

What's Wrong With My Spouse?

Irreverant Guidance for Partners of Impossible Spouses

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"I handed this book to my spouse and said, 'See! See! This is what I've been saying all along, you schmuck!'" Phyllis G., Syosset, NY

"A must-read for stressed-out spouses. Completely objective, from your point of view!" Janice E., Montpelier, VT

"Indisputably the most thoughtful book on relationships to surface in the last three days." Kirrrkus Reviews

"A compelling wake-up call, for my spouse." Ellen K., Boston, MA

*"If this book doesn't win some sort of literary prize, I'm moving to Canada."
Edward H., Radnor, PA*

Introduction

A long time ago, in the marital equivalent of the pleicostone era, you may have liked your spouse. The earth at this time would still have been young, and subject to the relentless pelting from meteors. The New Jersey shore would still have been undeveloped, except perhaps for Beach Haven.

This would have been a time when you and your spouse enjoyed each other; when each of you felt appreciated, and understood, by the other; a stretch of the relationship in which your contentment, and satisfaction, actually *seemed to matter* to your spouse—a time, in short, when you felt (astounding in retrospect) as if you ranked somewhere at the *high end* of your spouse's priorities.

And then something happened—specifically, the evolution of your spouse from interested and motivated to please, to increasingly indifferent to (and neglectful of) your needs; from the cooperative, collaborative partner you felt lucky to find, into the invalidating, withholding spouse he or she became.

Your spouse, over many months and, more likely, *years*, evolved (or, from an anthropological viewpoint, *devolved*) from a once promisingly attractive, compatible mate into a specimen better fit, it seems now, for *institutionalization* than intimacy. To this day, anthropologists can't say exactly what factors triggered (and continue to trigger) this spousal transformation; but they agree, almost universally, that, with rare exception, it *will* occur.

Your spouse, we can say confidently, is a piece of work. A *handful*? That's putting it charitably. *Disappointing*? That may be an understatement. *Impossible*? Often (at a minimum).

You may find yourself reflecting frequently, “There is something *wrong* with my spouse,” yet struggle to identify precisely *what*? In less secure moods, you might think, Is it *me*? Do *I*, as my spouse has argued, bring out the *worst* in him? Have *I* somehow reduced *her* to her abject condition?

This kind of introspection, while it looks good, is risky. Sure, it’s politically correct, taking the lens to yourself. But your self-reflection can also encourage your spouse, yet *again*, to disavow his or her clearly disproportionate, if not (let’s be honest) *massive*, role in the marital disharmony.

And so I’ve written this book for you. I’ve written it with two principal aims—first, to offer you, in the pages ahead, *high levels* of the healing understanding and validation that have been missing, or lacking, in your relationship; and second, mining my 20 years’ experience working with conflictual couples in clinical private practice, to explain your problematic spouse in clear, engaging language, illuminating the intricacies of *his* thinking, and the mystery of *hers*.

Let us proceed, then, as I commence addressing (with the fairness and objectivity my clients have come to expect from me) the scope of your questions and concerns about your spouse—basic questions and concerns; important questions and concerns; necessarily *provocative* questions and concerns!

Let us pull no punches as, together and *uncensored*, we confront and solve the problem of your challenging (if not *challenged*) spouse who, from a rational, coherent perspective (meaning *yours*) probably has some work to do to earn back the key to your heart (if not house).

Let's cut to the chase: Whose fault are our marital problems?

It is customary for couples counselors to persuade conflictual partners that neither is right or wrong; neither is to be blamed *individually* for the relationship's problems. If anything, the conflict and misery have been *co-created*, and so must be *co-owned*.

This is all sounds good, but let's not kid ourselves: *It is always someone's fault*. Sometimes it's just the case, as unenlightened as it sounds, that your *spouse*—*not* both of you, but *your spouse alone*—is pretty much singlehandedly screwing things up?

Sure, you've never felt comfortable officially announcing, "Jerry's made our marriage, and my life, *hell!* I've had *nothing* to do with it. It's been all *him!*" But that doesn't make it less true.

Think about it: when you married, your spouse took a vow to cherish you, leave you feeling cherished. Do you feel cherished? Ask your spouse to take a hard look in the mirror: has he lived up to his vows?

What about me? The vows I took?

We're talking about your spouse, not you. Sure, you took similar vows, but let's be honest, you made those vows on the condition that your spouse, going forward, treat you like she treated you in the *honeymoon* phase?

In other words, there's a *reason* you've abrogated pretty much every vow that was to form the basis of a trusting, loyal, committed relationship: in her craven neglect of you, you've lost your incentive to "step up" to the proverbial marital plate. Under these circumstances, your marital vows have effectively been *waived*.

But couldn't my spouse say the same thing?

Sure, and he'd be abdicating responsibility—as usual! Remember, this isn't about *you*...it's about your spouse. It's about how your spouse, and how he's failed you, and undermined a promising marriage.

For the record, you're not suggesting that you're *entirely blameless* in all matters related to your problematic relationship; merely that your spouse is primarily *entirely to blame* for these problems and conflicts. There's a big difference: You're not saying *you're* blameless, as much as *he's* blameable. And when he comes back at you with something defensive, like, "That's the same thing! That's the *same* position! That *you're* guilty of nothing and *I'm* guilty of everything!?" you can completely ignore the substance of his argument and remind him, instead, how argumentative, as usual, he's being.

He may try to twist-it again, saying something like, "*Forget* about my tone for the moment! How 'bout my *point*?" to which you can respond understandingly, even validatingly, along the lines of, "Tell you what, Randy. Get a hold of yourself, or I'm calling 911 again."

What happened to my spouse?

What happened to your spouse is what happens to most spouses: She lost track. Lost track of the importance of making you feel, well, *important*. Of leaving you feeling honored, appreciated, and attractive on a regular basis. She forgot that what matters is *you*, taking care of *you*, attending to *you*.

You musn't blame yourself for this, because, above all, you are not someone who blames yourself for much. In any case, you can feel good and complacent knowing *confidently* that, unlike your spouse, *you* haven't lost sight—not even for a moment—of the importance that *she* always make *your gratification* her top priority.

Can I dislike my spouse as much as I do at times, and still love him?

Yes. It's possible for your *love* to persist even as your *like* dies, leaving you searching for a single attractive quality in your spouse. Often, it's the "getting the *like* back" in your marriage, more than "the *love*," that will make or break it.

It can be difficult sometimes to prevent your dislike (which may be metastasizing faster than the mushrooms in your backyard) from overwhelming the remains of your love. But a good couples therapist can assist you in this process, by posing constructive, facilitative questions, such as, "When you look at *Ted*, *Denise*, beyond his arrogance, abusiveness, and impotence, can you find even the shard of a positive trait?"

Am I alone in finding my spouse so noxious?

Of course not. You can be comforted to know that a great many spouses find their partners noxious; indeed, the numbers are growing daily and *exponentially*, at a rate exceeding, probably, the expansion of the universe.

Not only that, but the rate at which *others* in your spouse's life are finding him noxious is also swelling, so you have company *there*, too.

Can Darwinian principles explain my spouse's transformation?

Marital principles better explain it—especially the principle stating that, in *general*, spouses become *inversely appealing to each other* the longer the marriage lasts. This is a regrettable phenomenon; hard, but not impossible, to reverse. We'll spend the bulk of this book exploring various facets of this principle.

Darwinian principles, on the other hand, more likely explain why your spouse's emotional, and even *logical*, brain, is so much smaller and *less intelligent* than yours. Darwinian principles can shed light on why, after carefully examining your spouse with an open mind, you observe that he shares so many qualities with his second cousins, the Neanderthal family (no longer living in Hackensack, where they never successfully adapted).

In other words, Darwinian principles can help explain (where marital principles *can't*) the basis of your spouse's stunted evolvment. A corollary question is, can something be done, *anything*, say, to jump-start his evolution? To facilitate its resumption?

**You say that marital principles can explain
our problems “in general.” Why “in general?”**

“In general” because there are cases, of which we all know at least one (and hopefully, no more) of couples who, over long stretches of time, seem to stay emotionally and sexually connected, who seem to genuinely enjoy each other and leave each other feeling consistently satisfied and respected (and *us* depressed).

It’s exceedingly important to limit contact with these couples, as they elicit some of our pettiest emotions. For instance, it’s always perversely satisfying to learn that one of these “model marriages” has collapsed, and the couple will be splitting venomously.

It’s not at all unusual, when you’re around these couples, to want to want to see some friction between them, and, if possible, to foment it. In the end, a vicious, below-the-belt divorce, as noted, is the most satisfying outcome. Of course, their kids will suffer, but not nearly as much as *you’ve* suffered hanging out with them.

You ask: isn’t it wrong to gloat over the demise of a marriage, especially, say, a friend’s marriage that seemingly had everything going for it? Absolutely not. They had it coming, and you deserve this.

But the marriage was great, for a while. What happened?

What happened was the end of the *honeymoon phase*—that stage of the relationship characterized by your willingness, if not *need*, to believe that your spouse was as grounded, sensitive and intelligent as he wanted you to believe. It seems to be evolution's way of hoodwinking us into committed relationships that will result in procreation and, thus, the continuation of the species.

Are you suggesting my spouse hid his true self? Intentionally?

Yes, but you had a role too. You entered the relationship susceptible to accepting him at face-value; susceptible to “idealizing him,” ignoring his flaws, the signs of lurking trouble. This doesn’t exonerate him: remember, he *wanted* you to think he was someone he *wasn’t*. He never *was* the original, promising blueprint.

We’re referring here *less* to a diabolical than a *tacitly agreed-upon* process of mutual deceit and self-deceit. Yes, your spouse hid his true self from you (at least, *aspects* of it). Perhaps not intentionally, but c’mon, of *course* intentionally. He wanted, *on some level*, to close the deal before, say, some unsettling bit of information surfaced, like his crack-selling arrest *years* earlier, which, by the way, was just a mistake; a complete, and, by the way, *resolved* case of mistaken identity.

What about me? Didn't I want him to think / was someone I wasn't?

You keep shifting the lens back to you. Why is that? Not everything's about *you*.

When was it said that everytime we examine your spouse's shortcomings there must be a corresponding examination of *yours*?

And what *about* you? Of *course* you wanted him to think you were someone you weren't. Why the hell should he have known about the history of bipolar disorder, substance addiction, the *rages* associated with your "hormonal fluctuations"—*before the marriage!*? It was none of his business *before* the marriage. And it was only his business *after* the marriage to the extent that any of these "complications" began to *ruin his life*.

Bear in mind, none of these afflictions spoke to *who you were* at the core, and let's remember, *who you were* at the core is all he needed to appreciate. This is why you didn't share these irrelevant conditions with him prior to the marriage; because if you had, it would have distracted him from your core.

By the way, can the “honeymoon phase” be avoided?

Yes, but at the likely peril of the human species. Remember, few of us would ever get married if we didn't have the honeymoon phase to convince us—despite warnings from our friends and family, and *his* friends and family—that our impending spouse is not the dissimulating sociopath the *Hare Psychopathy Checklist* suggests he is.

Most of us *seek* honeymoon phases of relationships with addictive fervor. One idea, in the light of this tendency, is to consider marrying *immediately*, so that the honeymoon phase can be enjoyed *post*-marriage, rather than expended during the dating phase. This strategy can get a marriage off to a better start, and perhaps cement the couple's bond in the important early stages of the new partnership.

Sometimes I think I expect too much from my spouse?

Think about what you expect from your spouse: You probably expect her to take almost everything you say in seriousness, seriously; to find you hilarious whenever you say something with comedic intent; to accept, and recognize the brilliance, of your positions on most, if not all, matters; and, to notice and assuage your disappointment whenever she fails, in your view, to register your significance on these and countless other levels.

Ask yourself: does any of this sound unreasonable? This is your spouse! This isn't your hair-dresser! It's your spouse! From whom, if not her, can you expect, and feel entitled to, this kind of global attention?

My spouse's body has gone to pot. I'm struggling with this.

Of course you are. You've watched your spouse undergo a slow, insidious physical transformation that scientists from Yale recently called "aging." Worse, she accelerated the process through her self-neglect. She was supposed to stay in shape, not exceed the square footage of a second home. Besides, didn't she vow, at the wedding, to do everything "reasonable" in her powers to stay slim and attractive—if not for herself, for you? (If you didn't get this vow in writing and notarized, shame on you.)

Compounding your outrage, she evinces *utter disregard* for how this affects you. Although you've tried every weapon in your arsenal of controlling, manipulative tactics—including scare, appeal, threat, empathy, abuse—*nothing* moves her.

For once, forget about what this means to you. Scratch that: what matters is what it means to you, let's not kid ourselves. You ask, does this constitute a case of spousal abuse?

Does this constitute a case of spousal abuse?

By legal standards, probably not. By psychological standards, possibly. Your perception of your spouse's "deterioration" has been *traumatic*. Sure, you try to keep perspective: you remind yourself, as she undresses, "Remember what matters;" "remember my love;" "remember *her* love;" "remember what it's all about;" "I can't have everything, grow up;" "*I* don't look like I used to, either, and *she* doesn't complain;" "what a great woman;" "what a great mother."

But then you sneak a look, and it is what it is. She asks solicitously, "What's wrong, honey? Are you alright?"

Of course you're not alright. You're not alright at all. If you'd wanted Sumo, you could have gone Japanese mail-order. No, you are definitely not alright.

You say “traumatic?” Seriously?

Seriously. For you, an event has unfolded—an inflation of your spouse’s mass, a development, moreover, she may have done little to prevent—that you’ve witnessed *in a state of helplessness*. This is the essence of trauma—the experience of helplessness in the course of events that leave one feeling threatened and disturbed on deep levels.

More succinctly, your spouse is now *fat*, and you are perpetually *shocked* and *mortified*. You are having “startle responses” whenever you glance at her; you are *flashing-back* to when she was trim and comely, and you are wanting to *stay* in these flash-backs. This is a sort of *reverse* trauma, flashing-back to *good* memories, to avoid the trauma of your reality.

No question about it, you are seriously disturbed (as is your overall functioning), and the cause is inescapable—your spouse’s *weight* gain.

How can I prod my spouse into taking better care of herself?

As I said, you've probably played your deck, worked every angle. The sad fact is that, at this stage of the relationship, she's more interested in the needs and desires of Miguel, your landscaper, than yours.

I'm not suggesting you give-up, not quite yet. On the other hand, if you ask me: What is the basis for hope? What are the odds that *I*—the *least influential* person on my spouse in the whole world—can induce her to take on a program of self-rehabilitation, I must answer honestly: slim, very slim.

Nevertheless, your first order of business is to *back off*. The sooner you do, the sooner will a very powerful source of her resistance abate—the *motivation to disappoint you*. Complex factors may inform your spouse's unwillingness to confront her self-neglect, but as long as she can pin the blame on you—specifically, on your controlling, demanding expectations and judgemental observations—she will have no need to examine those factors.

But if, miraculously, you can back off and leave her alone, *really* leave her alone, you'll leave her with no choice but to examine her truest motives for allowing herself to “balloon up” like a heavyweight between title bouts.

Of course, this guarantees nothing: her self-neglect, in the end, may trump everything. But the key is to remove her motive to *neglect you*, first, because, until we do that, there is really no hope, none at all.

**You mention acceptance?
How important is acceptance to a good relationship?**

Research shows that partners who can *accept each other for who they are* (short of accepting chronic abuse) give themselves a better chance to have successful marriages than partners who can't, or won't. This is great news, for now your partner can strive immediately to be more patient, understanding, and less critical of you.

You've probably always dimly understood that, if your partner could just bring a bit more tolerance to the table—for instance, tolerance of your indolence, dependence on alcohol to cope with stress, and tendency to abdicate minor parental responsibilities (like supervising your kids in her absence)—things between you and she would be much better.

So, because you really are, in some ways, a rocket scientist, none of this research about “acceptance” surprises you. Matter of fact, it was a big waste of money—money that could have funded studies on PMS, and how to stabilize the emotional lives of pre-menopausal and menopausal spouses. Because any village idiot worth his appellation could have told you that “acceptance” is a good thing; hell, you were way ahead of this, way ahead of it.

Next thing they'll come up with is, “cutting your husband some slack” improves marriages. You can save them the money for that study right now.

**I know my spouse; he'll say something like,
"There you go again, it's always 'what can I do for you?'"**

You're referring to your spouse's tendency to evade responsibility? To invoke some variation of the predictable, "How bout *you*? Huh? How bout *you*? How bout *you* accept *me*, you goddamned freak!"

You're tired of this, of course; tired of your spouse's defensiveness and knee-jerk tendency to deflect, if not project, your complaints right back onto you. This might be tolerable if *you* did the same thing; if, like your spouse, *you* responded defensively and contemptuously to *his* complaints about you. But inasmuch as you, unlike he, can hear his complaints with maturity and composure, and, moreover, can actually *reflect on* and *contain them* without having to hurl them back in yet a more highly charged form, you find his "tit for tat" mentality extremely off-putting.

Your concern is valid and reflects how partners tend to exploit this "acceptance research" in rather self-centered ways. The research is powerful, if intuitively obvious, but *useful* only insofar as your spouse gets that its ramifications apply mainly to *him*.

**Regarding “acceptance,” are you suggesting
I accept my spouse’s childish evasion of responsibility?**

Let’s not take this “acceptance” thing too far. I’d hedge my bets that a closer look at your marital dynamic will reveal something very interesting: many of *his* behaviors will *objectively* meet the criteria of “unacceptable,” whereas most, if not all, of yours, *won’t*.

By “objectively” we mean, of course, criteria that are strictly, scientifically pegged to *your standard of what is and isn’t acceptable*. This makes sense when you consider that no one in the house, let alone the marriage, is more qualified to make these judgements than you.

**I've always sensed this to be the case,
but selling my spouse on it is another story.**

This is a delicate issue. No one likes to concede that one's partner is more reasonable and rational, her complaints and positions more consistently valid and important than his. That's tough stuff to swallow.

Your spouse believes, and wants *you to believe*, that *his* needs and perspective deserve just as much respect and consideration as yours. He wants to feel just as "listened to" as you do, that his input carries *as much weight as* yours. Your spouse, absurd as it sounds, is convinced that he makes *sense*, as much sense as you.

For access to **lots more laughs**, with great marital-saving advice, purchase the full-length **What's Wrong With My Spouse?: Guidance for Partners of Impossible Spouses** (179 pages) as a conveniently available **e-book** for only \$9.99.