

YOU'RE DRIVING ME **CRAZY!**

PETTY ANNOYANCES ERODE EVEN THE BEST RELATIONSHIPS. WHEN YOU'VE PICKED UP YOUR HUSBAND'S 2,543RD DIRTY SOCK, SOMETHING'S GOTTA CHANGE.

MOST LIKELY,

BY JAY DIXIT | PHOTOGRAPHS BY ANDREW ECCLES

IT'S YOU.





WITHOUT DOUBT,

there are big problems that afflict relationships; infidelity, abuse, and addiction are not perishing from the earth. A highly sexualized society delivers an alluring drumbeat of distractions. But it may be the petty problems that subvert love most surreptitiously. The dirty socks on the floor. The way our partner chews so loudly. Like the relentless drip of a leaky faucet, they erode the goodwill that underlies all relationships. Before you know it, you feel unloved, unheard, and underappreciated, if not criticized and controlled. Intimacy becomes a pale memory.

Yet irritations are inevitable in relationships. It's just not possible to find another human being whose every quirk, habit, and preference aligns perfectly with yours. The fundamental challenge in a relationship, contends New York psychiatrist John Jacobs, is "figuring out how to negotiate and live with your partner's irritants in a way that doesn't alienate them and keeps the two of you connected." When marriages don't work, he adds, often the partners are fighting not over big issues but over petty differences in style.

We each have differing values and ways of looking at the world, and we want different things from each other. Such differences derive from our genetically influenced temperaments, our belief systems, and experiences growing up in our family of origin, explains Diane Sollee, family therapist and founder of SmartMarriages. "We think, 'My father knew how to put the toilet seat down, so why can't you?' Or 'My father never put the toilet seat down, so I'm not going to, either.'" Whatever the source, such patterns are deeply ingrained, difficult to dislodge.

Sometimes a sock on the floor is just a sock on the floor. But especially among longtime couples, little irritations may code for deeper problems. It's as if ice cubes become an ice-

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berg, says family therapist John Van Epp. Think of ice cubes as free-floating irritants—bothersome but meaningless: You hate the way your partner puts his feet on the furniture or exaggerates. Such behaviors might drive you up the wall, but they're harmless.

But small problems coalesce into a vast, submerged force when they take on a different meaning in your mind—when you add them up as evidence of a character flaw or moral defect. You're annoyed by the fact that your significant other hates sharing food from her plate. And that she hates planning in advance. And that when you try to share important news, she gets excited and cuts you off to share something of her

own. When you consider them together, a picture emerges of your partner as selfish and self-absorbed, always putting her own needs first.

"You don't really live with the partner in your home. You live with the partner in your head," explains Van Epp. Gradually, you begin looking for evidence that your partner is self-absorbed—and of course you find it. Your perceptions shift over time: The idealized partner you started out with becomes, well, less ideal.

But if you want to stay in a relationship, something needs to change.

In all likelihood, it's you.

Every annoyance in a relationship is really a two-way street. Partners focus on what they're getting, not on what they're giving. But no matter how frustrating a partner's behavior, your interpretation is the greater part of it. What matters is the meaning you attach to it.

The ability to eliminate relationship irritants lies within each of us. They may sabotage good relationships or not. It all depends on how you interpret the problem.

1 "IT'S DELIBERATE"

DIANE SOLLEE RECALLS growing up with a father who used to snore so loudly she could hear him mid-block. "When I asked my mom how she could stand it, she said, 'When I hear his snoring, I know he's home safe, alive and well.'"

"It's the reaction of the host, not the strength of the pathogen," says rabbi and marriage educator Edwin Friedman. Snoring isn't the problem; it's the meaning you give it. We take every irritant personally. We treat every action, deliberate or accidental, conscious or subconscious, as a personal slight—a sign the other doesn't care about us or isn't prioritizing us. When we don't get what we want, we interpret it as, "You don't love me enough." We think, "If you really cared about me, you'd stop driving me crazy with all your irritating habits."

Unfortunately, much behavior is mindless; we do many things without thinking. "It would be ideal to focus on the other person's reaction all the time," says psychologist Michael Cunningham of the University of Louisville. "But the simple fact is that people engage in automatic behaviors that are habitual or self-focused without taking the other person into account."

Cunningham studied relationship annoyances in 160 couples and found that people suppress their irritating behaviors early in the dating process but allow them to emerge once they're in a committed relationship. "People pay attention to what they have to pay attention to," he observes. "When you're dating, you're hypervigilant. Once there's a commitment, you feel entitled to relax."

Cunningham sees the resulting annoyances as "social allergens." As with physical allergens, the first exposure produces a small negative reaction, but each subsequent contact increases sensitivity. That, he says, is why those in long-standing relationships can explode over what seem like tiny infractions. The first wet towel on the bathroom floor is mildly irritating; the hundredth can unleash a hypersensitive reaction.

If your partner has a habit that he or she is not aware of but that drives you up a wall—keeping the bathroom door open, leaving bread crumbs in the butter dish, walking around in underwear—bring it up in a loving way. Maybe it simply never occurred to your partner that it bothers you.

Then there are the behaviors you've talked about *ad nauseam* but persist. If it seems like your partner just can't change this aspect of himself, it's time to take stock. Try reminding yourself what you have—and what you stand to lose. John Buri, a psychologist at the University of St. Thomas in Minneapolis, cites a colleague whose wife had a shrill, grating laugh. "He was always afraid she'd let loose with her ridiculous laugh, which was like fingernails on a blackboard for him," recalls Buri. Though the couple had a great deal in common, their connection slowly eroded because of this quirk. After 15 years of

marriage, however, the wife developed cancer and died. "Now he yearns to hear that laugh just one more time," says Buri.

2 MESSINESS

IN VIRTUALLY EVERY relationship, one partner is messier than the other. Eighty percent of couples living together say differences over mess and disorganization cause tension in their relationship, report Columbia University management professor Eric Abrahamson and Massachusetts journalist David H. Freedman, authors of *A Perfect Mess*.

"My boyfriend throws his dirty socks on the floor when he gets into bed," says Victoria, a legal recruiter in New York. "Once a man is living with a woman, he doesn't really see the need to clean up after himself. He assumes I'll just pick them up in the morning. It's disrespectful."

"He will never clean the way you want him to," says family therapist Cloé Madanes of La Jolla, California. "I cannot tell you how many couples are going to divorce over this."

If your partner can't seem to change sloppy ways, reframe the issue in your own mind. Instead of focusing on how inadequately he cleans, remind yourself how much you appreciate his contribution to household chores. Changing your perspective can not only resolve the irritating issue, it can mend the dynamic of the whole relationship.

COUPLES WHO TRY TO BE SCRUPULOUSLY FAIR SPEND ALL THEIR TIME MEASURING, COMPARING, AND QUARRELING OVER WHERE THE DIVIDING LINE FALLS.

3 FEELING UNLOVED

MOTIVATIONAL GURU Tony Robbins, developer of the Ultimate Relationship program with therapist Madanes, grew up in a family in which everyone was encouraged to say whatever they felt whenever they felt it. "Our approach was, you can say it with all the intensity you want and we're going to resolve it right there," says Robbins. "If you got up and left the room or said, 'Screw it, I'm done, I'm not putting up with this,' my mom's rule for that was, 'This relationship is over.'" Growing up, Robbins absorbed those rules unconsciously.

Then he fell in love with a woman whose father never raised his voice, a man who left a room whenever he felt upset. "My rule was you stay and work it out; hers was you don't raise your voice."

The culture clash led to heartache. When Robbins got excited and raised his voice, his girlfriend felt hurt. She'd leave the room to avoid conflict, which to Robbins meant she didn't care about him. Both felt unloved. So they made a pact: He wouldn't raise his voice, and she wouldn't leave the room. It worked perfectly—until the day they were both stressed out. Robbins raised his voice, and she walked out of the room.

"You promised you wouldn't leave!" said Robbins.

"You said you weren't going to yell!" said his girlfriend, who stormed off. Furious, Robbins stalked after her. All of a sudden



she jumped out from behind a door and said, "Boo!"

They both laughed so hard they forgot their fight. Her playfulness jarred him out of his negative state and reminded them how important they were to each other. She'd performed what Madanes calls a "pattern interrupt," shifting the frame of interaction so drastically that the hurtful behavior halts instantly.

Another way to stop a pattern of yelling is to offer constant love. "A yell is a cry for help," contends Robbins. "What someone is really saying is, 'I have no way to meet my needs, I'm freaked out, I'm out of control.' Getting into a warm, loving state no matter how crazy the other person is, being completely present—focused, attentive, connected—breaks such patterns."

When a partner is attacking you or making you feel unloved, a pattern interrupt is needed to shift the tenor of the interaction so completely that the viciousness vanishes. Instead of responding defensively by yelling back, recognize that no matter how badly your feelings are hurt, your partner is unable to support you at that moment and doesn't mean what he or she is saying. Soothe yourself and give your partner the calm needed. "Say, 'You can yell, you can scream, you can do whatever you want, but I love you and you can't get rid of me,'" advises Robbins. "We need that connection, that praise, the understanding; we need to have somebody who is going to be there and not run. *That's* how you break somebody's pattern."



4 FEELING UNAPPRECIATED

AN ATTITUDE OF goodwill is essential to all relationships; it makes us eager to do things to please our partners, especially if our efforts are acknowledged and appreciated. But if we feel our efforts are not being noticed—or, worse, that our partner notices only what we're *not* doing—we lose interest in performing those generous acts that further the relationship. We get irritable instead, and at the very least feel taken for granted.

"It's up to each of us to communicate what it takes to make us feel appreciated," says Sollee. "You can't assume your partner knows what to do."

You might also try breaking your partner out of his or her daze by turning the situation into a game, as Madanes does when her partner fails to appreciate her efforts in the kitchen. "I refuse to have my feelings hurt that easily by anybody," says Madanes. So she has a dialogue with herself. "I'll say, 'Cloé, that was wonderful!' 'Thank you, it was nothing.' 'No, this really tastes good, thank you.'" Doing this in front of your partner may be a big enough hint to get him or her to chime in. Even if it doesn't, at least you're taking control of your own emotions and hauling yourself out of a reactive state. There's little room for feeling like a helpless victim of a partner's obtuseness; you've gained control over the problem.

But don't break out the champagne just yet; you have your own pattern to fix. We notice things that confirm our biases and ignore what doesn't, which means you're probably focusing on what your partner isn't giving you. And you'll find ample evidence of ingratitude. But recall that your partner's behavior has no inherent meaning; it's the meaning you attach to the behavior that pains you. So when your mate asks you to take out the trash and you feel like responding, "What am I, your slave?"—remember the goodwill you deployed at the relationship's start and focus less on receiving, more on giving.

5 FEELING CONTROLLED

A YOUNG COUPLE decided to try living together and bought a house. One day, early in the relationship, he perched on the sofa to read the newspaper after work while she went to the sink to prepare dinner. "Hey, could you get me a glass of water?" he said.

"Get your own glass of water," she replied—and that was the end of the relationship. She saw the request as an attempt to control her. She'd grown up with a military father who was always telling people what to do, and she was not about to enter such a situation voluntarily. He was astonished by her refusal.

Feeling controlled is one of the most common—40 percent, in one study—relationship complaints. "We human beings don't like to be told what to do," says John Jacobs. The real problem may not be your partner's behavior but the way you label it. "What one person experiences as control, another might experience as love and caring," explains Madanes. "The art of relationships is turning things around even if the other is not collaborating."

To make a relationship work, it's best to attribute good intentions to your partner, says Madanes. Instead of seeing your partner as controlling, ask yourself what's motivating them. A partner who doesn't want you to go out with your friends may be scared of being abandoned. A partner who is second-guessing your decisions may be worried about you. "I never feel controlled," says Madanes. "I never think in those terms. Instead, I would think he's overprotective, or he's driven by fear."

Besides recasting your partner's behavior as well-intentioned, ask yourself what your partner needs but doesn't seem to be getting. Expressions of love? Certainty that you'll be there and not leave? Committing to satisfying your partner's needs intensely and totally will most likely transform the whole relationship.

The woman who refused her boyfriend the glass of water might better have plumbed the underlying issue and discussed her upbringing. "She could have explained that his question triggered an emotional allergy and made her resentful," suggests therapist Lori Gordon, "and it would help if he knew that."

6 NOT FEELING INTIMATE

A COUPLE, BOTH young, successful lawyers, wanted a baby. But they had begun fighting in a way that made them feel hopeless about the relationship. Once home from work, she wanted to discuss their money problems; all he wanted was quiet. She'd follow him from room to room as he tried to escape conversation, ultimately planting herself in his path. Then he'd push her. By the time they sought therapy, they'd concluded they couldn't bring a child into such a violent environment.

Madanes said there was something the husband could do, but it was difficult and she wasn't sure he could do it. "I can do it," the husband insisted.

"In the future, whenever she begins to go after you and wants to discuss money—whether at home, at a party, on the street—put your hand under her blouse or her skirt and fondle her."

"You're not going to do that!" said the woman. "Oh yes I am!" said the man.

Not only did the tactic successfully interrupt the pattern of angry confrontation, it transformed it into a playful and warm dynamic. Within a month, she was pregnant.

Like all relationship irritants, lack of intimacy is a two-way street. If you're meeting all your partner's needs and filling him or her up with love daily, you'll both feel warm and close. "I hear so many men say, 'My wife suddenly left me, and I can't understand why, I gave her everything,'" says Madanes. "I say, 'You gave her everything except what she needed!'"

WITH MOST COUPLES, THE PROBLEM IS NOT TOO LITTLE BUT TOO MUCH COMMUNICATION; THEY GET CAUGHT IN VICIOUS CYCLES OF COMPLAINING AND CRITICIZING, DISCUSSING THE SAME ISSUES OVER AND OVER.

7 FLIRTING

FEELING A LACK of closeness often manifests itself in flirting with others. The flirting may be innocent in that it doesn't lead anywhere, but it can be hurtful and humiliating to a partner.

"Flirting is a call!" says Robbins. "It says, 'Please notice me!' A partner who flirts is invariably searching for playfulness, attention, and fulfillment."

If your significant other is flirting with others, says Madanes, look beyond your own hurt feelings and ask yourself what your partner is looking for. And then ask yourself, "What am I doing to provoke this? What does my partner need?" For some, it may be having chores done unbidden, such as taking out the trash; for others it may be quality time; for still others it's being prioritized. All may be paths to passion.

8 PERSONALITY CONFLICT

ANNOYANCE ARISES FROM difference. For every person complaining that a partner is a certain way, the partner may be complaining about the opposite. You may feel your spouse is too social,

but he may see you as a hermit. Much irritation can be avoided just by understanding the differences between you and your partner—and accepting that it's OK, even inevitable, to be different.

Almost invariably, says Gordon, we make the mistake of assuming that our partner has the same needs we do. Or we regard needs different from ours as less valid, less worthy of being fulfilled. Even the most well-intentioned among us has a tendency to give our partners what we want, not what *they* want.

You're an introvert; you restore your energy in private. Your partner is an extrovert. After one hour at a party, you want to leave; she's just getting going. "This sort of difference is the seed of countless arguments," says Gordon.

To help couples understand how irritations arise from personality differences, Gordon gives them personality tests. For many, seeing hard evidence that a partner has a fundamentally different personality helps them stop resisting the differences and become more willing to accommodate them.

When you want to leave early, it's not because you don't care about your partner, explains Gordon. When your partner wants to stay, it's not for lack of caring about you. You could resolve the difference by agreeing beforehand to go home separately—you early, her later. Both of you have to accept the difference and not hold grudges about it.

9 LACK OF FAIRNESS

ONE OF THE toughest aspects of a relationship is negotiating the competing interests that inevitably arise. Who does the household chores? How do you split holiday time with two sets of parents? Who decides where you go on vacation?

Such issues often manifest themselves in complaints about lack of fairness. One partner feels the other isn't holding up the other end of the bargain. But as with all irritants, it's a matter of perspective.

One irony is that couples that try to slice all responsibilities down the middle wind up the least happy. Research indicates that's because in trying to be scrupulously fair, they spend all their time measuring, comparing, and arguing over where the dividing line falls.

It's more important for each partner to feel like they're giving and getting roughly equally, albeit in different domains. Dividing responsibility by preference and ability eliminates competition and opportunities for measuring your partner's performance against your own. Madanes suggests that both partners agree on which realms each will be in charge of, allocating responsibility for the car, taxes, social relationships, and so on.

Far better, says Jacobs, is to adopt a quid pro quo system. Rather than seek a middle

position that offends neither but pleases neither, agree to do it your way sometimes and their way other times. This time, your partner chooses the movie, but you pick next time. You both have to surrender to the plan: When you're at your partner's movie, you try to enjoy it—and not complain or ruin it for your partner.

10 CRITICISM

ALL RELATIONSHIP IRRITANTS can lead partners to criticize each other. But criticism is a dangerous irritant in itself. "If you want to kill a relationship outright, have an affair," says Buri. "But if you want to bludgeon it to death slowly, use criticism." Criticism makes people feel attacked and unloved, and can be so damaging to a partner's sense of self that it borders on abuse. Yet most people respond to even petty annoyances with criticism.

In reacting to annoyances, says John Gottman, men are more likely to shut down and refuse to engage. But women voice their complaints in criticism. They are apt to tell a partner exactly what is wrong with him and how he needs to change. But such an approach seldom brings about the desired goal; men feel attacked, defensive, unable to listen with an open mind. Conversations that begin with criticism are likely to end in anger.

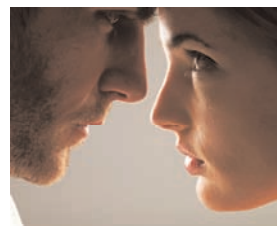
Criticism can sometimes be indirect, manifesting as sarcasm. Madanes prescribes a pattern-interrupt: Wherever the couple is, as soon as she makes a sarcastic comment, he's to lie flat on his back and say, "Kick me! Kick me! It would hurt less." "It's very effective," Madanes reports.

Relentless nagging—about money, about irritating habits, about anything—is another form of criticism that especially bothers men. Madanes similarly prescribes a pattern-interrupt. The goal isn't to shut down communication about real issues but to use playfulness to nudge destructive communication toward a more constructive mode.

Couples assume that since good communication is the linchpin of a relationship, all communication is good and more is better. That's a fallacy, insists Madanes. "With most couples, the problem isn't insufficient communication but too much communication." Many couples get caught in vicious cycles of complaining and criticizing each other, hammering the same issues over and over.

Not only is criticism flat-out destructive to a relationship, it often doesn't budge an issue. Most behaviors never change—because most relationship problems are unresolvable. Gottman calculates that 69 percent of all marital problems are immutable, arising from basic personality differences between partners.

In other words, what you can change is your perspective. **PT**



CROSS GENDER

WHEN ASKED TO RATE THEIR TOP RELATIONSHIP IRRITANTS, MEN AND WOMEN GIVE STRIKINGLY DIFFERENT ANSWERS, REPORTS UNIVERSITY OF LOUISVILLE PSYCHOLOGIST MICHAEL CUNNINGHAM. HERE'S WHAT GRATES ON US MOST.

MEN'S

COMPLAINTS ABOUT WOMEN:

- the silent treatment
- bringing up things he's done in the distant past
- being too hot or too cold
 - being critical
- being stubborn and refusing to give in

WOMEN'S

COMPLAINTS ABOUT MEN:

- forgetting important dates, like birthdays or anniversaries
- not working hard at his job
- noisily burping or passing gas
- staring at other women
- being stubborn and refusing to give in

