth in a respectful manner and learn how to manage your anxiety about disappointing someone. Good luck!

Dr. He

Dear Thom,

I have a couple of concerns about your email. First of all, the fact that you keep picking “emotionally over-the-top” women to have a relationship with says more about you than about the women you pick. Have you ever taken the opportunity to learn what attracts you to these kinds of women in the first place? If you’ve done the same thing with women more than a couple of times, then there is a pattern in place here *in you*, Thom that would be good for you to identify. The men that I have talked to who choose really emotional women are the guys who are themselves pretty disconnected from their own feelings. Maybe this is the kind of emotional balance you have needed from these women, which probably means that you would be bored with a woman who is more laid back. You’ve obviously gotten really good at connecting with “emotionally over-the-top” women and then breaking up with them. Since you are already good at that, why not try something different and take the time to learn something about yourself instead?

My other concern is, if you think breaking up with your girlfriend through an email will somehow make it “easier” for her, then you really haven’t learned very much about her or yourself in this relationship. I certainly get how doing it this way *would make it easier on you*, but for you to believe that you would somehow be making it easier for her is just the wishful thinking of someone who is emotionally immature. Six months is a long time to be with someone—even if a lot of it has been by email—only to call it off in writing. Beyond whatever ways breaking up with her by email is disrespectful (and make no mistake, Thom, it would be *totally* disrespectful to her and the relationship) *show some respect for yourself as a man* by having the courage to step up and be accountable for what you feel is true for you. Don’t disrespect your girlfriend *or yourself* simply because you’re “not up for it again.” You created this situation with her. Have the guts to be accountable for the half of the relationship that you’ve created. And really try to get the lessons that are in front of you here.

∞ *Dr. He ~ Dr. She* ∞

How to Know When a Relationship is Over

One of the questions we often get asked from the couples we work with is, “How do you know when it’s time to walk away from a relationship?” We believe it is an important question for couples to ask themselves as a way to get in touch with their level of commitment to work on the relationship.

We also believe that “**love is not enough.**” There are many people who believe they have married their soul mate that have ended up divorced, and it is usually because they didn’t learn how to do the work of what makes a relationship successful. Keeping a relationship viable requires that both people have a willingness to *do whatever it takes* to look at and deal with their own shortcomings in order to bring growth to the relationship. If this level of commitment is not present, then change and growth will be difficult to achieve.

We have compiled *five signs* for a couple to look for to identify when this level of commitment is not present, and consequently, to understand that it is probably time to move on:

Sign #1 - One or both of the partners in the relationship is unwilling to be accountable for his or her actions. For example, if there is continual assigning of blame back and forth and *neither partner is willing to take responsibility for their own part* of a stated problem, both people will feel hopeless that their version of the truth about the situation will ever be understood or respected. Only until there is an agreement that both sides will focus on their own “blind spots” will there be any hope that they can work out their differences and learn to trust each other. Stubbornness and inflexibility will only intensify the despair the couple is already feeling.

Sign #2 – Each individual of the couple mistrusts each other so much that their ongoing *interaction becomes destructive and toxic*—either physically or emotionally or both—and there is no accountability taken by either side to stop the destruction. Whether it involves hurtful and aggressive name-calling, unending criticism and condescension, or embarrassing each other in public, this kind of behavior can take a relationship past the point of no return when it comes to feeling any hope of achieving resolution. We can include here any lack of accountability for any destructive addictive behavior that is affecting the relationship such as alcoholism, gambling, pornography, etc.

Sign #3 - *There is ongoing dishonesty and betrayal.* A relationship can indeed be repaired even if there is lying and/or infidelity. However, if there is no remorse or accountability or redeeming behavior—and more importantly, if the lies and betrayal continue—then this will irreparably damage the cohesion and trust in the relationship. Unless there is full accountability taken by the offending, dishonest person, true intimacy will never be possible, and the foundation of the relationship will forever be on shaky ground.

Sign #4 – There is an ongoing demonstration of *lack of respect toward one another.* We all lose respect for our partners from time to time. If, however, this lack of respect continues to the level that one actually loathes the other and deliberately treats them in a hateful way, this will be very damaging to one’s soul. We live in a society in which we are more psychologically sophisticated than preceding generations, and we desire more emotional health in relationship in order to feel

genuinely connected to one another. If there is a lack of commitment to create this kind of “emotional glue” for the relationship then mutual respect will be difficult, if not impossible, to sustain.

Sign #5 - There is *no physical attraction* and one or both members of the partnership desire to be in a physically intimate relationship in order to experience their own sexuality on a regular basis. It is possible for two people to mutually agree that sex is not an important aspect of their relationship. Under these circumstances physical attraction is not as much an issue. However, sex fundamentally remains a powerful and unique way for people to connect at a physical and emotional level. Again, couples often lose their way sexually, yet if both are willing to identify and explore what gets in the way, then it is possible to regain hope of creating a new sexual relationship with each other. If attraction is completely gone, however, it means a core piece of the relationship is missing.

As you can see, the above five points drain the life, connection, and trust of any relationship. If these issues continue to exist in your relationship it is most likely time to change course for the good of all involved!

∞ *Dr. He ~ Dr. She* ∞



Making Relationships Work

How to Find an Emotionally Healthy Partner

Questions and Red Flags to Look for After the Third Date

When it comes to looking for a long term relationship, most people are looking for someone who has the potential of being a partner that they can count on and trust. Here are four questions (and of course there are always more, but we will start here!) we believe you want to know the answer to in order to find out if someone you are dating is emotionally equipped to be the kind of partner that can help make the emotional intimacy of a relationship thrive.

QUESTION #1

“Are you aware of what *your* part was in what went wrong with your last relationship?”

Most people are aware of what their partner did wrong during the last break up, but what really indicates a sign of emotional maturity and health is whether your date can talk about their own shortcomings in the demise of that relationship.

RED FLAG: Even if infidelity was the cause of the most recent break up, if he or she answers the above question by solely blaming the other person for all of the problems of their past relationship then they will probably be incapable of seeing their part of whatever struggles you have with them in your relationship.

A GOOD SIGN: If he or she says ‘yes’ and can articulate what their shortcomings were in that relationship, then you can at least trust that they are capable of taking some responsibility when things get tough between the two of you. In the case of infidelity, the partner might be able to say that he or she was not paying attention to the health of the relationship or the red flags of emotional distance that were glaring their way.

QUESTION #2

“Do you know what emotional wounds or baggage you have that you bring into this relationship?”

In other words, do you know what your emotional triggers or buttons are and how you react to them being pushed? We are all a product of our past experiences and hard wiring. Understanding how these experiences—especially the painful and wounding ones—have influenced us emotionally over the years is crucial to understanding how we react to our partner during times of stress in the present.

RED FLAG: If the answer is ‘no’, then he or she will have no idea how much their pain, fear, and anger has to do with you in the here-and-now versus whatever leftover feelings they hold onto from the past as part of their personality. This will hinder their ability to trust you.

A GOOD SIGN: If the answer is ‘yes’, then they will have the ability to identify what old wounds are being re-activated in the present by your behavior. For instance, if his last girlfriend cheated on him, does he understand how he was perhaps being overly-controlling of her? A woman might have an affair (which is not justifiable) if she felt her boyfriend was overly controlling, didn’t feel safe talking to him about it, or she had tried addressing the issue several times with no success in being heard.

QUESTION #3

“Would you be afraid of telling me something difficult if you thought it might hurt my feelings?”

In other words, are you adult enough to talk to me directly instead of tip-toeing or walking on eggshells around me?

RED FLAG: A relationship where someone tells you they just couldn’t talk to their partner because they would be afraid of their reaction usually ends up being very co-dependent and unhealthy. It will start to look and feel like a reenactment of the parent-child relationship. This will end up in a very boring, one-sided relationship, leaving both partners feeling very dissatisfied!

A GOOD SIGN: Talking about potentially painful and scary topics between two people actually is a healthy way of creating trust in the relationship. Being courageous enough to talk about difficult subjects can be a very loving and respectful gesture to each other.

QUESTION #4

“Would you be interested in knowing what my answers are to these questions?”

In other words, are you interested in knowing more about me and do you have the courage to want to know what and who I am emotionally?

RED FLAG: Unfortunately, some people are not very interested in who their partner is emotionally. They might think they need a companion for awhile, but if it is only a way for them to meet their own needs and not have a reciprocal partnership, the relationship is doomed to crash and burn.

A GOOD SIGN: If the person you are dating has an authentic interest in who you are—as well as a willingness to share who they are with you—then you are on the right track. Also, the other person’s willingness to appreciate and validate your answers to these questions is someone who can be trusted to help create a healthy partnership.

∞ *Dr. He ~ Dr. She* ∞

7 Things That Make Marriage Work

Dear Dr. He Said, Dr. She Said:

I've been reading your column as a very interested soon-to-be-wife. I'm getting married in July, and I'm trying to pay attention to what helps a relationship work best. I'm getting really nervous and don't want my marriage to end in divorce like my parents. Could you help me understand what you think are the most important things that make a marriage work?

Becky, Rancho Santa Fe

Dr. He & Dr. She

Dear Becky:

This is a question that we hear from our couples very frequently, so we thought we would respond as a unified voice since we teach the following concepts together when we counsel couples. It is great that you are paying attention to learning what makes a relationship work *before* you get married. This kind of proactive attention to *creating a partnership* will help you get into the groove of understanding that *relationships don't magically succeed without effort from both people*. They really do REQUIRE WORK, and that's okay! Working on your relationship doesn't mean there is something wrong with it. We believe quite the opposite to be true. If you are not proactively working on your relationship, then you won't develop the skills necessary to handle conflict when it arises.... and conflict will always—sooner or later—arise.

So, here are 7 things we consider to be vital to the success of a **long term** relationship:

1. *There has to be some alignment of basic values, goals, and direction* in a relationship, which serve as the basis of attraction between two people. It's hard to imagine proceeding to #2 if this one isn't in place!
2. *Coming from single life into a partnership requires both people to learn how to think and act more like a "we."* Many couples are shocked as they enter the sphere of relationship to find they have so much more to contend with - their partner's family, history, finances, idiosyncrasies, etc. All now become part of each other's concerns. So when making decisions, it is now important to consider the "we" along with the "me."
3. Becoming more of a "we" also means that *each person respects their partner as a separate individual* with his or her own thoughts and feelings *without* those differences becoming a threat to the relationship. This is a tricky one and requires a lot of communication and mutual agreements about how to navigate those differences throughout the relationship.
4. *Respectful communication is absolutely crucial to creating a trusting relationship.* Without it, the partnership will devolve into a chaotic battlefield where one of you will always be on the losing end.

The communication skill that most people lack is the ability to LISTEN to one another. Speaking to each other with respect whether you have positive or negative feedback to give is key.

5. *Show your partner affection.* Human beings are creatures who respond deeply to intimacy, touch, affection, kindness and respectful tones of voice. The nonverbal realm of communication affects the relationship deeply.

6. *Appreciate your partner.* It is amazing to see as many couples as we have who don't know how to appreciate one another. Every day notice something you appreciate about your partner and speak it out loud. It is NOT your partner's job to read your mind and assume to know how grateful you are about ANYTHING. It is YOUR job to express those words of appreciation.

7. *Each partner needs to be willing to be accountable for his or her own behavior* and for the "blind spots" they each bring into the relationship. You will both need to courageously reveal your complex and many-layered selves to each other over time and take responsibility for becoming aware of who you are and what you need in a relationship. We believe it is a vital part of a healthy relationship that both persons take care of themselves in mind, body, and spirit.

We wish you all the best!

∞ *Dr. He ~ Dr. She* ∞

Codependency vs. True Love

How to Tell Them Apart

This might not be a new topic for our readers, but it is one that we encounter every day in working with couples that we feel could use some clarification. We see that what many couples call **true love** is really a fear-based, mistrustful, and indirect way of dealing with each other that we call codependency.

What defines *codependence* or *codependency* is the way that: 1) we place the needs of others first to the exclusion of our own; 2) our self-esteem is dependent on gaining the approval of others; 3) we worry excessively about how others may respond to our feelings, so we walk on eggshells or tiptoe around each other; and 4) how all of this makes it very difficult for us to feel like we can be free to be ourselves in relationship.

Many of you have probably heard of codependency as it applies to those who have grown up in alcoholic households, particularly the Children of Alcoholics (COA) experience. We have observed, however, that this dynamic of how family members deal with each other indirectly also describes the picture of what many married couples create in their relationships that they have come to regard and accept as *love* or *being in love* with each other.

We try to teach couples to think of *true love* as being an emotionally mature and adult way of creating an equal partnership, rather than the parent/child, teacher/student, one-up/one-down way of relating that is created by codependency. This codependent dynamic is crucial to identify and challenge because—even though it may have felt good for the marriage for many years—it inevitably erodes the stability of an adult relationship because *by definition it precludes mature interaction between two people*. This mature interaction is what is necessary to create an emotionally safe environment for both people to be authentic and genuine with each other. Wherever there is codependency, there is fear. Wherever there is fear, there is mistrust. And wherever there is mistrust, there is instability in the relationship. Here are three things to look for:

1. Ask yourself whether you are *withholding your thoughts, opinions, or feelings* because you fear your partner's reaction. If so, this means that you cannot trust that your opinion will be valued in some way by your partner if you say what is true for you. *Think about what that says about your relationship*. Nor do we condone spewing out your feelings without some forethought or consideration about your delivery. Being aggressive or abusive with your feelings is just as unhealthy as walking on eggshells or tiptoeing around somebody. Being forthright and “adult” means expressing yourself directly, as in, “*I feel _____*” or “*When you do this particular thing, it makes me feel _____.*” No one has the right to criticize you for the way you feel.

2. Ask yourself what you may be projecting onto your partner. *Projection* is a defense mechanism in which one's unacceptable behaviors or thoughts are attributed to someone else. For example, a husband may insist he knows that his wife is cheating on him when he is the one who has the desire to stray from the relationship. We all project our own feelings onto others to some extent, but sometimes all we see is what we want to see. Our blinders keep us from keeping our relationship

real because we have unrealistic expectations of our partner based on our projection of what we want them to be vs. who they really are.

3. Ask yourself if you truly have an *individuated sense of yourself* separate from your partner's feelings, interpretation, or perception of you. **Individuation** is the innate tendency we have as humans to become individualized away from others (especially our parents), as well as to become conscious of our life purpose and know who and what we are and where we are going. Codependency on the other hand, keeps us locked in our emotionally immature patterns with one another and keeps us from maturing and growing as an individual on the planet.

These are three crucial components of true love, because when all three are present, there is a healthy pattern of inter-dependence between two separate people who are interactive, supportive and direct about who they are. Graduating to the honesty and trust of true love is what offers the hope of a healthy and happy relationship.

∞ *Dr. He ~ Dr. She* ∞

Expressing Gratitude and Appreciation

When we work with couples together we often witness and are saddened by the lack of appreciation and gratitude they have come to feel toward each other. Certainly the reason couples come in to see us is because they are in a lot of pain, and we understand how difficult it can be for them to be complimentary to one another once they have reached the deep, dark pit of mistrust that comes from engaging in power struggles. Couples who function like opponents (rather than as teammates) rarely bridge a stand-off with each other by expressing praise or saying thank you. However, we have observed that even the couples who are moving through life at a good clip together still have room for improvement in the area of feeling and expressing appreciation toward each other.

Why is it so uncomfortable for two people to say why and how much they care for each other? (By the way, we observe this difficulty in expressing appreciation in friendships as well.) Our assumption is that it goes back to some basic survival instinct of self-protection, as in, *“If I take the risk of being vulnerable by telling you how much I appreciate you—and you reject me—I will feel hurt, and then fear being taken advantage of by you, which would then destroy our mutual respect for each other.”* It is sad how these philosophies have become imbedded in our culture, even though intellectually we know that—as is true within a business structure—the *relationships that work best are those that show and articulate appreciation.*

Another thing we always hear from couples is that they *assume* their partner knows—or *should know*—how much they appreciate them and the things they do. We cannot over-emphasize how important it is for you to *never assume* your partner knows *anything* about what you are thinking and feeling—even if you have been together for decades. As we grow and change, so do our thoughts and feelings. *When we don’t hear appreciation, we don’t assume we are being appreciated.* In fact, we start to assume the opposite once we experience pain and misunderstanding with each other, because after a while, our silence more than likely is an expression of the old adage, if I don’t have anything positive to say to you, I won’t say anything at all.

We are not talking about going into long diatribes with our partners here. We are talking about simply saying, “Thank you for cooking dinner,” “Thank you for cleaning the dishes,” “Thank you for doing the laundry,” “Thank you for working so hard at your job for us.” Period. These little moments of gratitude can greatly inspire each other to continue to step up and “feed the relationship” in each partner’s own unique way. Without even some simple acknowledgements such as these, your partner is left to feel alone and unmotivated to invest energy into the “we” feeling of a relationship. Try it. Expressing a little bit of gratitude and appreciation goes a long way.

∞ Dr. He ~ Dr. She ∞

Naughty and Nice:

A Recipe for a “Merry” Relationship

To put a little ho, ho, ho into our holidays, we asked a couple dozen of our friends and colleagues who have been married for 10 years or more what they felt kept the excitement going in their marriage. We gathered a myriad of responses and decided to let you, the reader, hear the voices of the respondents in their original form.

As a starting point, even the *definition of excitement* differed for each individual, so you can imagine the range of ideas we received:

1. The first idea important to quote cautioned, “Expect the definition of ‘excitement’ to change over time. What was excitement in the beginning will be different 20 years down the road!”
2. One woman said she was just looking for *comfortable*—not excitement—in her 30 year marriage.
3. A man in a 20 year marriage said, “I think some people get too cozy and comfortable with their spouse. Don’t be so comfortable. Be *spontaneous* and a little *mysterious*.”

So for the sake of brevity, we have grouped the responses into a few themes that create what we like to call a “Hot Chocolate Recipe” guaranteed to keep the “Merry” in your relationship for the holidays...

Step One: Heat the Milk (*or Make Time to Be Together*) - A fundamental theme for all of the couples was to simply make time to be together alone. In the hustle and bustle of everyday life, all the couples felt making consistent time to be with each other in a quality way was both challenging and essential to keeping the connection passionate in a relationship. “No kids, no friends, no distractions.”

Step Two: Stir in the Chocolate (*or Feed the Heart Connection*) - The next theme that emerged was how important it is to listen to and support each other’s needs, wants, and desires. Despite the many different ways that couples told us how they reconnected with their love and appreciation for one another, it all boiled down to this basic need: *Listen to each other and be with each other with an open heart:*

- “We get vulnerable about what we want from each other, putting it on the table in a way that—should the other want to—they can give it to you as a gift.”
- Be thoughtful of your partner. “Open her door when she gets back with the groceries.”
- “When we stop running around long enough to look each other in the eye and tell each other how much we love each other, it keeps our connection alive and healthy.”
- “It is our deep friendship that has created the greatest level of stability—not excitement—which I value and respect.”

- “We talk about our feelings, our fears, our dreams, our fascinations—not about our cars, our new kitchens, our new suits and sofas. We linger in a thoughtful conversation over a patiently prepared dinner and devote *ourselves to talking about the essential stuff*—not the peripheral that just disconnects us from ourselves and from each other.”

Step Three: Add Cinnamon and Spice (*or Be Committed to Personal Growth and Development*)

- “If it is true that *familiarity breeds contempt*, then it is also true that routine and the lack of change or the lack of growth and personal development leads to boredom and can snuff the life out of an otherwise healthy, loving relationship. When youth and physical beauty fades, there better be something else interesting and appealing about me. It should be the person I’m continuing to become! Our relationship cannot have excitement if we are not committed to our own personal growth and development. Boring people create boring relationships!”
- “Bringing our individual interests to the relationship and the experiences that come from those can foster feelings of freshness and excitement.”
- “Support each other to do the things that help you to reconnect with your individual identity—the parts of you that get lost in the routine of work and kids—so you can bring that energy back into the relationship. That is what keeps us going.”
- Intellectual stimulation with one’s partner was an important theme in this category, as well as taking care of one’s own physical health. “I know when I stay in shape I feel good, and my wife is more attracted to me!”

Step Four: A Nip of Peppermint Schnapps (*or Stir in Adventure*)

- “We both need to have a travel experience or adventure dangling in our future to help us be okay with the monotony of everyday life.”
- “It keeps it exciting if—between the two of you—you find yourself learning about and doing things you never thought you would and are enriched individually and together as a result!”
- “Change things up. Dare to be different. Travel the world.”
- Laughter and humor were also characterized as adventurous. “When I love my husband the most is when we are laughing together. Even when—or maybe *especially* when—we are laughing at each other!”

Step Five: Lots of Whipped Cream on Top (*or A Little Sexual Variety Goes A Long Way*)

- “Besides all the loving things we do for each other and our kids, I think it’s important to be a little naughty with each other. Go on Priceline.com when you get to work one day, book a local hotel for the afternoon, call your wife to join you for lunch, dangle the room key in front of her while reading the menu, and I’ll bet she orders lunch to go!”

- “We make time to light candles, massage each other, put on good music, shut out the world, and then make love. It’s such a natural high, and so much more bonding.”
- “Trying new things as much as possible, making love in unusual places, at unusual times.”
- “New sex toys!”

We hope this article offers a recipe that excites your taste buds and ignites the spark in your relationship! Happy Holidays to you!

∞ *Dr. He ~ Dr. She* ∞

New Year's Relationship Resolutions

Here comes the beginning of a New Year, and we see it as an opportunity for our readers to become proactive about making their relationships better. We believe that it is a good time to rejuvenate a marriage or relationship by paying attention to some very basic but necessary aspects of maintaining a deeper connection to your partner. Make an agreement with each other to consistently try these five things to make 2013 a better year for your relationship:

1. Take a few minutes to make a daily face-to-face connection with your spouse.

Whether your stress is about jobs or kids or to-do lists, connecting with your partner—even if you're both tired at the end of a long day—can be a way to remind yourself that you're not alone with it all. While talking to each other on the phone is also a way to connect, there is nothing like holding your significant other's face in your hands and giving them your look of love.

2. Express appreciation more to each other verbally.

A little bit of expressed appreciation goes a long way. We all want to feel acknowledged for what we do to help out, and saying or hearing “Thanks for taking out the garbage” or “Thanks for cooking dinner” or “Thanks for doing the laundry” makes even those mundane tasks more palatable.

3. Meet for 10 – 15 minutes once a week to discuss the coming week's schedule.

Start off the week being on the same page with each other by being aware of what is up ahead schedule-wise in your busy lives. This keeps the element of surprise to a minimum about family logistics, and it also is a way to keep the division of labor balanced between both of you. Make sure the monthly calendar also includes a balance of individual play time (for both of you), relationship play time, and family play time. Schedule a date night at least once, if not twice, a month and take turns planning the activity.

4. Clearly state your needs to each other.

No mind reading! Many couples assume that—after knowing each other for some amount of time—they should automatically know what their partner needs and wants. It usually sounds something like this: “I shouldn't have to tell you what I need. You should just know by now.” This is a huge mistake. There is no way one human being can know or anticipate what another human being needs and wants. It is much more important for both people to clearly tell each other what they expect from them. This is what builds trust. Trying to read someone else's mind or expecting the other to read yours only breeds disappointment in the relationship.

5. Be more accountable for your actions.

Follow through on everything you commit to take care of. If you know you won't be able to follow through on something, don't commit to it! *Stand up for who you are as a person, especially if you've made a mistake!* This builds a deeper bond of trust with each other that is the best foundation upon which to build a healthy relationship.

These resolutions are great ways to keep the status quo of your relationship from devolving into stagnation. Assuming that a relationship will forever function well “the way it always has” does not allow it or the two people in that relationship to grow. One of the reasons the divorce rate is so high is that people assume that the relationship they started out with should be enough to take them into the future. This rarely works. It’s much healthier for a relationship to grow and transform as you both grow and transform yourselves. Use the maturity you’ve both gained over the years to reshape your relationship into one that addresses the current needs you both have. In much the same way that a photograph taken of yourself five or ten years ago could no longer accurately depict who you are or what you need today, your approach to your relationship deserves a similar updating.

∞ *Dr. He ~ Dr. She* ∞

What Women Can Do to Be Better Partners to Their Men

We thought we would lay out twenty ways (each coming up with 10) that we both feel women can be better partners to their men. Here is what we came up with:

Dr. She

1. Keep feedback to your men succinct and non-blaming. Tell your man what you need without digressing into a million tangents and attacking him about all the things he doesn't do. For example, instead of saying, "I can't believe you never help me with the children," tell him you are feeling overwhelmed and need him to put the children to bed at night.
2. Appreciate all the things your man does do well. When you take the time to see the efforts he, is making it helps him to feel you have a balanced view of him. It also feeds his sense of importance in your life which, in turn, feeds his desire to support you more.
3. Don't expect your man to be responsible for your happiness. You are responsible for your own happiness and he is there to support and love you and share in that happiness. Get out of any co-dependency you might have with your spouse so you have your own identity within the context of the marriage. Men find this very sexy and it is the healthy approach to relationship for you, too.
4. Find a way to manage your drama and reactivity with him. He doesn't know what to do with it. Save the big emotions and hormonal fluctuations for your girlfriends who can relate to it and then come back to your partner with a clear, succinct picture of what he did to push your buttons and what you need. When you approach him in a more respectful way it will lessen his tendency to react to your feedback defensively.
5. Do not play "mother" or "little girl" with him. Both will eventually be a turn off for him and leave you feeling bad/resentful or incomplete. You need to be careful when you are choosing your man. Pay attention to whether you are looking for a "daddy" figure to take care of you or a "little boy" figure to take care of. In both of these dynamics, you will be playing out old unresolved patterns. We all get caught to some degree in playing out unresolved dynamics from our past, however, we need to stay conscious and constantly move towards maturing in our relationship.
6. Take care of yourself and do things that make you feel joy and satisfaction. If you don't, you will inevitably project your personal/internal disappointment onto your partner. This won't be fair and he will be confused! Each time you come up against feeling dissatisfaction in your marriage, ask yourself what is missing for you personally in your life as a whole and whether there are other avenues to create personal satisfaction other than your marriage. This is not to avoid dealing with your marriage when you need to, but it is important to maintain a view of your life from a "big picture" perspective.
7. Find a way to appreciate your own body and your own sensuality so you can share this with your partner. Don't get caught up in feeling he always needs to approach you. Making love means both people bring their sexual energy to the table. Yes, it is great if he expresses his physical attraction

to you, but you appreciating your own physicality/sensuality exudes outward and helps to feed the sexual chemistry.

8. Set healthy boundaries with your partner. If you are truly respecting yourself you will set healthy boundaries with your partner (and in all areas of your life) and he will feel this and mirror that respect back to you.

9. Appreciate what the differences between you and your partner provide for the relationship versus being afraid of those differences and wanting him to be more like you. If you only look for commonalities to create a connection between you and your man, you will set yourself up for disappointment. The mere fact that he is a man establishes inherent differences and he will have a difficult time seeing things through your lens unless you help him understand your perspective which leads to the next point...

10. Please don't make him read your mind or expect him to know what you like/want/need. Be a communicator for the best interest of yourself in the relationship. If he does hit the nail on the head sometimes without input from you, that is icing on the cake, but don't confuse those times with feeling he knows you so well. You fluctuate every day, so you still need to be clear with him on an ongoing basis.

Dr. He

1. Do not ask a man to be more emotionally expressive to you and then jump down his throat when you hear something from him you don't like. He may not enjoy giving you "bad news," but better for him to be up front than to hold back and build resentment towards you.

2. It is totally unrealistic for a woman to expect a man to know how to read her mind. He will disappoint you over and over again if you assume that of him. Remember that if it's difficult enough for a guy to keep track of his own feelings, how on earth could he accurately figure out what you are feeling....unless you tell him yourself?

3. While your role as your children's mother is hugely important, don't use that role as a way to hide out from him as being his wife. Men appreciate the huge amount of energy wives put toward raising kids, but what is just as important for children as giving them your undivided attention—is for them to see a connected, loving relationship between their mommy and daddy.

4. Get rid of your scorecard. Deal with one piece of your pain about your man at a time—not every unresolved moment from the past, every time you both disagree.

5. It is equally as healthy for him to hear you point out what he does right in your lives as it is for you to point out what he does wrong. A little bit of appreciation from you goes a long, long way with him.

6. Do not tell him how he feels. The fact that he may not keep track of his emotions as well as you keep track of your own doesn't mean that you know him better than he knows himself. Ask him how he feels, don't tell him.

7. Don't always assume that having sex is his hidden agenda when he is being physically affectionate with you. Often times he'll be okay with just holding you. A guy can hear "I'm not in the mood" much better than feeling you recoil from his affection.

8. A man's need for physical closeness is just as important for you as a couple as is your need for emotional closeness. Both are necessary to make your marriage work.

9. Don't assume that his need to have alone time is somehow a reflection of how he feels about you. It's how men know how to re-center themselves, and—it's not personal!

10. Give him the benefit of the doubt. When he says something hurtful—which will happen at times, unfortunately—do not assume that he is intentionally trying to hurt you.

∞ *Dr. He ~ Dr. She* ∞

What Men Can Do to Be Better Partners to Their Women

To follow up on our most recent column, “What Women Can Do to Be Better Partners to Their Men,” here is the other side of the equation when it comes to creating a long term, healthy relationship:

Dr. He

1. Treating the woman you love with respect is a sign of your own self-respect. If there are ways that you are unfair toward her or unkind toward her or act dishonorably toward your partner, see it as an indication of your own lack of self-worth....then do something about it!
2. Have the courage to tell her something that she might not want to hear because—if it’s your truth—she’ll respect you for taking the risk of saying something that she might have a different opinion about.
3. Learn the difference between expressing a feeling and delivering a judgment. Underneath every judgment is a feeling, so communicate that feeling. Starting a sentence with, “I feel that you are...” does NOT express a feeling. It’s just another way to deliver your judgment of her. Expressing a feeling sounds like, “I feel angry/sad/hurt/scared/confused when you...”
4. Give her the benefit of the doubt. When she says something hurtful—which will happen at times, unfortunately—do not assume that she is intentionally trying to hurt you.
5. Figure out what it means to think and act more like a “we” and less like a “me.” For example, asking her what she may need when she is stressed out is a way of showing her love and respect—as well as showing her that you are interested in her life and what makes her tick.
6. Assume that whatever emotional immaturity you have is now officially an obstacle to your relationship with your wife. Participating in your relationship as an immature little boy and not as a mature, healthy adult man only compromises your marriage. Show up in your marriage by giving yourself permission to grow up into being the man you are here to be.
7. Hold her in your heart when you are alone out in the world by acting like a man who is part of a couple—even if she is not standing by your side.
8. Push your own comfort level by seeking to explore ways of being affectionate with her that DO NOT have love making as the ultimate goal...and let her know that!
9. Be supportive of her need/desire to grow as a person. Her becoming happier with herself as a woman—even if it gets scary or confusing for you—will only help the relationship in the long run.
10. Do all of the above things because they will make you a better man on the planet. Do not do them because they will get her to love you more. She will instinctively love you more as you commit yourself to your own personal growth.

Dr. She

1. Learn to show up emotionally, not in our way, but in your way. Despite rumors women are not good at reading your minds so they need to know how you tick and what you need so that means you need to know that about yourself as well.
2. Don't be a little boy in the relationship so women don't feel they need to flip into the mom role. Yes, women are multi-taskers and think about a lot of different things that you don't, but instead of avoiding partnership find a way to bridge the gap so your partner gets the feeling that you are doing your part in a conscious way. This can mean doing things that you know need to get done "for the team" without her having to ask you to do them.
3. If you are respectful, loving and communicative in little bits throughout the day, women don't need a lot more romance or foreplay when it comes to the sex department. If that love and respect is going on consistently, women feel the connection in their systems and feel much more available to share in the sexual piece of the relationship spontaneously.
4. Be reliable and dependable. Say what you mean and mean what you say. We don't really care if you need another hour at the office as long as you let us know ahead of time so that we can rearrange our schedules. Communicating these things lets us know that you value our time as well as your own and that you are considering us.
5. There are times that women want you to just be a sounding board for their story without you giving them advice. When a woman wants you to hear her, try to put yourself in her shoes for a moment and find a way to validate her even if you would have handled the situation differently. Remember, you don't have to agree with her ways, you just need to understand her. Only offer solutions/advice if it is requested of you.
6. Don't be a controlling father figure. This creates an unhealthy co-dependent relationship and speaks to something about your personal fear to show up as a partner who can be vulnerable in a relationship.
7. As Dr. He suggests...don't be afraid to hurt our feelings with the truth. We sense when you are keeping things from us or not being straight up. If you tip toe or lie we don't trust you and we start to feel crazy and the last thing you want is a crazy woman on your hands! No matter how hard the truth is, it is the best choice and the one that women trust.
8. If your partner wants/needs to have a conversation about the relationship and you are not feeling in the right frame of mind, give her an alternative time that works for you and stick to it. It will be a more successful conversation if you are present and prepared to have a dialogue.
9. Appreciate your woman beyond her looks... for her intelligence, creativity and the many other abilities she possesses. If she feels seen and appreciated by you you'll be surprised with what you will receive in return!
10. Don't be threatened by her girlfriends. It is a good outlet for her to have and one that is difficult for you to provide. Encourage her to get her "girl time."

Dr. He ~ Dr. She

Reinventing Relationships

One of the predominant patterns we see in working with couples is the transition in a relationship from what we call the *fantasy phase* to the *reality phase*. We have all grown up with the “happily ever after” myth and—despite how progressive we feel we may be—many still believe in the fantasy that relationships are supposed to be easy and “just happen” without ever doing any work on them because “...we love each other.”

Ever-changing life events challenge this “fantasy” myth and confront us with the reality that we may need to *reinvent our relationship* to integrate these internal and external changes. By reinvent we mean: to rethink our expectations of each other; to change the way we communicate with each other; to assimilate new information into our perceptions of one another.

Here are some of the changes that naturally challenge the “fantasy” myth:

1. We all age and mature. As we grow up our perception of the world changes, as do our needs, wants, and desires. This compels us to assimilate new information—not only about the world, but also about ourselves and our partners—into a *new idea about relationship*.
2. Unexpected life events and traumas occur for all of us, including job changes, death of loved ones, unexpected illness, financial stresses, etc. These issues throw us off course and challenge us to rethink how we behave and communicate in our relationship. It also challenges us to adjust to whatever new needs and concerns arise as a result of these ongoing contingencies.
3. A betrayal or major breach in trust between a couple definitely reality checks any kind of fantasy “story” the couple holds onto as part of their identity. Quite often the couple cannot recover from this wound to heal and re-establish trust because they have difficulty imagining their relationship to be any way other than the fairy tale illusion they have come to expect from each other.
4. Having children is a huge life transition that changes the course of a relationship. Our self-focus must yield to the immediate needs of a helpless other. This shift is very challenging for a relationship. The couple’s priority is no longer one another, nor do they have any time for themselves individually. When a couple is not emotionally prepared to deal with this major shift and the impact it will have on their one-on-one relationship, more often than not the marriage will go into crisis. Statistics even show that a high percentage of divorce occurs after the birth of the first child.

It’s one thing for a couple to deal with the reality of raising children. Bringing a husband-wife relationship out of the fog of fantasy and into the light of reality, however, is quite another and can be very confusing for couples at first. Very often the initial needs of both people are at odds. For example, we see many men who are angry that they are not receiving enough attention from their wives, while many women feel resentful that they have to shoulder all the work of the household and the child, perhaps along with working outside the home.

A relationship that embraces “reality” is one where both people: are clear with sharing their personal truths directly (no walking on eggshells around each other); embrace and respect each other’s differences; encourage each other’s independent interests; refrain from making assumptions about

each other; view each other as partners who have their best interests at heart; give each other the benefit of the doubt when questions of integrity arise; cheer each other on to achieve personal goals by “stretching” past their perceived limits.

Both of us know from personal and professional experience that a relationship may need to be re-invented a few times over the course of its life span. As two people grow from the challenges that Life puts at their feet, the relationship must likewise evolve and morph into something that honors the battle scars received from those challenges. The way that Life events shape and mold us is as real as life gets, and there is no way that our relationships will not benefit from integrating the lessons learned from those experiences.

∞ *Dr. He ~ Dr. She* ∞



About Dr. Hanalei Vierra and Dr. M'Lissa Trent

Hanalei Vierra, Ph.D. (Dr. He) and M'Lissa Trent, Ph.D. (Dr. She) are a married couple who have worked together for over 18 years coaching troubled relationships to clearer communication, deeper intimacy, and healthier partnership. Their private practice is in Del Mar, California.

See their website at <http://sandiegotherapists.com/conjoint.html>

For more information on Relationship Advice for Men go to <http://HowToKeepHer.com>

Please email questions to Dr. Vierra at DrHanalei@aol.com

