

# *What's Wrong With My Spouse?*

## **Irreverant Guidance for Partners of Impossible Spouses**

By Steve Becker, LCSW

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## Advance Reviews

*“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.” Kirrkus 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.

### How can I help my spouse face reality?

This isn't easy. As I said, none of us likes to concede something of such magnitude. But here's an idea: You can remind him that he has many skills that you admire. You can stress that you love and *accept him no less* for coming up, compared to you, a bit weak in the category, let's say, of "reasoning and reasonableness."

You can stress that this is less *his* deficiency than *your* remarkable, unusual perspicacity, which, it appears, you were born with. In other words, you're not calling yourself exactly a genius, but you're pretty much calling yourself a genius.

Let's look at some ways you might convey this sensitively and effectively:

- "Harold, do you recall what I got on the logic part of my GRE's? That's right, honey, a 680. I believe you got a 390? Let me make this decision, honey."
- "Larry, I'm not putting you down. I think you're an extremely brilliant man. I'm just saying, if you canvassed everyone who knows us, you'd find that it's *I*, and *not* you, who is perceived, without exception, as the more grounded problem-solver."
- "I'm not saying you're wrong, Al. I'm saying *I'm* right. There's a big difference. In fact, I'll go so far as to say that *you're never wrong*, Al. Okay?"
- "It may *seem* like I don't take your ideas seriously, Hank, which is exactly why I'm suggesting you stop bombarding me with them. See what I'm saying? You sort of set yourself up?"
- "I think this so-called inequity you're talking about, Jim, is a figment of your vivid, artistic imagination that attracts me so much to you. But it's fantasy honey, so drop it."

■ “I’m not saying I’m *gifted*, Sal, just that all through school I was regularly pulled out of my classes due to my astonishing intellect. You, too, were pulled out of your classes, Sal, I believe because you were *specialized*?”

■ “Arnold, it takes two to fight. Think about the logic of it: if you would just stop fighting, we wouldn’t be fighting. You can do this, Arnold. I believe in you. It’s why I married and had disabled children with you.”

■ “Absolutely, Fred. We vowed we’d always consult each other on the big decisions in our lives. You’ve been consulted, Fred. I heard your point. And I’ll take it under consideration.”

Play around with some of these paradoxical interventions and see if they can coax your spouse into a more cooperative state of mind?

**Honestly, I've always secretly suspected I might be a genius.**

Genius or not, we can say this unequivocally: You've endured a spouse for a long time who, most assuredly, *isn't* a genius, at least not emotionally. Just as confidently, we can say this: Compared to your spouse, you are *indeed* a genius, a genius of staggering proportions.

What's more, you could be very easy to *live* with, *love*, and *like* if your spouse would just shelve his absurd, egalitarian notions of marriage, and stop making trouble needlessly. You're not asking him to *sit and heel* for you, just to *defer* to you when it's clear to any sensible mind that *that's* what's in *his*, yours, and *the kids'* best interest.

**My therapist has suggested that my spouse has serious problems,  
and that I'm selling myself short in the marriage.**

You are blessed to have a therapist willing to go out on the limb and implicate your spouse without ever having met him. This is exactly the kind of therapist you want—one who embraces your assessment of your spouse's deficiencies unequivocally (again, without ever having met him), and encourages you, implicitly if not directly, to send him packing.

All too often therapists take cautious positions here, hesitating to skewer a client's partner on the thin basis that they haven't gotten to know him or her. This caution suggests less than a 100% appreciation and acceptance of the *client's experience* of the marriage. Sure, you want your therapist to be objective, to help you see things with more balance, but you really don't. For that, you can talk to your spouse, who will be happy to suggest for your consideration alternative ways to view your conflicts.

Many therapists are careful not to indiscriminately validate their clients' viewpoints for fear of enabling narrow, self-defeating attitudes and positions. In other words, they don't always tell their clients what they want to hear. But think about it: you're paying good money to see your therapist: maybe she *should* tell you what you want to hear? Maybe that's the minimum service she should provide?

**I have a different experience with my therapist, who frequently challenges me to address what I bring to the table in the marriage? Should I fire her?**

Because I don't know the particulars of the situation, in good conscience I have to say, yes. It's not enough that you live with a challenging spouse; now you're up against a challenging therapist?

I'm not suggesting that a good therapist is a toady, but the very best ones are.

Compare these two responses:

**Therapist:** Absolutely, Sal. She provoked you. You had every right to feel incensed. The fact that your anger terrified her and the kids diverts us from the real issue—her!

**Therapist:** I hear you, Sal. You felt provoked, sure...but might *she* have felt provoked *first* when you called her a bitch? And how do you imagine the kids experienced your rage?

You get my point: The first therapist is really working, attuning to your perspective, validating the way you see things, whereas the second therapist seems to be asking you to look at yourself, look at how your actions impacted the interaction and left others feeling?

Nobody questions that you bring baggage to the relationship; but in a good, satisfying psychotherapeutic relationship, it should go without saying that *yours* will be appreciated for being infinitely lighter and immeasurably less toxic than hers.

**My spouse constantly accuses me of laziness;  
the truth is, I get more done in my free time  
than probably 90% of the guys I know.**

The truth is, you do more (but not *much*) than *she* thinks you do, and less (*much* less) than *you* think you do. In other words, her assessment of your productivity at home is biased slightly negatively, while *yours* is inflated ridiculously.

If it's true that you're more productive than 90% of the guys you know, let's be honest: this a damning, sobering indictment of men, in general. But let's hope it's less *that*, and *more* a reflection of the "guys *you* know," who, in all probability, on any of several clinically valid "misfit scales," will rank in the top one percentile of adult male subjects.

**We've produced the most amazing children together.  
This must mean that, on some level, we're compatible?**

I'm afraid not. Of course you love your kids, and yes, you share them with *this* spouse; but with a different spouse, you'd simply have had different kids whom you'd have loved just as much.

This isn't to dissuade you from regarding your spouse and your history together in the most favorable light possible. You've shared much together, including and most importantly, your children. But let's not confuse procreation with compatibility.

When you married your spouse, of course, you did so feeling, deep in your heart, that you and he would, in fact, combine the best of your wonderful genes to produce the greatest children the world had yet seen. There was the feeling that you wanted to bear only *his* children, no one else's.

And then the kids came, and for a stretch it all looked good: the children, possible outcomes only of your mating with *him*, were as special as you'd imagined. Although the first one looked a little funny, and still *does*, yet you saw the stamp of uniqueness that someday would propel him to heights well above what you or your spouse would ever attain.

And the second? The second had "prodigal son" written all over him; you *knew*...you *knew* the second you'd laid eyes on him that he'd overcome his missing arm, the club foot, and lowest score the hospital had ever seen on the Apgar test. *This* kid was special, all right: he'd be special all through school, in special classes, and with special equipment that would enable to him buzz an aide whenever he had to urinate. But he was *your* kid, the product of your lovemaking with *him*, that special man you now call dickhead, and that made *him*, the kid, almost anointed in some way.

Number three posed no obvious warnings: he looked okay at birth; compared to numbers one and two, he most conformed to the vision of genetic perfection you envisioned when you and your spouse agreed to bless the world with your progeny. But, by about age five, scientists at the local university were already lining-up to use him in a study of antisocial personality precursors in early childhood. This child was making Damien from “The Omen” look like a pussy. It made no sense.

Later, the confusion would lessen, when you’d learn that your spouse was a psychopath, and that psychopathy ran in his family. But that insight was still years away.

And so, here you are today. Ted’s doing fine, having weathered the elementary school childhood taunts of “elephant man;” Nick is thriving in the program for the physically handicapped with undetectable I.Q’s; and Eugene, locked-away in a maximum-security juvenile facility, is helping researchers shed light on the etiology of sociopathy.

In other words, your kids, after all, really *are* soldiering on, each in his own way, but let’s face it, you and the spouse are no less incompatible than ever.

**I've been accused of being self-centered sexually.  
I'm tired of it. It's unfair, and takes the fun out of sex.**

It must be hard to be reminded, after *you've* “come,” that *she* hasn't? Your spouse, it seems, has the idea that, after all the energy *you've* invested in *your pleasure*, there should be enough left-over for *hers*?

But when did sex become a *contract*, you ask? When did we start *keeping score*? Whatever happened to *spontaneity*? And why must labels such as “self-centered” be thrown around so recklessly?

You aren't self-centered, you aren't. As a matter of fact, you've considered some interesting ways to equalize your sexual pleasure and experience (some of them *her* suggestions), and you've reflected very deeply on them. For instance:

- You could satisfy *her* first, before yourself. This has advantages, among them that, in the process of concentrating first on *her* pleasure, *yours* can quietly build, culminating in an even *more potent* climax. The problem is, in satisfying her, your own excitement really doesn't build much. You never really *are* concentrating on her, you're really just thinking about yourself, about getting to you. But *that's* not self-centered.

- You could make sure *she's* come before you end your sexual session. You could ask her directly, “Have you come yet?” The risk here is in the answer, “No.” You will need to face this risk, because “no” will mean you'll have to do something extra and effective to bring her to orgasm. This could mean, in other words, that you'll have *to do something*.

■ Relatedly, you can ask her *what will feel good?* What can I do to *heighten your pleasure?* But here again, you must be prepared for the answer. She could respond with something like, “I’d like some oral,” and you will need to muffle your gasp, to disguise your mortification. Or, she may ask you to masturbate her, and you’ll need to conceal the impatient rolling of your eyes. It’s possible she may ask to be kissed some more *as you masturbate her*, in which case you’ll need to manage the desperate urge to flee! Yet none of these instinctive reactions, of course, will reflect your self-centeredness.

■ You can access her fantasies, and enact them with the aim of exciting her (as she can do for you). But we face the same predicament: Will her fantasy demand something of you, something like, an *interest in her pleasure?* Because if it does, *that* could be a problem. But *not* because you’re self-centered.

Times have changed, quite obviously. It’s reached the point that a partner—particularly the male partner—can’t *fundamentally lack interest* in his spouse’s sexual satisfaction, without his being labeled “self-centered.” This is probably exactly what you’re feeling. You are probably thinking, “I’m a great lover. I really am. It’s almost *never the case*...in fact, it’s *never the case* that I don’t have an orgasm during sex.” You’re probably thinking, “I’m pretty good, to be able, time and again, to *guarantee my own orgasm*. Yeah, that’s pretty impressive. I don’t see why I can’t be recognized for *that?*”

**This is embarrassing, but sometimes I sense my wife isn't satisfied with my penis? How big does my penis have to be?**

Probably bigger than it is. Many men worry about the size of their penises and, not coincidentally, these are men who tend to have small penises. It's also true that men with small penises have contributed much to the world, just *not* in the bedroom.

Still, it's likely that your wife's gripe is less with your *size* than her perception, as we've just discussed, of your *self-centered* attitude. Many men confuse these factors—that is, in their fixation over their size, they forget that what their partners *want most* is more reciprocity and attentiveness (and not *just* a partner with a bigger penis).

In other words, your *smallness* is less her complaint than is your tendency, in sex (if not in general), to seek *exclusively your own gratification*.

I should note that it's quite possible that your worries about your penis size are unfounded. Many men believe their penises are much smaller than they really are. And keep in mind, it's much more important that your penis can get *hard* than long. So think *hard* first, *size* second. This mantra can help you keep perspective, especially if you repeat it aloud (and *loudly*) frequently during the day.

So, how can you tell if you're suffering from *true* versus *delusional* penile-length challenges? Your worry may have some validity if, during sex, your spouse says things like:

- (*with eyes closed*) “Oh God, Harold. I love it when you stick your pinky inside me.”

- (*after entering her*) “Remember, honey, to give me the heads-up you're about to penetrate?”

- (*as you're thrusting away*) “Oh my God, Jerry. I think I'm ready for you.”

■ (*her eyes closed, as dildo is inserted*) “Oh my God, Ben, *that* must be the dildo.

Just use *that*.”

Bear in mind, while the size of your penis may be an issue (for you, at least), for *her* it's the size of your desire to please her that, on balance, matters more.

### **My spouse complains that I don't find him funny anymore.**

This is a sad but common trend: spouses finding each other, over time, less funny and more annoying. That is, what *once* was funny is now illustrative of his inability to know when to stop, to know when he's lost you (which was a long time ago).

You may wonder, was he *ever* really funny and entertaining, or was this an artifact of the honeymoon phase in which you *convinced* yourself he was, and convinced *him* that you found him so?

In any case, your spouse, after all these years, has lost his comical edge, and even when he's occasionally humorous, you don't like him enough anyway to laugh. And he can bemoan this as much as he likes, like a petulant comic railing at a non-responsive audience, but it is what it is.

But don't be surprised if, in his desperation for validation, he enlists the testimonials of others to prove his genius as an entertainer, making resentful comments like:

- “You know what, Claire? You're like the only person in Pennsylvania who doesn't appreciate how hilarious I am. How do you explain *that*?”
- “Do you realize, Karen, that I'm constantly cracking Ted and Marsha up at work? I may not be highly valued in the office as a litigator, but everyone I work with values my humor. What's your take on *that*?”
- “Look, Joanne, I can't make you find me funny anymore, but the fact that you *don't* makes me worry that you really need some help. Because I *know* I'm funny, and so do all of my friends know I'm funny, and *their* friends, too. So, trust me, I don't need your validation on this! But I can help you find the help I think you need, if you want me to?”

It's quite awkward when your spouse is desperate to impress you with a quality on which his self-esteem hinges so deeply—a quality, sadly, that you may not see in him or, in any case, value. If motivated, you can reduce the tension by making appeasing gestures (called “lies”) along the lines of, “Don, it might surprise you to know that I rate you right up there with Howard Stern and Robin Williams?”

**I hear it's important to spend "quality time" with my spouse,  
but I dislike him, so why would I want to spend *any* time with him?**

You raise an interesting point and expose a pernicious, vicious cycle. In the first place, "quality time," as *you* conceive it, may differ starkly from *his* notion of quality time. For *him*, a good night together might entail a minimum of vicious, passive-aggressive fighting, at the end of which, there is sex. For *you*, quality time could be a movie enjoyed together, plus his interest to learn that you started a new job six weeks ago, and had a confirmed pregnancy two weeks before that.

But let's be clear: just because the experience of quality time may be subjective doesn't mean that yours, *objectively*, isn't the more valid conceptualization. Remember, the tie *always goes to you*, a principle that your spouse would do enormously well to accept.

The vicious cycle aspect is thorny: we might describe it as, the *more* you dislike your spouse, the less time you spend together; the less time you spend together, the *weaker* the relationship becomes; yet the *more* time you spend together, the *less* you like him, leading to *more* avoidance of him, resulting in a further erosion of your, by now, virtually non-existent bond?

Date-night just doesn't seem to fit into this equation, and yet many therapists prescribe it as an anodyne for estranged couples, heedless of how tortuous it can be to spend an entire evening, *alone*, with your partner. (Studies suggest that being trapped inside a burning building with little hope of rescue may be the most analagous experience.)

### **So what's the way out of this conundrum, short of splitting?**

The reuniting around common interests can be helpful. But I'm going to assume that, besides the kids (if you have them), you have no common interests. And that, even in the case of the kids, you're probably on different pages much or most of the time?

You can decide to search-out, actively, shared interests together. This is a good plan, except it's just hard to do, with so little free time, and given how disinclined you are to waste what little free time you have in your spouse's company.

Also, the problem often goes deeper than merely having "*grown apart*," "*drifted apart*," "*lost whatever we once had in common*" (however little that was). The problem we keep returning to is, fundamentally, *your spouse*. In other words, you could take up bridge together, or jointly take piano lessons, or join a book club, and, while this will be nice, it won't address your spouse's core attitude problem, about which he remains defensive, if not in denial.

So here's a suggestion: Arrange to have several of your closest girlfriends—in whom you regularly confide what a jerk he is and who validate unequivocally your perceptions of him—join you in a mass, but also very specific, personal evisceration of him. The goal will be *less* to attack him, than actually to *rip him apart* and leave him feeling pretty much defenseless. This may not be pleasant, but it may be. Pleasant or not, a very forceful gesture such as this may be necessary to shake your spouse up. Remember, your spouse needs to be shaken up. His complacency, and more specifically, his *unlikability*, have reached dangerous levels.

We might call this an *informal* intervention approach (versus the more labor-intensive classical intervention); but while casual, it can be just as effective.

**My spouse is way too defensive to handle something like that.**

This is part of his problem, his defensiveness. But don't sell him short. He may up and surprise you, and declare his readiness to own his alienating behaviors. Bear in mind, it's especially important, if you take this approach, to get the right girlfriends to join you in this attack of his shortcomings—girlfriends, ideally, whom he's never liked and who have *never liked him*.

This will almost guarantee that his defensiveness, even *rage*, will be elicited in the intervention itself, thus confirming, spontaneously and undeniably, his problematic volatility, negativity, and oppositional personality.

I should mention the recent advent of “spousal rehab” centers. These are in-patient facilities, most of them out West or in the Southwest, that will “house” your difficult spouse for several weeks, during which time he'll be systematically “deprogrammed” of his inflated evaluations of his performance and “attitudes,” and returned to you in a considerably humbled, more pliant state.

**That's fantastic. Is it possible to have my spouse  
forcibly committed to such a rehab center?**

The courts don't make this easy. Most judges are somewhat reluctant to ship spouses off to these centers involuntarily. On the other hand, it is happening increasingly, and the early data is that these programs really *can* break your spouse and send him home pretty much a shell of the belligerent, willful personality he was.

However, the judge needs to be pretty convinced that your spouse really qualifies for such intensive, spirit-taming treatment. The nice thing is you've got your girlfriends, all of whom will be very happy to testify in court, before the judge, how urgent it is that your spouse be sent away. And you will have videotape of the recently executed intervention, in which you'll have edited-out all of your and your girlfriends' ad hominem attacks, and wisely left only your spouse's rageful, unhinged responses. Out of context, your spouse will impress the judge as sufficiently disturbed to qualify for a mandated flight to an Arizona facility.

**I met a guy at work who treats me so much more sensitively than my spouse does. He really seems to understand my feelings.**

Remember, guys always “get” guys better than women do, so it’s not surprising you’re finding him a good ear. But remember, he doesn’t live with you 24/7, and has no idea how difficult you are on a day-to-day basis.

Most of the people with whom we’re friendly at work (or even personally) are more attuned to us than our spouses. In large part this is due to their comparatively limited contact with us, which affords them protection from the truer challenges we bring to our intense, committed relationships. They’ll tend to see our more rational, pleasing sides because, however comfortable we may be with them, we’re still generally on our “better behavior” with *everyone but our spouses*.

Having said that, it sounds like this man you’ve found at work may actually be gay, because most straight men will not understand you with the sensitivity you’re suggesting. My advice is, treasure him as a resource, and make sure he knows *how much* you treasure him. You can do this in quite manly ways, with appreciative remarks like:

■ “Phil, I need you to know that your sensitivity to my feelings leaves me feeling very special. You are a very important person in my life. Thanks.”

■ “Don, it’s hard for me to convey how much I appreciate your attunement to me. If it’s okay with you, I’d like to hug you?”

■ “You know, Ron, I was wondering if you’d like to catch a showing of Brokeback Mountain with me tonight? You know, just as buddies?”

And just as effective:

■ “I’ve learned, Kevin, that a man needs to be understood, and sometimes I think (*breaking down emotionally*) you understand me better than my wife. God, *thanks*, buddy.”

■ “When we first started working together, Paul, you were just a colleague. Now, you’re like the wife I always imagined having.”

■ “I know you’re just seven years older than I am, Jerry, but, are you willing to be my dad?”

■ “Billy, I know you’ve done a lot of listening to my concerns. If you ever need a good listener, I promise I’ll do my best to find you one?”

Your gratitude, expressed with such generosity and dignity, will leave your collegial confidante feeling appreciated and motivated to remain the sensitive ear that he is.

**I've noticed lately that women seem to be checking me out; it's highly flattering and reminds how little my spouse appreciates me.**

The reason your spouse doesn't appreciate you is that she's constantly seeing other husbands doing way more around the house, and with the kids, and their wives, than you. And yet, as we've discussed at length, this doesn't justify her failure to recognize what you *do* do, however hard to detect it may be. For this, for what you actually accomplish and sacrifice, you are right to want to be valued and validated.

With respect to the recent glut of attention you're getting from comely female strangers who are sizing you up as the asset you've always known you were (and would like your wife to remember), this is a wonderful thing, to know that, at any moment, you can call upon your fertile imaginative powers to soothe your insecurities.

This isn't to say these women aren't as impressed with you as you think, it's just to suggest that a far more plausible explanation is that, in your desperation to be noticed, you're completely imagining this. Bear in mind, this kind of fantasizing is extremely healthful, as it singlehandedly drives down the adult male suicide rate by at least 60%.

But a good way to confirm reality here is to approach such a woman and say something like, "Hi, I'm Stanley. How ya doing?" If she replies, "Fuck off" (which she will), this indicates a misreading of the circumstances.

Your best chance, believe it or not, is still with your spouse. As alienated by and unattracted to you as she is, she still represents a better bet, at this stage, to allow you to stir something in her than these women you psychotically imagine are fantasizing about you.

**My spouse often fails to grasp me  
on any number of levels, such as at all.**

It can be hard sometimes to pinpoint the reasons for your spouse's egregious failure to grasp you. Is he too self-absorbed to care? Just a bad listener? Prone to distraction? Afraid of intimacy? Is he just *dumb*?

Sometimes you have a spouse who's intellectual and emotional development are quite asymmetrical: he may be brilliantly analytical yet with a truncated emotional intelligence. On one hand, he can solve abstruse technical problems at work (for which he may be handsomely paid), but on the level of comprehending your most elemental concerns, he goes pretty much brain-dead. Can he simultaneously be that brilliant and that dense?

Absolutely. In such cases, is he just *underdeveloped* in this respect or *inherently* challenged? How can you know the difference?

Here's a suggestion: Approach your spouse and say something like: "I know I've threatened to leave you before, Phil, but you should know that I've contacted a lawyer and will be filing for divorce next week."

The following responses don't bode well:

■ "Honey, I don't get it. What's your *point*?"

■ "Honey...honey...settle down here. Let's not lob threats of this magnitude recklessly? Look, I'm going out with Al in a little while and, when I come home, *after* I watch SportsCenter, *if* you're still up, we can talk about this. Okay? Let's get a grip."

On the other hand if, earnestly, he says something like, "Honey, look...I'm willing to do *anything* to save our marriage, so long as it doesn't impinge on my Friday night flag football schedule," while enormously dense, he may be remediable.

## What can anxiety do to my spouse?

Anxiety, like depression, can really mess with a personality and turn a difficult spouse *impossible*. So how can you tell if your spouse is anxious, and how badly?

Start by asking yourself these questions, answering yes or no:

- Do the words “laid back” fail to connote him?

- Is he negative, for instance expects the worst outcomes of situations, such as, “Honey, if I don’t survive the dental procedure, remember, don’t cremate me.”

- Does he have phobias, for instance, screaming, “Estelle! Estelle! It’s a spider! Kill it! Goddamn it, honey, kill it!”

- Is there anything important he *doesn’t* avoid?

- Is he hypochondriacal, for instance, trembling, tells his physician, “Level with me, doc. This can’t be just a cold. I’ve had colds. I get ’em every month. I’m tellin’ you, *this* is different. Let’s check again for pancreatic cancer?”

- Does he panic easily, for instance, “Ellen, the ATM machine’s temporarily disabled! Oh God. I’m feeling dizzy.”

These are but a few of the many signs of anxiety. Therapy and medication can help a spouse whose anxiety is spiraling out of control. If he balks at the idea of medication, you can say, “That’s not *you* talking, Ed. That’s your anxiety. And if it’s not your anxiety, then it’s some other fucked-up, bullshit-manufacturing, excuse-making part of your personality that I’m no longer tolerating.”

Naturally, you’ll want to ascertain of the prospective therapist his experience working with cases of anxiety? His best credential is not, “*I* have an anxiety disorder, and so I know first-hand what it’s like to be anxious.”

Neither is it, “And I’m on *three* anti-anxiety medications as we speak, but I very strongly believe that medication is not the answer, except in rare cases, such as mine.”

And if the therapist seems to be *entering* an anxiety attack, or is in the middle of one, and says, “This is good. Watch how I handle this,” be wary.

Last, if on greeting you in his waiting-room, he says, “Hello, nice to meet you. You’ll need to take nine steps, no more, no less, exactly *nine*, from this point *here*, to the sofa in my therapy office,” you’ll want to consult your health plan for another referral.

**My spouse accuses me of offering help only when she's pretty much finished doing what she wanted help with.**

Are you saying, she accuses you of *tactically waiting* 'till there's pretty much *nothing left to be done* before you offer your help? Clearly, this is just another indication of how chillingly well your spouse knows you.

But even so, isn't it better that you offered *something*, rather than *nothing*, knowing, of course (indeed, making *sure*), that your *usefulness shelf-life* had expired? It's kind of like stepping-up to the plate, literally, *after* the game's over, but doesn't the gesture, however empty, count for *something*?

You know plenty of guys who, in similar situations, wouldn't even *go through the motions* of gesturing their help? They'd outright ignore, if not contemptuously blow-off, their spouse's request! The problem is, your spouse doesn't know any of these guys. The guys *she* knows, her friends' spouses, are all "whipped" compared to you, yet she's constantly invoking *their* responsiveness to *their* spouses, as if you're supposed to be impressed by a bunch of whipped guys?

Your spouse actually believes that, in comparing you unfavorably to her friends' spouses, you'll be motivated to become *more like Mike* next door! She doesn't understand that this motivates you to become *less like Mike* and, passive-aggressively, *more like you*.

**You've mentioned the word "expectations" several times. How do expectations fit into a marriage?**

When you get right down to it, marriages succeed or fail based on partners' expectations of each other. How fair, clear, respectfully expressed, and effectively communicated partners' expectations are—*this* is the terrain within which marriages thrive or die.

The tricky part is keeping track of changing expectations of each other and examining them regularly to make sure they remain reasonable.

Naturally, this is your strength. You are someone who regularly questions his expectations in his relationships (even, occasionally, when sober); holds them up to the mirror; examines their origins, and also their present validity and fairness.

So no, the problem here isn't you. We know that. The problem is that, even *after* you've closely assessed your expectations of your spouse, and culled out the legitimate (from the illegitimate) ones, she *still resists* meeting them! This, unfortunately, *is* a problem.

You're talking about expectations that you've vetted in your individual therapy, scrutinized from every angle—those which your therapist, and even *rabbi*, have blessed as "kosher." And yet, even *these* few, surviving expectations are a no-go with your hard-ass spouse). Expectations as basic as:

■ "Gloria, stop asking me to do stuff around the house. I work hard as hell during the week, so I'm *done* when I'm home."

■ "I can't do it, honey. Stop asking me to express feelings. I was born without feelings."

■ "Be glad I have *any* priorities, let alone the right ones."

■ “I wanna satisfy you honey, I really *do*. It’s just that when *I* come, we’re finished.”

■ “Don’t assume, just because I’m not listening, that I’m not absorbing your meaning?”

■ “Okay, okay. I’ll come to the teachers’ conference. For *which* kid? And what grade’s he in?”

■ “What do you mean I’m never present? I’m sick of hearing that. By the way, if you expect me to go to the Cohens’ later, forget it. And, speaking of the present, when are you gonna call that asshole plumber to fix the downstairs toilet?”

It’s not a bad idea from time to time to sit down with your spouse and review your expectations of each other. You’ll want to listen undefensively, with an open mind, as she outlines in graphic, inarguable detail the magnitude of your neglectful, irresponsible behaviors. You’ll want to reserve about 30 minutes for the discussion, and you’ll want to make absolutely sure, for fairness’ sake, that she gets her full 10.

### **My therapist wants to meet my spouse. Is that a good idea?**

It depends on his motive. If he suspects that your spouse is “hot” from the way you’ve described her over the months, he may have built-up an excruciating urge to eyeball her, an urge supported by his *growing boredom with you*, along with his gnawing curiosity to see whether, in person, she matches his vivid fantasy. This would be a good motive to bring her in. Until he sees your wife, he’ll remained preoccupied with his fantasies and be less available and attuned to you.

It’s also possible that your therapist, having heard so much dirt on your spouse, wants to confirm directly that she’s as nutty as you’ve described her. In this case, his intention is to derive empirical evidence that will validate what you’ve been complaining about for months. In other words, he sees this as an opportunity to tell you, in your next individual session, “You were right, Tim, not that I doubted you for a minute. Your wife really *is* a piece of ass.”

I’m not suggesting that boredom with you, or a fixation with your wife in fantasy, is necessarily an admirable reason for your therapist to request her presence in a session. But worse would be a motive to meet her with an eye towards trying to see *her* end of things; to make sense of *her assertion* that you’re a psychopathic liar and that everything you’ve shared with him from the inception of your therapy has been a gross, irresponsible misrepresentation of her (and you!).

### **What tactics can I use to entice my spouse into couples counseling?**

You can tell your spouse that your therapist is young and distractingly beautiful. Her name is Tatyana. Throw in that she's single and has a flirtatious style, and see what happens? He'll be annoyed to discover that your therapist is Don, a large, balding, fat man. But the trick is getting him there. You can deal with his sense of betrayal once he's there.

There are less deceptive ways to coax your partner into attending a therapy session, like the infamous threat, "Harry, you will enter counseling with me, or I'm leaving you!!," but research shows that more than half the time Harry will reply, "Then leave."

You can spice the threat up a bit by appending, "And, by the way, you'll never see your kids again!," but again, research shows that almost half the time Harry will reply, "Whatever."

### How will we know our couples therapist is competent?

For starters, if he's smart, he should recognize pretty fast that the cancer in the relationship is sitting to your right. And he'll *need* to be smart, very smart, because plenty of shit will be flying—many reckless, vicious complaints and accusations, so he'll have to be able differentiate the meaningful, valid ones (yours) from the gratuitous, groundless ones (his)?

He'll need to have excellent boundaries, as emotions will be raw and alliances ripe for the forming. You'll want him to remain *neutral* through all this, unless he's willing to form an alliance with *you*.

He should leave each of you feeling understood and appreciated for your experiences of each other, while making it crystal clear that your spouse may be emotionally challenged, probably abusive, and a narcissist, if not a sociopath. He should be able to do this in a way that your spouse can digest *undefensively*. This needs stressing: It is critical that he anticipate your spouse's defensiveness, because neither he, nor you, will want to hear, or allow, your spouse to defend himself.

He should be openminded and receptive to his shifting perceptions of the marriage and marital dynamics, as long as those perceptions remain favorable towards you.

Regarding interventions, their purpose must never be lost: to confront, if not *hound*, your spouse into more appropriate, prosocial behaviors. Expect your therapist to model undefensiveness and respectful communication at all times, even if he perceives *himself* to be under attack. For instance, "I could take that personally, Larry, I really could. But I'm a therapist, and know better than to let you push my buttons, you weak, insecure,

arrogant asshole! You know what? Get out of my office! Now! Before I *throw* you out, punk!”

The right couples therapist stays awake, and ideally, *alert*, through most of the session. He'll *need* to stay alert to track your partner's compulsive denials, avoidance, and prevarications. I know of several burned-out couples therapists who use alarm clocks to insure they rouse by session's end, with the “10 *extra-minute*” button option available should they “come to” much earlier?

Your couples therapist should be available for contact between sessions, but should resist his compulsive urges to call for nightly updates, in the manner of, “Yo, Larry, it's *me*. Put Annette on the phone.” This could be construed as intrusive and “biased” behavior, particularly his reliance on you (versus Larry) as a credible reporter of events.

A good couples therapist isn't overly invested in the outcome of your marriage. But, if you end up divorcing, he should have gotten to know you well enough to suggest, after enough time has passed (say, a week), dinner and a movie? He should be subtle in his approach, like, “Annette, it's Joe. Listen, I'm glad you had the sense to dump that meathead. I couldn't tell you at the time, but that's exactly what my advice would have been. I was wondering, can I take you to dinner and give you the attention you've always wanted from a man?”

Most important, and this bears repeating, you need to *feel comfortable* with your couples therapist. Whether your spouse does or doesn't is a separate and, frankly, less important matter.

**When I look at the bigger picture,  
I realize I could have done worse. Much worse.**

This is a nice self-soothing technique, what I call a “perspective” technique. But let’s be honest: You couldn’t have done much worse. It appears you did about as badly as you could. Trying to convince yourself otherwise is clever, just not true.

Better that you focus on appreciating your spouse for the few genuinely positive qualities he has. Your emphasis on these qualities, if your spouse senses it, can inspire him to reach even deeper into his limited repertoire to bring out an even better version of himself.

I call this strategy *molding* your spouse, through relentless focus on his overshadowed strengths, into the salvageable partner he can yet become.

**My spouse insists that I'm extremely defensive  
and, moreover, hot-headed and anger-ridden.**

The more you think about her depiction of you, the more incensed you get. Seriously, ask anyone who knows you (besides your spouse), and they'll say, "Dan? What're you *kidding*? He's a *pussycat*. I've known him forever. *Him*? An anger problem? Nah."

That incident with your neighbor, James (you took the *bat to his car*), was more about *passion* than about anger. Your spouse seems to confuse this a lot: she's constantly mistaking your passion for anger (and this really *pisses* you off). And, by the way, the judge saw it your way too, *exactly* your way. When he court-mandated anger-management counseling, this was just a "technicality," his way of handling the charge with a minimum of fuss. And the community service he ordered, requiring you to discuss anger management strategies with youth in public schools? *That* arose from his clairvoyant perception of you as an unusually gifted communicator who could tangibly influence the young people of your town.

When he fixed you with his stern gaze and pronounced you "a bully!," that was all theatrics, and both of you knew it. And when you smiled at him knowingly, he was merely staying in character when he warned, "Do you know what *contempt of court* is, sir?"

You got the point. The judge was a showman, and he knew the charges were as bogus as you did. On the other hand, the required, formal apology to Jim and his family was, admittedly, pushing it. You were sorely tempted to tell the judge to go to hell, but you held back (just barely) due, as you've argued all along, to your fundamentally very healthy anger-management skills.

**If you talk to my spouse, you'd think it's a special day when I change a light-bulb. I'm tired of that complaint.**

Be honest: when's the last time you changed a light-bulb? If it's recently, when's the last time you did anything more strenuous and challenging than changing a light-bulb?

Then again, what are you, a certified handyman? Did your spouse marry you on the basis of your demonstrated interest and competence in maintaining a *house*?

Aren't there *professionals* who do this kind of thing, for a *living*?

We return, again, to the question of how much of a load you are, and how berated you should be for it? As we discussed earlier, you are, in fact, a load, and a big one; and, although we've already suggested that you probably do more than your spouse alleges, it's also true, as we've noted, that you do less, *much* less than the vast majority of the non-disabled adult male population.

Still, you ask fairly, must I be skewered constantly for my abject disregard of household responsibilities? After all, it's likely you were *always* a load, which is to say it's doubtful that you *became* one, conveniently, instantly after marrying. In this sense—and perhaps *only in this sense*—you were yourself *then* (undupliciously) and remain who you are today. In other words, while you dissimulated in so many other ways, on this score you were pretty transparent. Why, then, can't your spouse make peace with this?

**My spouse says I've got double-standards,  
and she's sick of them.**

This is a tough one. I mean, you figure she'd be glad you've got *any* standards, let alone an extra one? And what *are* double-standards anyway? Is it a double-standard everytime you accord yourself privileges and rights that you don't accord *her*? Who defined *that* as a double-standard?

No, this isn't about inequality and chauvinism: you're not looking to roll back the clock on women's rights. No, at bottom, this is about nothing more than your right to recognize and assert your needs...your *manly* needs...your unique needs...your needs that make you unique...uniquely *you* and the unique man you uniquely *are*. Yeah, that's about the sum of what this is. No more, no less.

It's not that complex and it doesn't have to be controversial. All you're saying is, not everything that applies to her must always, by definition, apply to you. And it's got nothing to do with your feeling privileged or entitled, or any of that crap; matter of fact, you're tired, really, of the double-standard accusation, utterly sick and tired of it. And no, you don't have an anger problem, and you sure as hell don't have an attitude problem.

### **My spouse seems to think things are okay with us.**

Two things come to mind: either you haven't communicated your discontent as effectively as you think you have, or—and let's not balk at this sobering possibility—your spouse is as intractably, terminally dense as you fear he is. This isn't easy to separate—your incompletely, opaquely expressed grievances versus his fundamental, fatal obtuseness?

Although we tend to overrate the transparency of our communications, in *your* case—given your track record of making your concerns and needs directly understood and appreciated—we can only suppose that your spouse, mired in his characteristic self-delusion, sees what he wants to see, and *not* the reality.

This can be awfully exasperating. Sometimes such spouses really need to be jolted out of their cluelessness, with statements like:

- “Fred, you seem to think we're doing okay, but you should know that those used condoms on our bedroom floor are Sal's, *not* yours.”

- “Donald, when I say that one of us has to go, I mean *you*. *You* have to go, Donald, and by *no later* than tomorrow night! *That's* when I call my cop friend, Vito, to come by and help you pack.”

Your spouse's continuing inability to recognize your seriousness may warrant a complete battery of psychological tests, most especially an I.Q. test to determine his exact level of retardation.

**My spouse complains that I spend no time with my kids,  
and that I'm damaging them from my absence.**

You need to take a hard look in the mirror and ask yourself with blunt honesty: Is this *another* case of your spouse's haranguing you without validity? Don't make this easy on yourself—in other words take the time to *really* probe yourself: Is she, once *again*, riding your ass without justification?

Because, let's be brutally honest with ourselves, she does this constantly. A day doesn't go by—certainly not *two*—without your hearing some recycled complaint shrilly protested (if she hasn't hatched a *new* one).

So now we have this: You don't spend any time with the kids. The word "any" always gets you. It's so *global*. And so *wrong*. You *do* spend time with your kids. You come home late at night, and sometimes just *watch them sleep* for several minutes, just you in the room watching them, just you and them, no one interrupting you. What's *that*, if not quality time?

She scoffs at that, suggesting that they're not even awake, coherent...they don't even *know* you're there. What's it take, she says dismissively, to watch your kids sleep? How does *that* enrich them? How does *that* promote a bond between them and you? It's *easy*, is what it is, she'll say. It's easy...for *you*. And *that*, she'll say, is the necessary condition for your involvement with the kids—that is be *easy*, for you.

When does it end? you ask. If not in divorce, only in *death*? The prospect, if nothing else, dramatically reduces your fear of death.

**My spouse resents my girlfriends,  
saying I'm too close to them.**

Of course this bothers you—who, if not your girlfriends, will understand and appreciate you? Who will take the time to listen to you, actually give a damn about your day? If it wasn't for your girlfriends' interest in you, you might even go postal, starting on your spouse?

First it was your male friends she complained about—how you spent way too much time hanging out with the boys. So, you basically gave all your buddies the heave-ho, telling them to stop calling, that you were no longer available socially as your spouse hated their guts and proscribed your association with them. This was a gross, dishonest characterization of her position, but totally consistent with your grossness and dishonesty.

Now you've simply cultivated some really nice relationships with *women* outside the marriage. You've developed these really mature friendships with these women, having met them, very sincerely, on Match.com. Sure, you kept it all carefully under wraps...but not from guilt, but rather to spare her the needless stress of learning about these relationships, knowing her tendency to find the sinister in the most innocent of circumstances.

But she learned about these relationships, and now she's mad. Much madder than you ever realized she could be. As a matter of fact, where *before* she wondered if you had your priorities straight, *now* she's wondering if you're not some sick deviant, lacking even the rudiments of an adult, fully-formed conscience?

**I've been thinking about God a lot lately.  
About deepening my spirituality.**

This is the lay version of the death-row prisoner embracing Jesus months before his execution. Let me share something very important: God can't help you. Your seeking Him as a solution is a desperate, convenient, *dishonest* stab at relief. You are kidding yourself.

Also, you aren't spiritual, so there's nothing to deepen. Let me ask you something: when's the last time you made a generous charitable donation—say, of your time, or money—to a cause you really cared about? Not your spouse, *you!*

I'm not berating or judging you. I'm just saying, be true to yourself, and leave God out of it. What you need to do is this: You need to ask yourself, what is wrong with my spouse and how can I fix her? How can I coax her into realizing, once again, that *I'm* the most important person in her life? How can I redirect her attentions, especially sexual, *back* to me, from whom they've been diverted for way too long?

**I may have noted, I find myself checking out Match.Com,  
and websites like that? Just kind've seeing what's out there?**

In other words, you're spending a lot of time on these sites every day, and you're regularly flirting with alleged cyber-bachelors? Sure, this is harmless, and although it's arguably a bit dishonest, why the hell would your spouse even need to know?

But don't be naïve. Many of these skeezy men are actually married, and *not* who they say they are? So when *you* indicate that you're single, or separated, or imminently contemplating separation, or officially emotionally separated, or that your husband died four years ago after a long battle with his neurosis (all *lies*, of course), don't assume that *these* guys are, in fact, single, just because they say they are. Because, while *they* may be into games, into leading someone on, *you* certainly don't need to introduce some lying, slippery charlatan into your life?

In any case, what you'll surely discover, as you investigate "what's out there?" is, "not a lot." In fact, the odds are greater that our super-telescopes in Chile trained on distant galaxies will confirm alien life before *you* locate a partner more viable than the one at home? So, go ahead, if you need to: Take a little jaunt in the cyber-singles universe. Just don't be surprised if, when you're done, your spouse actually comes out looking half-good?

### What's your position on mail-order brides?

My first piece of advice is, make sure you get a good return policy. Risks aside (and there are many), there is something to be said for this underappreciated concept. People assume you've got to be pretty desperate to go this route, and they're right. But you've got some pretty downright hot women from foreign countries looking for a break in America. They're prepared to compromise themselves deeply, as evidenced by their willingness to hook-up with losers (I meant, sincere guys) like you.

But you need to be cautious. As I said, a good return policy is essential. Many of these women are trouble—devious, cold, exploitative. They are *not* “in love” with you, even though, in your astonishing neediness, you may want to *believe* they are. Yet they are experts at seduction, and can leave a weaker man believing he's actually found love through the mail.

Also, she should be the race you expect. If you ordered Chinese, she shouldn't be Polish. If you ordered a Jewish bride (in which case you should be involuntarily committed), she shouldn't be from Africa. If you wanted Russian, she should be Russian, not from Wisconsin. In terms of language, if you want your bride to speak absolutely no English, return her if she's from England.

Your bride should arrive in a securely sealed box and my advice is, *inspect her* before the UPS guy leaves. Make sure, for starters, that she's as unblemished and smoking-hot as she looks on the website. Also make sure that she's as compliant and vapid as advertised. You've got a strong-willed and very intelligent spouse with a mind of her own and probably more substance than you've been able to handle; your mail-order bride should be the absolute opposite of this, otherwise what's the point? So if, on

meeting her, she strikes you as particularly sharp, demanding, or even remotely high-maintenance, ship her right back.

Remember, these brides have made a long journey tightly packed in a UPS shipping carton; if they surface from the box looking a bit dazed and disoriented, that's good.

A good greeting, to make her feel comfortable, is "Hello, Olga. How was your journey?" Or, "Welcome Svetlana, to America. I love you. You *love* me, right?" Or, "Let's not rush things, Akimi. How 'bout you take a nice hot shower in the master bedroom, and I'll meet you in my bed in, say, two minutes?"

### **Should my spouse know about this?**

Of course not, you cretin. Your spouse has driven you to this. It's because of your spouse that you've reached a sufficiently desperate point to have to resort to something so shameful and degrading.

On the other hand, if you're pretty confident your spouse really won't care, that she may even feel *relieved* to know that, *finally*, you've done something that may let her off the hook, permanently, from *ever* having to *think about* being intimate with you again, there may be a case to disclose what you're thinking, or what you've done.

If you *are* planning to conceal this, as you probably should, don't have your new bride shipped to the house, only to tell your curious wife that the large box is a new computer system. Have her shipped to your office, or a friend's house.

**One last question: What's your personal experience and knowledge of mail-order love? Can it succeed?**

From what I know about the mail-order bride business, the results are pretty unpredictable. Although I've never tried this (despite being sorely tempted), several of my friends *have*. These are men who have been very successful and well-adjusted, except in the areas of work, parenting, and marriage.

In the best outcome, my friend Rick set-up a double-life with a bride, Sue Anne, from the province of Georgia. She was supposed to be from the former Soviet Union, but turned out to be from a small town about 30 miles south of Atlanta. Further, she looked nothing like the Ukrainian beauty Aaron had fallen for on the Russian Bride website. But she was still very attractive and, moreover, within minutes told him how attractive *he* was and how much she loved him. Aaron would never have taken this seriously were it not for their previous probing, mature e-mail correspondence over an extended period of four days. In other words, Aaron had really taken the time to get to know Sue Anne.

In the final analysis, I advise caution if you're thinking about mail-order marriage. Too many of these women end up getting shipped to the wrong addresses, and the effort it takes to straighten out these glitches can be a nightmare.

But I appreciate the concept. Your *real* spouse has left you feeling extremely deprived and you blame her for everything it's possible to blame someone for. Although you admit that she's not responsible for your happiness, *or* your misery, in your heart you hold her responsible for both.

She doesn't "get" you anymore, and it's not because you're so hard to get; she just doesn't *care* anymore.

And so, mail-order begins to look extremely intriguing. Still, despite your pessimism, I'd advise that you focus on your *real* wife, and your *real* life, before getting fleeced by a conniving piece of ass from Eastern Europe.

**My spouse and I blame each other a lot.  
Can you discuss the function of blame in a relationship?**

The function of blame is to lay the responsibility for everything that goes wrong in the relationship, in your life, even in your past lives, on your spouse. Think about the logic: If *you* are responsible for your good moods, *who* can be responsible for your bad moods? The answer, of course, must be, *not you*. So it must be, *someone else*. And the leading, and really only feasible, candidate, of course, is, your *spouse*.

Your spouse, by logical deduction, is responsible for your discontent. Here's the fundamental rule of blame: when the shit hits the fan, look *outside yourself* for the cause.

Consider these two examples:

■ “Honey, it’s just not happening [*erection*]. I don’t know what to tell you. This has been going on for months. I guess I’ve got a problem. You know what it is? Your pajamas! That’s the problem. It’s your *pajamas*.”

■ “Why am I grumpy? How ’bout ’cause I haven’t *slept* in a few years? How’s *that* for a reason? Maybe instead of attacking me you can ask yourself how *you’ve* contributed to my insomnia?”

Notice in these examples how the blaming spouse initially appears prepared to take responsibility for his problems, then abruptly resorts to blaming. This is a good structure for a blaming statement—start it in the guise of owning *your share* of what went wrong (this will attract her attention), then ambush her with the accusation.

Blaming can be corrosive to a marriage. A good couples therapist, for instance, will challenge a blaming partner to be less blaming, for instance, “Barry, there you go again! Blaming Sharon! If anyone’s to blame for this marital fiasco, Barry, it’s you! This is my last warning, Barry. Don’t test me.”

**My spouse once found my creativity attractive;  
now, she's the last person to appreciate it.**

We addressed this concern from her angle earlier, but let's elaborate. There is that moment in marriages, when you wake up one day and realize: I no longer amuse, or impress, my spouse. Many men describe this recognition as stunning, while others, in reflection, recall their spouses' utter, impenetrable disdain as having developed more gradually, insidiously. But all men—at least all sensitive, creative men—find this to be a hurtful development, leading many to grave states of alienation.

Some men permanently withhold their frustration from their spouses until it curdles into resentment and, sooner or later, bitterness. Many of these men end up having affairs; less suppressed men may venture to share their distress with their spouses, but the key here, as always, will be how constructively they make their frustration known.

In such cases, it's critical to be thoughtful; to *think* before you *express*. The following, for instance, are probably less than optimal bids for your spouse's attention:

■ “So...honey. I've noticed you haven't had a look at my novel yet, which I completed last year. Um...just so you know, when I win the National Book Award, you will *not*—I want to stress this—you will *not be mentioned* as one of my indispensable supports, as most wives like to be!”

■ “Sara, you didn't seem to appreciate my witticism just now; what is *wrong* with you?”

■ “Look, I'm not saying I'm the funniest guy in the world, just that I'm in the top 10? See? *That* was funny, and you didn't laugh. See what I mean?”

■ “Stop calling me needy, Janet. I don't need you to worship my entertainment value. I just need you to stop finding *others* entertaining when we're out together?”

■ “You didn’t *like* my book, Estelle? Did you *read* it? Maybe you need to *read* it before deciding you don’t *like* it? (*reacting to spouse’s response*) What’s that? You read it *twice*? You *sure* about that? Maybe if you read it *once*, seriously, instead of *twice*, superficially, you’d have gotten it? Whatever...you know what? I don’t care what you think...I really don’t.”

■ “You haven’t asked me how my screenplay’s going in a while, Karen. Hint...hint.”

■ “I *know* how talented I am, Marcy. You think I need your validation? You think just because you *don’t believe in me* that it *drives me crazy* or something? You think I depend on your constant approval and encouragement? That I’m *that* fragile? (*reacting to spouse’s response*) What do you mean ‘stop acting hysterical!?’ I’m *not* acting hysterical!!”

■ “You know, honey...Carol, my friend at work, *loved* my new poems. She thought they were among the best she’s ever seen. She said she they brought tears to her eyes. Maybe, if you’re interested, I’ll show them to you?”

■ “I’m thinking, Rachel, about taking my stand-up act on the road? Somebody’s gotta be funny, it may as well be me. Why didn’t you laugh? I thought *that* was funny. You didn’t?”

I am often asked to comment on the phenomenon whereby men, over time, become their own best, if not *only*, audience, within their marriages. This is typically a painful, lonely experience for them, sometimes best alleviated by the ingestion of large quantities of liquor.

**How did this happen?  
How did my spouse stop finding me impressive?**

As we've discussed, the process began when you got married, and accelerated with each passing year, and compounded with the birth of each of your children.

But there's *this* to consider too: maybe you never *were* quite as funny and entertaining as you *thought you were*? Maybe you *and* she, in the halcyon days of your new relationship, unwittingly collaborated in this delusion? I'm not saying you weren't funny, even talented; just not *that* funny, and *that* talented?

In a sense, you were set-up, early in the courtship, most likely in the seductive "honeymoon phase," when she likely supported your extravagant assessment of your creative genius. Presently, years removed from this ancient, validating epoch, her failure to register your astonishingly fertile mind leaves you in confusion, shock, outrage?

### **You're suggesting she hung me out to dry?**

Remember, when it's difficult to face certain disappointments in a marriage, specifically disappointments in your spouse, there's always a good paranoid explanation for your struggle.

Sure, you could step back and look at the bigger picture—reflect, say, on the history of your expectations and how you've insinuated them into your relationship—but who would *want to* when a handy, paranoid interpretation is so available?

No, she didn't hang you out to dry, not in the sense you're implying. We discussed this earlier as part and parcel of the honeymoon phase. Way back when, she wanted to find you as brilliantly sharp, clever and unique as you wanted her to find you. And she figured out *how to*, way back then. Over time, as her need to idealize you diminished, she was able to size you up in a somewhat more realistic manner, while you, on the other hand, like a petulant child, insisted all along (and still *do*) that she retain her idealized view of you.

Has she gone too far in the other direction? From idealizing your brilliance to dishonoring your genuinely creative side? That's very possible. But this transformation of her experience of you, from idealization to possible devaluation, was neither calculated nor malicious. It was a function, at least initially, of her feeling safe enough, after the honeymoon phase, to bring a more sober evaluative lens to who you really are. And so now, you are angry, understandably. You don't need her, as you've stressed again and again, to regard you in the astonished awe with which she regarded you many years ago; but, when you think about it, *really* think about it, you do. You really do. And she should.

**When my spouse left the room briefly,  
our couples therapist mentioned in an aside that  
he could take better care of me than my spouse does.**

I'm especially uncomfortable with his having taken this liberty while your spouse was relieving himself in the restroom. Your husband might have been thinking, "Wow, this is going great...*this* guy's gonna save our marriage," while this sleazebag was undermining him in a most disrespectful way.

It's possible that your therapist was experimenting with a paradoxical intervention. He might have been trying to incite something—perhaps your protectiveness or sense of loyalty towards your spouse? But this doesn't justify his behavior.

He's seen for himself how disproportionate is your *spouse's burden* for the deterioration of your marriage. He's heard first-hand about your spouse's chronic erectile difficulties, even laughed as your spouse chronicled, with red-faced shame, his futilities in the bedroom. Sure, he tried to disguise his sadistic mirth in paroxysms of contrived coughing, but *you* knew the coughing was a cover, that he was having a field-day with your spouse's disclosure, even if your spouse, in his cluelessness, failed to see it?

What I'm saying is, your therapist sly proposal was an exploitation of you and your spouse. At the very least, I'd inform your husband of what transpired in his absence. Then he can confront the therapist directly, and based on the latter's response, you can go from there. It will be difficult, at this point, for your therapist to recover your trust. But he can start by owning his violating behavior and the damage it caused.

The following appeals *might not* cut it:

■ “Come now, Larry. You believe *her*? Isn’t this a woman who’s been twisting the truth about *you* from the moment you both stepped into my office a month ago? She’s set *you* up, why wouldn’t she set *me* up?”

■ “Larry, give me a single rational reason I’d risk my livelihood hitting on your unhappy, unfulfilled, sexually-starved wife?”

■ “Larry, are you accusing me of what I think you are? Look, let’s just start over, all of us...start fresh? So...what brings the two of you to my office? How can I help you?”

There are many bad therapists out there, and most of them aren’t marriage poachers. In other words, with a little effort, you can find a bad therapist with some integrity.

**I'm used to seeing my spouse  
in a certain *habitual* way.**

This is an important observation, because how you *see* your spouse is how you'll *feel* about him, regardless of how accurate or not your perceptions are. As a matter of fact, how you *see* your spouse, in the end, may be more important than the *accuracy* of your perceptions.

That's because most of us bring high rates of inaccurate perceptions of each other, on an ongoing basis, into our relationships. Getting these perceptions "right" may be less valuable than getting them "positive," or less negative.

Remember, all this began in the honeymoon phase, when we ascribed wonderful qualities to a partner we were determined to see in a positive, idealized light. We found ways to ignore, deny, minimize, even *reframe* all those warts we saw (or sensed) early on; and we engaged in this positive spin for *the sake of preserving* our good, loving feelings for this person we were determined to love, and find loveable.

In the ensuing years (experienced by many partners as concurrent life sentences without parole) our commitment to love this individual, flaws and all, weakens; and with this weakening, we find ourselves in a slow, gradual process of *transforming our experience* of him: where once we were determined to find his warts benign and ignorable, perhaps even characteristic of his charming quirkiness, this is no longer the case.

And yet it's possible to reverse this process, even now; to reappraise your spouse from a more generous, unconditionally loving perspective.

### **My spouse says I drink too much...way too much.**

This is a sensitive issue, because you're an alcoholic and, understandably, want to enjoy your alcoholism in peace. Of course we know this isn't possible because your drinking is taking your marriage and family down.

Then again, who is *she* to say what's too much? By her standards, your downing a twelve-pack on a nightly basis is a big deal. And weekends? On weekends you hardly drink at all, and when you do, *lightly*—maybe a case in an afternoon, over *several* hours—in other words, you pace yourself.

On balance, you admit to having a drinking problem—specifically, you can't drink without your spouse swooping down on you like a plague of bats. Under these circumstances, who *wouldn't* start drinking in secrecy?

As for that time last year when you retrieved the morning paper stark naked, you weren't drunk, so much as there were no clothes (not even a single pair of underwear) in your dresser. Whose fault is *that*?

Besides which, you question whether this even occurred because, to this day, you have no memory of it.

### **I think my spouse is a narcissist.**

We want to be careful not to throw out “labels” recklessly because, even though it’s fun to label people (even wrongly), labels *can* brand people for life. Still, ask yourself whether any of these questions apply to your spouse:

- Is he highly self-centered, meaning tends to see the world (even the “third world”) as revolving around him?

- Does he handle disappointment and frustration poorly, perhaps passive-aggressively (or aggressively)? For instance, “I know she’s *five*, for God’s sake, but that’s no excuse for not wanting my advice! She needs to think about this...for a long time. Alone! In her room! And don’t undermine me, Estelle!”

- Does he tend to swing between states of *idealization and grandiosity* when validated, for instance, “Pam, have I ever told you that your adulation of me, which is so completely well-founded, is indicative of your uniquely evolved judgement of men?” versus *hostility and contempt* when feeling invalidated, for instance, “You thought *Phil* was amusing tonight? More than *I*? You know what, Pam, you’re really *dumb*. I take back what I said earlier about your gifted judgement.”

- Is his sense of entitlement excessive, for instance, “I never said you owe me anything, just that I figured you’d want to give it to me?”

Affirmative answers to any of these questions suggests the possibility of a narcissistic orientation, and may explain many of your spouse’s less appealing qualities.

**This sounds like me.**

Back to *you*, again? I was talking about your spouse, yet you bring it back to yourself? Let me tell your biggest problem: your biggest problem is your spouse. Have you forgotten that?

So, if that *sounds* like you, that doesn't mean it *is* you, even remotely. Narcissists, by the way, don't typically fear that they're narcissistic. So relax.

*Could* it be you? Theoretically, yes, but of *course* not.

**My spouse says if I don't communicate my needs,  
he can't help me.**

Sure, we've all heard this one before: "I'm not a mind reader;" "I'm not omniscient;" "You've got to *tell me* what's on your mind?;" "I can be responsive only if I *know what you want* from me?"

The implication here is that, unless you tell him directly what you want, you're being difficult, setting him (and you) up for a problem? Creating a no-win situation?

But wait a minute: Whatever happened to telepathy? Whatever happened to "being on the same wavelength?" When did spouses lose the ability—and more outrageously, the *responsibility*—to "get" exactly where their partners are coming from without being told?

Doesn't it seem reasonable that, after 10, 15, or more soberly, *20 years* of living with a partner, he ought to be able to *read your fucking mind*? That a *look*, even your *silence*, should, by *now*, convey a thousand obvious words? Doesn't he owe you *that*, after all the crap you've put up with? And don't even bring up the subject of entitlement...please.

**But my spouse really *doesn't* lay out her agenda directly.**

Let's be honest: Even if she did, in connect-the-dot fashion, the odds of your *getting* it, getting to the *heart* of her concern, would be slim. And it's not just because you're a guy, although that's part of it; what complicates it even more is, you're a *dumb* guy.

Then again, as we've established, nobody...*nobody* should have to decode a partner's needs. So this is on *her*, not you. You have nothing to explain, nothing to examine. And if she stalks off with an attitude, what the hell are you supposed to do, if she won't spell out why she's pissed?

**What is passive-aggressiveness,  
because this may be a problem for us?**

By *us*, I assume you mean that your spouse's passive-aggressiveness is causing trouble? Let me ask you something: Does your spouse express his anger in covert ways, like sulking, withdrawing? Does he *deny* his anger while acting it out? When you confront him with his hostility does he say something like, "What are you talking about?," or "No, I'm not mad. What the hell kind've question is that!"

You may be thinking, *this* sounds as much like me, as my spouse! Maybe even more like me? But we've been down this road before, haven't we? As badly as you're craving attention, you need to remember that this book is about your spouse, sorry.

**It infuriates me when my spouse compares me to other guys,  
especially her girlfriends' husbands.**

Understandably, and I know we touched on this earlier. Comparisons always rub us the wrong way, unless we come out on top. And they're especially infuriating when they're true—that is, when we're being told, *accurately*, how much more competent, attentive and committed to his spouse and family Ed, our neighbor, is.

You don't appreciate this, nor should you. You are you; your spouse married *you*. The very first time she saw you toting Sartre into that Irish pub on one of your early dates (suspiciously after your learning of her interest in existential philosophy), and Pushkin on the next date (suspiciously after your learning of her Russian literature minor in college), she knew you were a fraud, a complete, abject fraud.

But the point is, she *knew*. And now, after all this time, after all you've given, and sacrificed (in other words, so little), she has the gall to compare you to your neighbors? To call you *out* like that?

**I know my spouse: she'll slim down after we split, but under no circumstances will she get herself in shape while we're together.**

Sure, we can revisit this issue, because, well, you're preoccupied with it. What you're saying is true: You can bet the house (which she'll get) that, as soon as you leave (and it will be *you* who leaves), she'll immediately invest in her mind and, more unfairly, *body*. In a matter of months, she'll be looking good, real good.

And yet, as long as you stay, she won't. Nothing you do, plead or threaten will budge her. We discussed this earlier, how your *roofer's* needs have come to assume more importance to her than yours.

This isn't easy to accept. In fact it's painful. And it gets you back to remembering vows, remembering when it mattered, a *lot*, to please each other. If only she could recover that memory.

### Why won't my spouse change?

Your spouse won't change because the risk of losing you, his friends, children, and house just isn't sufficiently jolting to motivate him. You could take this personally, and should.

But, in a way, it's not personal. Your spouse is a highly complacent creature, like cows in a Vermont pasture. This doesn't mean he likes himself, or is satisfied with himself. It's just that, like cows, he's not terribly poised to actualize himself.

Sometimes a good brush with death (and you *can* arrange this) will prompt a man to ask, *is this it?* *Is this all I want to be?* *Is there growth in me that I'm now obliged to seek?* But the answers, respectively, are usually yes, yes, and no.

### Why won't I change?

Because, fundamentally, you have your act together. Sure, you're not perfect, but who is? Sure, you can be difficult from time to time, but remember, you can also be a *lunatic*, capable of threatening (and actually perpetrating) violence. In others words, knowing what *could* happen if he pushes the wrong buttons too many times, he will (or *should*) be glad for the merely unpleasant, difficult side of your personality.

There's another reason you won't change: because, let's face it, it's hard to change, maybe too hard, and besides, even if you *were* to change, who's to say he'd even notice, let alone appreciate it?

**Isn't it true that a change from *either* of us  
can positively affect our marriage?**

Isn't this great news? It takes just one of you to alter your behaviors in ways that can reverberate positively for the relationship! As such, it's not a bad idea to remind him, periodically, how this works—that is, how a small change here, a newly acquired habit there, from *him*, can yield welcome results? How even a few *minor* behavioral modifications, from *him*, can significantly raise the level of harmony between you?

You can make this point in palatable, even thought-provoking ways, such as:

■ “Ted, are you familiar with the ‘chaos theory’? How small, even *invisible* phenomena can create dramatic, even global, effects? Think about that, Ted. I’m wondering how several small, or even *bigger* changes from *you* could impact our marriage?”

■ “I’m not asking you to be someone you’re not, Phil, although that might be a good, eventual goal?”

■ “Let’s start with some smaller, achievable goals, Donald, and then step-by-step go up the change-hierarchy? For starters, you will stop challenging me when I make decisions. In other words, my decisions are binding, and yes, you have no voice.”

■ “I’m not expecting miracles, Ben. Let’s start with replacing light-bulbs?”

Don’t be discouraged if he isn’t instantly receptive to being positioned as the responsible, formative change-agent. He may have many reasons to balk initially, among them his clinging stubbornly to the fantasy that *you* may *yet* beat him to the punch and do something voluntary to improve *his experience* of the relationship? Of course, this is the kind of impaired reality testing, bordering on self-delusion, that someday you’ll invoke to have him involuntarily committed when that becomes necessary.

**My spouse says I have an anger problem.  
She doesn't know what anger is.**

I believe she does and, as we established earlier, you have an anger problem.

Naturally you're tired of hearing about it, and true, there are men—some of them even *not in prison*—with worse anger control than yours. But remember, your anger doesn't have to be explosive to be problematic; it can also come in quieter forms.

As you examine the reactions below—reactions you might find yourself identifying with *verbatim*—ask yourself, are they reflective of mature, or less mature, anger management skills?

■ “You're calling me *what?* Passive-aggressive? You know what, forget about the zoo. Take the kids yourself. And forget about the new edition to the house. We can't afford it.”

■ “It's just some dumb African carving, for godsakes. Take it easy! I'll glue the savage back together again, you won't know the difference. Think about what *pissed me off*, not your *goddamned wooden trinket!*”

■ “Stop telling me to *stop yelling!!* I'm not *yelling!!* But if you keep telling me to *stop yelling*, I'm gonna *yell!!* The kids are crying because they see how you're patronizing and mistreating me!!”

■ “What do you mean I'm *shutting down* again? Just because I have no fucking clue how to address your insatiable demands, that means I'm *shutting down?* I heard *exactly* what you said, I just can't *remember* any of it. That's called *forgetting*, not shutting down!”

■ “There's nothing *wrong*. Can't I glower and look at you menacingly without your assuming something's *wrong?*”

■ “Out of control? Jesus Christ, you call *this* out of control? Maybe you don’t fucking *know* what out of control *is*! How can you call me out of control? Seriously, are you kidding? You fucking call *this* out of control? Maybe I ought to really *act* out of control one day and you’ll see the difference! (*muttering angrily*) Out of control? What a joke! What a fucking joke!”

■ “Hey look, you don’t tell *me* when I’m angry, I’ll tell *you* when I’m angry! And I’m telling you, I’m *not* angry!”

■ “I *am* discussing it! Does *discussing* it preclude my speaking in an enraged tone of voice?”

■ “I punched the guy out for stealing my parking space! Yeah? So what! You can call that *hot-headed*, Cheryl. I call it justice administered!”

**Now that we've established that I have an anger problem,  
what can I do to help my spouse understand how she causes it?**

You're moving a bit fast, here. I didn't expect such enlightenment quite so soon. But I can see you've already taken a big leap at solving the problem, by *laying the blame* for your anger on your spouse.

And it's not that you're abdicating responsibility; it's just that, as *she's* the only person in the world who provokes your seriously warped expressions of anger, she'll need to make some very serious changes.

For starters, she'll need to:

- Allow you the space you need, *whenever* you need it—which is to say, *stop asking you* to carry your weight in the relationship when you're unmotivated.

- Stop confronting you with her needs, especially of an *emotional* nature.

- Realize that you drink not from alcoholism, but from love of drink.

- Desist from comparing you *ever again* to her girlfriends' husbands, all of whom, we've established, are clearly “whipped” and, frankly, emasculated.

- Stop comparing you to her father, who was a good guy, and responsible.

- Quit questioning your priorities, which, in approximate order, have been: My comfort is first, my buddies come second, *I* am third.

See how thoughtful you can be about your anger? This will undoubtedly impress your spouse and move her, one hopes, to embrace some of these important ideas?

### **Any ideas how I can get laid more?**

Yes...*apologize*. Best if you know *what* you're apologizing for, but even if you don't, apologize *still*. The thing is, you don't want to apologize just once. Instead, every day for the next two weeks, say something like, "Marsha, I'm sorry. I'm really sorry." When she says "for what?" (if I know you, you won't have the answer to this question), you will say, "For everything. For everything I've done, and everything I haven't done."

For two weeks, at least once a day, say this, and leave it at that. Don't press for intimacy during this period; just say it, and here's the key: during this time, try extra hard not to screw-up. This won't be easy, because you won't know what you're apologizing for, and so will be at high-risk to repeat the same offending behaviors you've been perpetrating cluelessly for years. Still, strive to be a choir-boy during this stretch, so your apology won't look as transparently empty as it is.

If you can do this, you may find that it softens your spouse considerably, and may get you laid for the first time in years.

**What if she asks for specifics? What if she's suspicious and tests me?  
Tests the substance of my contrition?**

If she says, skeptically, something like, “Specifically, Bob, what are you sorry for?,” and if you’re still as clueless as I expect you’ll be, you can reply along the lines of, “Honey, I’m sorry I’ve been so inconsiderate and self-centered.” (By the way, “inconsiderate” means thoughtless of others, while “self-centered” means you tend to think about *your* needs and convenience pretty much exclusively).

This might impress her; it’s still a pretty general explanation, but it has the appearance of being more targeted and reflecting self-awareness, which we know is not your strength. If she then says (and she might) something like, “Bob, has someone scripted this for you?,” say something like, “Of course not, honey. I’ve just been doing a lot of thinking.” (There is some truth to this: you’ve been thinking a lot about how long it’s been since you’ve been laid.)

It’s very important that you stick to the script, or to a similarly laconic script, because we know that if you give yourself any leash at all, you’re going to hang yourself.

**My spouse absurdly claims that I agreed to release him from nightly infant care duties to bring him on-board with our last pregnancy.**

We both know that you'd have been insane to agree to such a thing, and that you did. You did because you wanted his assent to a pregnancy that took you both by surprise and about which he had serious reservations. You agreed to this, and now have what I call "spousal amnesia," a condition in which spouses importantly forget all the utterly disastrous concessions they've made under pressure.

But of *course* you're outraged. Even though he's doing exactly what you told him he could do guiltlessly, you can't believe, now that the baby's actually *here*, that he'd stick to his guns and insist on getting a decent night's sleep? What kind of man does that? What kind of father? Yeah, so you made this deal; yeah, so you forgot you made this deal. Still, how 'bout stepping up the plate, dad? Huh? See that screaming infant over there! It's *half*-yours!

**My spouse complains that I'm useless in the morning,  
that I defect from all responsibilities.**

It's true that you're not a morning person, and it's also true that you're not an evening person. However, between 11 a.m.-2 p.m., you're pretty damned productive (especially at the office). That's *your* time of the day to get things done. In fact, you work so hard during those three hours that you require a nap, just to recover, from around 2 p.m.-4 p.m. every day.

The thing is, she has no idea how hard you work from 11-2. How, right around 2, like clockwork, the waves of fatigue come, lulling you irresistibly into your daily, protracted siesta. And how, around 4, you rouse, and from 4-5 you give it your all *again*, accomplishing in that one hour what it would take the average person at least 20 minutes to produce.

No, she doesn't appreciate this even remotely. All she sees is that you're not a morning person, an evening person, or even a late-night person. What she doesn't see, as with an almost willful refusal, is that you're an 11-2 guy. That's right. If she recognized *that*, she might see you in a whole different light.

**My spouse tells me I'm a terrible listener.**

Hmm. Perhaps it's been a long time since your spouse has had anything very interesting to say? In other words, are you bored? Then again, boredom doesn't explain your poor listening, it's a *symptom* of it.

That is, you think you're not listening because you're bored, whereas, more likely, you're bored because *you're not listening*. And perhaps it's the case that you *use* boredom to *avoid* listening?

Think about it, but of course not too hard.

### **How will my spouse know that I'm listening?**

Many experts suggest “paraphrasing” as a way to show your partner that you’ve been listening. In other words, you listen to what she says, then reflect back your understanding in language that’s reasonably faithful to her meaning.

There are risks here. First, you can fall into the trap of basically parroting her, which is a somewhat bastardized form of paraphrasing, and can leave her feeling patronized. Worse, your paraphrasing efforts, if inaccurate, may affirm for her just how hopeless you are.

Consider this example:

**Her:** It’d be really nice if, once in a while, you could leave your work at work and, when you come home, be present with me?

**You:** You’re saying you really appreciate how hard I work, and that when I come home, it’d be nice if I brought you a present?

**Her:** Phil, not for nothin’, but you really are a fucking retard.

Paraphrasing can also be difficult to apply in a way that sounds natural. It’s best used, in my opinion, to gather yourself when you’re feeling overwhelmed, as a sort of stop-gap until you’ve calmed yourself, regained your equilibrium.

Here's another example:

**Her** (*wielding a knife*): Phil, you goddamned, lying, deceiving, c\*cks\*cking mother-f\*cker!!!

**You** (*petrified*): You're mad at me, Marion. Furious.

This is a case where paraphrasing is used to deescalate a rageful individual. It's a stock response ("You're mad at me, Marion. Furious."), but it's good to have access to stock responses in these and other situations.

Here are some other stock responses you should memorize:

"You're frustrated with me. Very frustrated."

"You want more. More from me."

"I've disappointed you. I can see that."

"I messed up in your eyes. Really messed up."

"You want my undivided attention."

Notice that these are extremely general statements that are universally true almost all of the time. Thus, if you're up against the wall, and especially if you're being accused of being spectacularly clueless, borrow from this stock of empathic cliches, and you'll buy yourself some time.

**My spouse hates me; isn't that  
more favorable than if she felt nothing for me?**

Maybe, but what makes you think she feels *anything* for you? On the other hand, if she says, “Yes, I still have feelings for you—of dislike, in fact *hate*, and, to be totally honest, Harry, utter *contempt*,” your marital survival odds are bumped up to about .005%.

In short, while persisting feelings of *any* kind suggest the detection, how dimly, of marital vital signs, this isn't necessarily a basis for optimism.

You might want to ask your spouse, “What can I do to turn this around?” If she says, “Leave,” you might want to consider it.

**My spouse seems contented in the relationship,  
but I'm not.**

In such cases your spouse's contentment can feel like a repudiation of your discontent. If he's content, why aren't *I*? Am I *that* hard to satisfy? You begin to question the basis of that ache in your belly that tells you there's something wrong, that something's missing.

Quite obviously, the first thing that's wrong is your spouse's insensitivity to your unhappiness. Scientists call this "cretinism." But it may also reflect his narcissism—his tendency to excessively focus on *his* satisfaction?

Your spouse may think along the lines of, "If I'm okay, then *you*, too, should be okay," versus the more attuned, collaborative, "I'm okay, are *you* okay?"

It can be awfully lonely living with a spouse whose evaluation of the marriage begins and ends with an assessment of only *his* comfort level. Sometimes couples therapy can be helpful in these cases, but only if you can find a therapist capable of motivating your spouse to dig deeper. Indeed it may be essential to pursue this direction. But how will you know you've found such a therapist?

You can feel pretty confident you have, if he makes impressive interventions like:

■ "Okay, Lou, lemme size this up. *You've* got no complaints of Carol, and yet it doesn't concern you that *she's* been unhappy for years? Lou, if it's okay with you, I'm gonna submit the insurance claims with a clinical diagnosis of 'retard'"

■ “Don’t make me recommend divorce, Paul. Really. Don’t call my bluff. Because I’m there, I am. I’m right there.”

■ “Exactly what is it that you *still* don’t get, Billy? Perhaps a head injury might induce comprehension? Have we come to that?”

The essential idea that a marriage is unhealthy if *either* partner is unhappy. This would be a patently obvious concept to a normal spouse, who would never characterize the marriage as healthy if he knew how unhappy *you* were. But your spouse is what we call “classified” in spousal terms. As such, he will need much extra help to learn what comes more naturally to a very rare minority of males.

**My spouse is threatening to take away my television and computer if I don't find work in the next two weeks.**

This is an extreme and somewhat infantilizing intervention that is probably exactly what's needed to get you off your ass. You have a point, though; it's not like you've never worked; your present stretch of unemployment has lasted less than two years.

But there may other reasons your spouse feels she needs to do this, such as your priorities having gone seriously amiss. Sure, since out of work, you've been looking sincerely hard—but more for fresh, promising porn sites than employment. And you need to ask yourself: Am I watching too much television *besides* spending too much time on the computer? As we're broke and approaching destitution, shouldn't finding work and making some money be my principal goals? Must I put my spouse in the position of having to patronize me with threats meant for 10-year olds?

The answer is, maybe. So long as you insist on jeopardizing the fundamental security of your family (which is, of course, a ridiculous exaggeration) your spouse will feel it necessary treat you like an undependable child. And it's not fair; it's really not. Because you're *not* an undependable child; you're an undependable *adult*.

### **My spouse accuses me of corrupting my sons with bad messages?**

What messages could you *possibly* be feeding your sons that are, in the first place, so terrible, and in the second, so incompatible with what they hear from *her*? My guess is, this is just another case of your spouse's grasping for something to complain about?

Let's take a look at some the core messages you give your boys:

- “Hal, it's okay to cry, but not in front of anybody. Jesus, buddy, take it into your room, or into the woods, or something?” (*giving your son permission to cry*)
- “Randy, winning's not everything, but losing's shameful.” (*discouraging obsession with winning*)
- “I'm not saying don't discuss it first, Joe; I'm just saying if he's messing with you, take him out.” (*encouraging verbal conflict resolution*)
- “So, uh, Benjie, was she, uh, hot?” (*Encouraging substance first, looks second*)
- “You said ‘no,’ Jimmy? You had a shot to go *all the way*, and you said you *weren't ready*? Are you a *fairy*? What the *fuck*?” (*encouraging his sexual patience and his going at his own pace*)
- “You wanna be a *nurse*, Fred? Jesus Christ, what's next? You gonna tell me you're *gay*?” (*assuring him that you accept him as he is*)

It's pretty hard hearing your spouse critique this aspect of your parenting knowing that you're about a hundred times as sensitive to your kids as *your* dad was to *you*. All you do, as a matter of fact, is give your sons positive messages, like when, after learning

that he lifted those tennis balls from the local Sports Authority *purposely*, you gripped Daniel, 9, by the shoulders and said, “My man!” And not because you were endorsing stealing, but because you needed tennis balls.

**My spouse is selectively deaf, and it drives me nuts.**

Of course it does. You’re saying your spouse hears only what he *wants* to hear and *when*, but never anything inconvenient or at an inconvenient time? I will note, however, that I’ve had cases of spouses who were certain their husbands were “selectively deaf” when in fact they were really *going deaf*. So the first thing you want to rule-out is the possibility, however slim, that your spouse isn’t merely hearing *you* less and less, but may be “*going Beethoven*” on you?

A pretty simple way to assess this is to take a whistle and, approaching him surreptitiously from behind, blast it in his ear. If this doesn’t produce, say, a startle response, we may be looking at something more than passive-aggressive.

Otherwise, your spouse is what clinical researchers from the University of Chicago call “normal.” In other words, this isn’t so much *personal*—as female partners so often experience it—but rather a function of what scientists are increasingly coming to understand as the fundamental *autistic essence* of men. In other words, it appears that, while less than 1% of the female population suffers from some form of autistic detachment, something approaching 78% of men *do*.

For the longest time it’s been assumed that men just tune-out as they like, and some do. But the vast majority of men, apparently, are never “tuned-in,” due, as I suggest, to this speculated tendency to global, mild autistic disturbance.

Evolutionary psychologists believe it's less the *hearing that's selective* as that evolution actually *selected males* to be deaf to their female partners' banter. This deafness, they suggest, enabled these men millenia ago to focus sufficiently on impending hunting excursions and other dangerous business. That is, it conferred protection by minimizing distraction from conversation-seeking mates.

However valid this hypothesis, most men are actually less seriously autistic in the pure sense of autism than they are masterful at *posturing as full-blown autistics*. They do, and certainly *can*, hear everything you're saying, but, for the most part, consciously and selectively, choose *not* to.

You can challenge this posturing with remarks like:

■ “Harold, you can pretend to ignore me if you like, but in exactly *three seconds*, I'm about to pour that boiling pot of water over your head and inflict transfiguring burns across your body unless you turn around and give me your *undivided fucking attention now!!! One Mississippi!! Two Mississippi!!*” (*At this point, with pot in your hand, he will likely comply.*)

■ “George, here's the deal: Turn off the game *right now*, and listen to me, or I'm going to kill you. (*Stepping between him and the television, wielding carving knife ominously*) I swear to God I'll carve you to pieces, motherfucker, *Hefty* bag your dismembered ass and leave you out for Waste Management on Tuesday. (*Slamming knife-tip into wooden dinner-table with fury*) Don't *fucking test me*, George!”

■ “Harry, unless, beginning this minute you *permanently* cut-out this *affected deaf bullshit* when I address you, I’m going to recommend we do a trial *divorce*. This means we’ll split-up, and while I’d never deprive you of your parenting rights, you will *never see the kids again*. You should know that I’ve already retained the services of the most vicious divorce lawyer in the state, Harry, who has assured me he’ll take great pleasure, even more than *I*, in leaving you pretty much destitute and destroyed. So...let me ask you again: Where did you *leave the kids’ jackets* this morning? On the field? At the diner? At Dunkin’ Donuts? *Where*, Harry, and don’t tell me you *don’t know!!!*”

■ “Stanley, I don’t give a *rat’s goddamn ass* how long your day was and how tired you are. I’ve got some things to share with you about *my day*, and you’re going to listen to *every intolerable detail*. If you don’t turn-off the t.v. *now* and pay obsessively close attention to me, I swear to God you’ll be wearing that t.v. over your broken head. (*Using the 1-2-3 approach*) *One...two...Ahma ’bout to bust your head, Stanley...Three!!!*” (*The tie, in this exceptional case, goes to the husband, but if he’s late, you must follow-through on the threat*)

If you’re feeling unusually self-aware, you can ask yourself, if you like, “Do *I* contribute to this problem in some way? Is it possible, however unlikely, that *I* may leave my spouse feeling *bombarded* with more information than he can process at once?”

You might ask, “Is my *timing* off? For instance, he seems to snarl at me as viciously as a chained pit-bull when I approach him after he’s walked in the door from work? He often says he needs a few minutes to orient himself, grab some dinner, *decompress*?”

I believe these are valid questions to raise, and you may be onto something here. But let’s not kid ourselves: your spouse, in his most receptive state, can tolerate, at *best*, a paucity of interaction. More than that—and we’re talking very little, *very* little—induces a sort of retching response that’s a signal he’s about to seize from emotional overload.

You may be familiar with the warning signals—how he begins to *squirm*, avoid eye-contact, tense-up all over, grow irritable, and lapse into terse monosyllabic responses, all suggestive of his high risk for an impending breakdown?

And while there may be particularly *bad* times to attempt an approach *towards*, or engagement, *with* him, is there ever really a *good* time? When is he really *ever* “all ears?”

Has he *ever* said to you, even *once*, “Honey, I’m in a good, relaxed place right now, and this would be a good time to remonstrate with me about your week, any concerns you’ve got about, hell, *anything*...update me on any news about the kids’ academic, medical and/or mental status? So, you’ve got my attention, sweetie, my *undivided* attention for the next *three* minutes, until the Bears game comes on.”

**The only time I've seen my spouse cry was when  
the Red Sox swept the Yankees in the 2004 playoffs.  
Is there something wrong with him?**

If you mean, is he a big baby for crying over the Yankees, yes. But I hear your greater concern: that your partner may be missing the capacity to express emotionally, and share with you, his sadness and vulnerability.

Scientists call this issue, “man.” It seems that men, in general, cry much less than women; many men cry very little, and not a few men, ever. So the answer to your question is, *yes*...there *may* be something wrong with him, and yet he's not necessarily abnormal. You might wonder: Is your spouse, in his seeming coldness, callousness and absence of apparent emotion, closer in profile, say, to a Ted Bundy, or your friend Phyllis' emotionally available husband, Tom?

The answer is, he might be closer to Bundy. But again, don't panic: You are not alone, and neither is he. He *still* remains a very low candidate to become a serial killer.

In terms of advice, it's a bad idea to try to penetrate his armor with inflammatory remarks like, “Ed, what *are* you? A *robot*?” Or, “Ed, you'll never need a lobotomy.” Such comments are likely to discourage, not encourage, his unguardedness.

Some men aren't the stones they appear to be. They may seek out private places to cry, like in their car, alone. If you see such a man heaving tearfully behind the wheel, his

sadness released by God knows what—perhaps world famine, a fugitive memory, even a glance at a beautiful woman he knows is outside his reach—allow him his privacy. Don't rubberneck. Let him be human with dignity.

**My spouse says all the “little inconsiderations”  
add up to a wider picture of my disrespect.**

The problem is, she adds them up. If she'd just take each of your thoughtless behaviors individually, she'd be less inclined to see the pattern. She needs to stop doing the math, basically.

It would help of course if you weren't perpetrating these heedless behaviors with dizzying regularity. Also, if you could make some space between them for recovery time.

How much would it take, for instance, for you to come home from work and, once in a while, sincerely ask her how her day was? As a matter of fact, when's the last time you conveyed your interest in her day beyond the mandated, cursory, distracted inquiry?

With a little reflection, we can make sense of this. You see, it's not that you regard *your* day, fundamentally, as more important than hers, or the kids'. Rather, you regard your day as *way more important*. What happens in your day, let's be honest, is just *way more important* than what happens in theirs or, to be honest, *anyone's*.

Furthermore, even when *very little* happens in your day, even when your day is as uninteresting as your day can be (and usually is), your day was *still the most important* day of anyone's in the whole world, because it's the *only day* that interests you in the least.

Maybe this is inconsiderate, or maybe it's just you?

And, by the way, just because you've always met her inquisitiveness about *your* day with bored, irritable, monosyllabic responses, does that justify her very clearly reduced interest? Is this some sort of message? Punishment?

**I can't even so much as glance at another woman  
without my spouse acting liking I'm cheating.  
When did I lose my right to check out beautiful women?**

You lost this right when you got married. Or, if you didn't lose it then, you lost it when, subsequently, you abused it flagrantly. And you lost it less from *glancing* at these women as much as *salivating* at them. You lost it because, in proximity to attractive females, your head develops a remarkable, Houdini-like, 360-degree range of motion, which your spouse feels too insulted by to admire.

But the real problem here is that you've lost the *art of the glance*; you've forgotten that a glance—rather than a crude, sustained *ogle*—is fundamentally *quick*, very quick, a sort of feint and, in its higher form, *disguised*.

You see, the beauty of a well-executed glance is that *no one*—especially your *spouse*, even if she *catches* it—can *prove* what elicited it. At best she can wonder—but never *prove*—whether, in that split second, you were checking out that waitress at the next table, or the brunette three tables to the right. (*We* know, of course, that, with your superhuman peripheral vision, you were checking out *both*.)

So, you *can* glance at women; that's never, in fact, been proscribed. What you *can't* do is mentally screw them right in front of your spouse. That will *not* earn you the slack you insist she cut you.

**Look, I admit it. I had an affair. It was short.  
It's over. Should I tell my spouse?**

I'm not sure that solitication of a hooker constitutes an affair, but the answer depends: if you're looking for a way out of the marriage, and are too wimpy to leave, tell her. But if you're not maritally suicidal, admitting it can be risky. By the way, you say it's *over*? Does the prostitute know? And have you cleared your balance with her pimp?

You have to ask yourself, *why* would I tell my spouse? To assuage your conscience? Where was your conscience for the six years you were hooking-up with Desiree in that Secaucus flea-bag? To *what* end would you confess (if not the end of the marriage)?

And it goes without saying that, if she learns of it, your spouse will expect you to have examined seriously—and have derived some hard truths about—what *drove you* to a *Secaucus crackhouse* all those years?

So, no. If the affair, or whatever it is, is over, move on and become the husband that everyone, including you, knows you can never be. But it can't hurt to try.

**What about STD'S?  
Do I owe my spouse a confession just on *that* score?**

Let's see...you've been screwing a hooker for several years...a hooker with a virulent heroine and crack habit. Certainly, *her* chances of harboring an STD must be low? Plus, you've never been a guy particularly prone to picking-up infections. Those tiny crawly things you find in your pubic hair every once in a while—*they're* no big deal. You just pull 'em out and squash 'em. Why they keep coming back is, admittedly, puzzling. Who knows? Bedbugs?

As for AIDS—who gets AIDS? Gays, and needle-using heroine addicts and crackheads, that's who. Oh, and their sexual partners? Are you any of those things? *Your* sexual partner is your *wife*, who's no needle-using addict. So, you're clear on that front. The more you analyze it, you're coming up pretty clean.

### **My spouse doesn't communicate so much as power-struggle.**

What *is* power-struggling if not, essentially, your spouse's refusal to concede your point. Therapists often make the mistake of working with it as a "couples dynamic" versus (as I do) the misguidedness of a particular partner.

As we've addressed, there are always two sides to a story, but one of them is always more legitimate than the other. Even so, the very term power-struggle is somewhat misleading, because often it's less *power* that's being struggled for than *respect*.

What your spouse really wants is, once and a while, to be heard; *credited*, not discounted. Now and then to have you throw him a bone; validate his position, however inane it is.

Here are some ways you can do this without, practically speaking, even giving up any ground:

■ "Phil, you make a lot of sense (*even when he doesn't*). I'm gonna think about your point. In the meantime, we're going to do what I initially suggested."

■ "Huh...I never thought about it like that, Ted. How 'bout while I mull over the implications of your compelling argument, we enroll Donald in private school *anyway*? We can always change our minds?"

■ "Wow, Bill...I've got to say, even though you haven't influenced me, your insights are pretty staggering...so staggering, in fact, that I'll need some time to process them."

■ “Stanley, although I’m going to ignore your suggestion as usual, you should know that I think it’s brilliant. How’d you come up with that?”

Bear in mind these statements should be made *unsarcastically*; and stay away from dismissive-sounding statements, like these:

■ “Yeah, whatever Phil, I hear you. You made your point, but we’re going to Nantucket, case closed.”

■ “You make sense, Arnold, I never said you didn’t...but not as much sense as me. So drop it, the discussion’s over. We’ve got a plan, stop trying to monkey with it.”

**People don't know my real spouse. In public,  
she's a magnet: generous, sweet, charming, attractive,  
you name it. Behind closed doors, it's another story.**

It's tough to know *which* is your "real spouse?" She'll say the *real* her is what the public sees, and that what *you* see, what you call her demonic side, is really *not*-her. She'll suggest that, fundamentally, she's *exactly* what the public sees ("public" as defined as *everyone but you*); that *you*, pretty much alone, have accessed her underlying Carrie thanks to your abuse and, when you're not being abusive, your baseline neglect.

You, on the other hand, *know* that your spouse saves her sinister, frightening side *especially*, and really *only*, for you. Almost as if to *taunt* you with it, as if to say, "No one but *you* will see suffer *this*! No one would ever guess I can turn into *this*? No one will *ever* know. No one will ever believe you."

And so your confusion and agony persist; perhaps in an unusually self-aware moment, you might take the lens to yourself, and ask, "Is she right? *Can* she be right? Is it possible that I've overlooked something, a piece of my own behavior, a pattern of behavior? Hmm, let's see. Yeah, the kids don't like me. They're scared of me, for some ridiculous reason. My family and friends uniformly tell me that I'm a difficult, demanding person. Even the *dog* cringes when I approach. Nah, it doesn't add up. Sometimes, the evidence just doesn't point to you."

To your credit, you've *always* been willing to consider *your* role in the elicitation of your spouse's satanic side; and yet her capacity to morph abruptly from ingratiating public figure into terrorizing wife remains, to this day, inexplicable.

It's not that you're the perfect partner, God knows you're not suggesting that; just that you're way less inadequate than she purports, and you damned sure don't deserve her abuse, especially when everyone else is the beneficiary of her alternate personality—the warm, beloved split.

### **My spouse needs to run things. He's a control freak.**

Remember, in most (if not all) cases, if you can leave your partner feeling understood (regardless of how little sense he makes), you can get away with almost anything, because your spouse, in truth, doesn't give a rat's ass about 90% of the things he fights you on.

Again, remember: he's fighting to be *heard*, not to be *right*. Once heard—once he perceives that his position has some currency with you—he'll relent usually dramatically and let *you* run the show because he doesn't want to run it anyway.

What follow are some simple techniques to leave him feeling satiated and compliant, even as you privately recoil from his stupidity:

- “Interesting, honey.”
- “You make sense, Barry.”
- “I love how you think, Tom.”
- “Your mind is a wondrous thing, Ed.”
- “You're very eloquent, sweetheart.”
- “Thanks, honey, for taking the time to discuss this.”

Give it a try, and watch what happens.

**My spouse says I should take a good look at my self-centeredness.**

If you *could*, you wouldn't be the self-centered individual you are. What you are good at, *really* good at, is *not looking* at yourself, *not* getting all tangled up in self-reflection and the big questions, like, "How do others perceive me?" "How does my behavior affect *others*?" "How do my *attitudes* affect others?" "When it's all said and done, how will I want *others* to remember me?" "What *matters* to me?" "What *should matter* to me beyond gratifying my immediate needs and desires?"

You see, these questions aren't be meant for you. They're meant for someone who doubts himself; who, unlike you, doubts his place at the epicenter of the world, if not *universe*? In a sense, these questions are meant for less certain, less confident men to ponder. Men who, unlike you, struggle to assert their claim of entitlement.

### Can I become less narcissistic?

Perhaps, but you'll want to be careful that your motives to lessen your narcissism aren't themselves narcissistic. If I know you as well as I think do, it wouldn't surprise me to learn that you are inspired by ideas like:

- “I want to get laid more often.”
- “If I can become *less* narcissistic, people will think even *more* highly of me!”
- “I'm not bothered so much by *being* narcissistic, as I am about being *perceived* as narcissistic.”
- “The *less* narcissistic I *appear*, the *more* people will be inclined to see me as perfect (not that I need to be seen as perfect).”

When thinking like this drives your commitment to change, we have to speculate that you may be *using* your narcissism—not lessening it—to preserve the saliency of your needs.

**How *can* I sensitively raise the idea of *penile enhancement* to my husband without crushing his already fragile ego?**

This certainly is a sensitive subject, no doubt about it. Your husband's "size," while not a deal-breaker, is a real concern. When you married him, this was somewhat problematic, but let's be honest: you figured he was pretty young, there must *still* be time for his penis to grow?

Yes, he was past puberty, but still, you figured that some way, *somehow*, whether through good nutrition, exercising, *stretching*, he'd add some length over the years? But this wasn't to be, because penises, past a certain age (around 28) just don't get any bigger. In fact, although it seems the height of cruelty, his penis, like the rest of him, seems to have *shrunk* a bit in recent years.

And it's never helped that several of your girlfriends are constantly bemoaning—but really *boasting* about—the problematic size of *their* husbands' hugeness. That's always hurt, way more than they really know.

And so there you are, up late Thursday night watching television in the den, when that intriguing cable infomercial appears, promising a breakthrough surgical technology that adds length to size-challenged men?

Your first thought is, "Ken."

Your second thought is, "Ken could benefit from this."

Your third thought is, "Correction: *I* could benefit from this."

You watch, fascinated, as the urological surgeon, Dr. Sal, explains convincingly the technology that he's *personally* developed, mastered, and patented. The surgery, Elective

Penile Reconstruction, is relatively non-invasive and entails minimal post-operative discomfort. Dr. Sal's first patient, he explains movingly, was *himself*, and he is bold enough to provide photos of *himself*, from before and *after* the surgery...surgery that he performed on...*himself*. The difference is breathtaking. You find yourself crying, joyfully.

It all seems miraculous, like a Godsend; and, although you live in New Jersey, Dr. Sal, conveniently, has offices in Tijuana, Mexico *and* the Dominican Republic! The perfect excuse, in other words, for a vacation you both sorely need. What a vacation, too: your spouse leaves home the "inchworm," and returns the "anaconda."

But how? How to broach this idea to your proud, albeit utterly self-absorbed, spouse? Broach it without shattering him? Because, although your unmet needs of him may matter very *little* to him, yet his self-image as a man, especially a *virile* man, matters *a lot*.

So, the answer is, you broach it *carefully*. You broach it craftily and subtly. Consider some of the following approaches:

■ "Len honey, I read about this new procedure that can take very *well-endowed* men, such as *yourself*, and make them even *better* endowed. Painless, and guaranteed.

Intriguing, huh?"

■ "Barry, I've been thinking. I've been thinking about, you know, breast augmentation (*which you haven't considered, and won't*), and thought, wouldn't it be nice if, like, maybe *you paved the way* with some, uh, penile augmentation? Because you're already so well-hung, imagine what another two to three inches would do for me?"

■ “John, you know how you’ve been putting off that urology visit? For the *epiditimitus*? Well, I booked you an appointment for next Thursday in Mexico with a renowned urology specialist, who is seeing new patients immediately! You will go to him, John, and you will listen to what he has to *say* and what he can *do* for you. I will join you, to make sure you go, and listen.”

■ “Fred, *of course* you satisfy me a *great deal*, and yet, last night I learned of an opportunity that, if pursued, will assure us that you’ll satisfy me *much more*.”

For more passive spouses, an even more proactive approach might be indicated, like:

■ “Donald, you’re scheduled tomorrow for minor surgery at the outpatient surgery center on Rt. 22. Your doctor’s name is Salvatore Demucci, and all you’ve got to do is *show up*. *He’ll* take care of the rest. You don’t even need to know *why you’re going*. Just go. You’ll come home a new man.”

■ “Al, because we’re pretty hard-up for cash, I enrolled you in an experimental treatment trial for men with *very normal* genitalia. It’s possible you may surface from your anesthesia *super-hung*. I think we can both live with that side-effect, Al, don’t you?”

As you can see, it’s possible to raise this sensitive topic with your spouse without unduly shaming him. The right blend of suggestion, scheming, and obfuscating should do the trick and leave you with opportunities to impress your friends, for a change, with stories of *your* spouse’s prohibitive massiveness.

**My spouse harangues me for not knowing *exactly* my kids' birthdays or, for that matter, our anniversary date.**

In this day of information overload, to identify the *month* of these occasions, let alone the exact *day*, is an accomplishment. What complicates things is that, with savant-like accuracy, you can furnish the birthdates of the entire Yankees' starting roster without stumbling, yet when asked to pinpoint your kids' birthdates, that dumb, panicked look surfaces.

What *should* you know confidently? What's fair for your spouse to expect? I think you should know, first of all, how *many* kids you have, exactly. You should know all their names pretty automatically. You should know their ages within a year, and their school grades within two (if you've got a 10<sup>th</sup> grader, minimally you should know that he's somewhere between the 8<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> grades).

And certainly, if you've got a kid with a diagnosed learning disability, you should know about it, know *what* the disability is, and know *which* kid has it.

I think if you've got all this down, your spouse may be slaving for a fight if she demands much more.

### **My spouse insisted I have a vasectomy. Can it be reversed?**

The answer is, yes, although reverse vasectomies are more complicated procedures than the initial vasectomy. The urologist has to reattach all the previously snipped wiring and pipes to restore fertility. Because the restoration of fertility is not guaranteed, you'll want to ask your urologist what his *success rate* with the procedure is?

Discouraging responses include:

- I'm not sure. I've never done one.
- My patients' survival rate is very high, almost guaranteed.
- I'm going to give that question some real thought.
- That's very personal, and, I believe, according to HIPPA law #642, none of your

business?

- On a good day, or a bad day?
- As long as I reattach the right chords, usually pretty good.
- If I performed the original vasectomy, not good. If I didn't, better.

You want to get a real expert to do a reverse vasectomy to increase the chances of its success. And remember, if your spouse continues to have children *after* your vasectomy, this is a strong indicator that the kids aren't yours.

**My spouse can be shrill and abrasive  
when she complains about me.**

The key is to develop a capacity to tune-*out* the static while tuning-*in* to the message.

There is a record of a man named Bob Fritz, from Minneapolis, who allegedly accomplished this once in 1966. (Several similar claims have since been debunked.)

It's not easy to separate the message from the *tone* of the message. It seems we're *tone*-evaluators first; if the tone is wrong, we tend to shut-down. But if you can manage to stay present and *not* shut-down, the rewards can be handsome.

Consider these contrasting examples:

**Vignette 1**

**Your spouse:** What? You've been home all day and couldn't find *ten minutes* to go out and get some diapers? Is there *anything* I can ask you to do that you'll actually *do*?

**You:** Give it a rest, Michelle.

**Vignette 2**

**Your spouse:** What? You've been home all day and couldn't find *ten minutes* to go out and get some diapers? Is there anything I can ask you to do that you'll actually *do*?

**You** (*taking two slow deep breaths to calm homicidal impulses*): Michelle, come over here for a kiss.

**Analysis**

In the first vignette, while your response may be warranted, and it could be much more inflammatory, still its somewhat dismissive tone runs the risk of provoking your

already frustrated spouse. However, in the second vignette, you took some calming breaths, then offered her a *kiss*? I call this a “disarming technique,” because it makes me feel like I’ve invented a concept.

Disarming techniques work by immediately shifting the prevailing mood. However, they can be poorly conceived, even botched, as in the case below:

**Your spouse:** Are you prepared to contribute *anything*, any *goddamned thing* to this family, Leonard?

**You:** I’m dying, Phyllis. It’s cancer.

This will disarm her, yes; but it may backfire, especially when she learns you’re lying.

### What are “I statements,” and what makes them better than “You statements?”

*I statements*, in theory, are great, but researchers caution that less than .0001% of the adult population can make them, even once. They involve owning your feelings and needs directly and non-accusatorily; this is accomplished by introducing your feelings and needs with the word *I*. For instance, “I feel this...” “I would appreciate it if you could...” “I am asking you to....,” etc. According to forensic language experts, there have been no documented instances of an American adult successfully employing this rare, extremely mature form of communication in the last thirty-two years (since records have been kept).

In contrast, every day the average American makes a *You statement* anywhere from 15-25 times, according to researchers. The short form of the *You statement* is commonly expressed as, “You are such an idiot.” “You really messed up.” “What the hell’s *wrong* with *you*?” “*You* are to blame.” “*You* are so selfish and insensitive.”

More sophisticated forms of the *You statement* may look like, “You know what? If it wasn’t for you, I’d be a happy person.” “*Yes* I acknowledge we’ve got a problem, and I recognize its source as *you!*”

Sometimes *You statements* are embedded within an *I statement* structure, e.g., “I am so puzzled at how dense *you* are.” “I’d like to know why you are such a total jerk?” “I’m feeling strongly that you have a very low intelligence.”

When you make an *I statement*, the target of the statement is less likely to feel attacked, will thus feel less defensive, and will thus feel more receptive to the content. *You statements*, conversely, tend to leave the target of your communication feeling

defensive and attacked. As a result, his response is likely to be self-protective and aggressive.

Aside from being difficult to make, *I*-statements, as constructive as they are, pose another problem: they lack *cathartic value*. They won't, for instance, when you're feeling really pissed off, satisfy your craving for vengeance.

As a result, when you find yourself in states of seething, self-righteous fury, an *I statement* can feel like a capitulation. The solution is to use it before your ballistic-level has hit code orange; to use it, in fact, to nip your escalating rage in the bud. But you have to be committed to this.

Let me give you an easy and incredibly potent *I statement* that, with practice and lots of rehearsal, you can apply to great personal advantage:

“I see your point.”

This isn't a classically structured “I statement” in that it doesn't express a feeling or need. But my own research, generously financed by Bill and Melinda Gates, suggests that if spouses would *initially* respond to each others' concerns with *I see your point*, the divorce rate would be cut by 72% *immediately*.

Naturally, you don't have to really *see her point* to say this. In fact, we can agree that you *won't* see her point, at least not in the moment. But you may see her point later, when the effect of that eighth beer settles in?

**I should say “I see your point” even when I don’t?  
Even when she makes less sense than an unmedicated schizophrenic?**

You should. As I said, you might not see her point now, but you might in an hour, or in a few days. And even if you *never* see her point, remember: she *has* a point, whether you agree with it or not.

Remember too: your *seeing* her point isn’t tantamount to *endorsing* it. As discussed earlier, she wants, most importantly, to feel *heard*, respected.

So, this isn’t about capitulating. In fact, when you say, “I see your point,” quite the opposite happens: She’ll become immeasurably more open to what *you think and feel* about the subject at hand.

The beauty here is that nothing’s required of you—no thought, no sacrifice, no sensitivity; just the rehearsed practice of those four potent words: “I see your point.”

**Wouldn't my spouse grow more  
attached to his point if I'm validating it?**

You're not validating his point, you're validating *him*. As I suggested above, you're validating specifically his *right to his point*. As soon as he hears "I see your point," he'll dramatically relax his attachment to his point because his point never mattered much in the first place.

Remember, his stubborn investment in his position is mainly a defensive byproduct of his perception (warped, naturally) of feeling dismissed. Let's look at an illustration of this concept.

Phil, 38, is "lazy," according to Marsha, 34, his wife. He does not like to be "put out" or "inconvenienced" in any way at all. Phil means well, it's just that, according to Marsha, he avoids anything that requires effort on his part, especially around the mobilization of his kids.

As a matter of fact, Phil's kids drain him. The very thought of his kids, whom he loves much, drains him. Phil's kids, in fact, drain him more than even strenuous physical labor, not that Phil has much familiarity with strenuous physical labor.

That is Phil. He works hard during the week to support the family, but brings home less money than he thinks does and, by any objective measure, really *doesn't* work hard during the week. Nevertheless, Phil feels entitled to recover and convalesce on the weekends, and Marsha resents it.

On this particular Saturday morning in September, Marsha suggests that the whole family take a jaunt to the beach for the day. She broaches this to Phil shortly upon his awakening at 10:30 a.m. (*she's* been up with the kids since 7 a.m.). In response, Phil does what comes automatically: he winces as if he's been ambushed.

Let us proceed from here, with scenario 1: Marsha gets things going with:

**Marsha:** So what do you think?

**Phil:** I don't know. It's supposed to be really hot today...brutally humid.

**Marsha** (*annoyedly*): Yeah? That makes for a good beach day.

**Phil:** I don't know.

**Marsha** (*challengingly*): So what do you want to do?

**Phil** (*losing it*): I don't know. Christ, I just got up. Can you give me a little space?

It's like your fucking blindsiding me with this. You come up with this beach idea and it's like if I'm not on-board you're gonna have an attitude? You already have one, I can feel it.

**Marsha** (*sneeringly*): You are such a fucking load, Phil. You *just* got up? At 10:30? I'll tell you right now what you want to do. Nothing! Right? Nothing! You want to do fucking nothing, which is all you ever want to do!

**Phil:** Yeah right, Marsha. You're a fucking psycho, you know that? I wake up, and in two minutes you're at me like a fucking pit bull. Do whatever the fuck you want. If your goal was to drive me away, you've succeeded as usual.

This is a typical interaction between Phil and Marsha, who love each other very much (well, maybe not). Now, let's take a look at what happens if Marsha, after proposing a day at the beach, does *this*, instead:

**Marsha:** So, what do you think?

**Phil:** Um...I don't know. It's supposed to be really hot today. Brutally humid.

**Marsha** (*composing herself*): I see your point.

**Phil** (*surprised*): What?

**Marsha:** I see your point.

*Phil regards her curiously.*

**Marsha:** But I think the kids would really appreciate it, Phil; really appreciate you for enduring your discomfort.

**Phil** (*taking a deep breath; briefly reflecting*): Okay. Okay. We can do it.

What can I tell you? Here you have opposing strategies applied to the same circumstance, producing *very different* results. In the second example, Marsha dodged an unnecessary, ugly and tired recapitulation of old accusations by simply validating Phil with the arresting statement, "I see your point."

This stunned Phil (who witnesses said looked "like a deer in the headlights"), and quickly relaxed him; grateful to be *heard*, which is all he wanted, he grew immediately less defensive and more open-minded; specifically, his motivation to cooperate increased significantly.

As it happened, Phil had an attitude all day, but less toxically than usual; for Marsha, it was a miracle (and enough) that he agreed to join her and the kids at all.

**Are there any mantras I can repeat to myself to increase my tolerance of, even appreciation for, my spouse?**

There are, and they can make a difference. Here are several:

- “My marriage isn’t as bad as Marcie’s; I still have at least one friend with a marriage, and husband, worse than mine.”
- “When the kids leave the house, John and I will have a chance to rediscover just how much is missing between us.”
- “Tom may no longer stir anything in me, but I, um, oh God I’m depressed.”
- “Andrew contributes in his own small, incredibly small, lame way.”

Bear in mind that positive mantras carry the maximum positive charge; as such, we can improve the above mantras by excising their negativity. For instance:

- “My marriage is better than Marcie’s, even though I’m not comparing. My marriage is better than Marcie’s, even though I’m not comparing.”
- “When the kids leave the house, John and I, starting from our shared obliviousness to each others’ interests, can build something special together.”

Can you notice the difference? I used to be highly dubious of mantras, affirmations, positive self-statements, etc., but I now believe in their efficacy.

Just remember, when constructing a really potent affirmation—keep it positive and somewhat realistic, like:

“Someday Lou will die. With his diabetes, sedentary life-style, and appetite for trans fats, maybe soon. Then I’ll be free, after I’ve mourned him deeply.”

**It bothers me that my spouse sleeps in a separate room.  
She says it's my snoring, but I worry that it's a bigger issue.**

Snoring, unsurprisingly, is the most referenced explanation for separate spousal sleeping arrangements. And think about it: You can accuse anyone of snoring, because the “accused” is defenseless. My own wife has accused me of snoring when I’ve been wide awake, yet even in these situations you wonder, “Was I *totally* awake? Was I *imagining* that I was awake but really *wasn't*?” And then, the more irksome question, “Could my wife be capable of that kind of bald deception?” And, of course, the answer is *yes*, because I *was* awake, and I don’t snore when I’m awake.

In other words, although it’s plausible that the issue here is nothing more than your problematic snoring, it may be more than that. How, then, do you know? One way is to problem-solve the alleged snoring problem and see if your wife seems eager for your return to the bedroom upon its solution (or anticipated solution). For instance, you could say, “Honey, I’ve seen Dr. Bromberg; he diagnosed me with sleep apnea and is going to outfit me with a continuous air machine and also restraints that will render me soundless and immovable at night. This is wonderful news; now we can sleep together again?”

Observe her response. Does she cringe, and say something like, “That’s great, Len, but let’s wait and see. For now, let’s not shake things up?” Or, “How ’bout that machine, Len? How much noise is *that* gonna make?” These are pessimistic signs.

Alternatively, if she smiles and says, “That’s great, honey. I’ve missed you so much. Now that you’ll be hooked up to more equipment than a CCU patient, I’ll move in as soon as you get that going”—this is a sign that your snoring may have been the real issue.

When else should you be concerned that it’s more than about the alleged snoring? That the snoring is merely a smokescreen? Take a look at your sex life: do you have

one? Specifically, have you had sex sometime in the last two and a half years? If not, there may be a wider intimacy issue, whereby her leaving the room is less about your snoring than her avoidance.

When you vacation, do you sleep in the *same* hotel bed, or *separate* beds? Your snoring, theoretically, should be a problem in *either* case; as long as you're in the same room, she may as well sleep with you in the same bed unless her need to be apart from you transcends the alleged snoring. This is a good test, worth checking into a hotel room just for this purpose.

If, in this case, she opts for a separate bed, saying, "Honey, remember...your snoring?," you can reply, "Sweetheart, this was a test. And you failed it. I'm going home. Goodnight."

**My spouse rarely, if ever, initiates oral sex with me.  
And I'm tired of having to ask him.**

And you shouldn't have to keep asking, because that becomes almost degrading. What you need to do is just shove his face in your crotch, and trap him there between your legs. He'll adjust; he'll have to. Many men approach eating pussy like jumping into a freezing pool of water. They're just kind of frozen on the sidelines, afraid of the initial plunge. But once they're "in," they warm up pretty quickly and sometimes, once acclimated, the problem can be pulling them *out*.

In such cases, you can rescue them with short, crisp orders, like:

- Enough, Larry!
- Okay, Fred. Come up for air!
- Your tour's over, Len. Come back home!
- Harold, I'm gonna release your face on the count of three!
- That's nice, Irv. Remember this place, and return to it sometime.

For the man who *still* refuses to surface, you might want to just leave him down there; the risk of asphyxiation is small; alternatively, you can grab him by his hair (if he has any) and snap his head back until you've broken the suction. The risk of neck injury is small; resulting paraplegia is almost unheard of.

Also, rather than hinting at or asking your spouse to perform down below, considering *ordering* him to do so. Some men find this intimidating (of these, a small percentage will flee, screaming, from the bedroom), but others require and appreciate this direction, and find it stimulating.

### **Can you describe double lives, and the pros and cons of leading them?**

The advantage to leading a second life is that if your first one blows, you can still find some satisfaction, gratification. This is a sort of “life-fulfillment insurance,” enabling you to enjoy your fraudulent life while *avoiding* your real one.

Let’s say your spouse is beyond help, with terminal limitations fatal to your marital contentment. On the other hand, he makes good dough, plus you’re not necessarily enthused about the prospects of single-motherhood with a litter of half-civilized kids. Furthermore, the kids still like him, calling him “dad,” even though you’re not even *absolutely certain* he *is* their dad?

While all this is going down, it just so happens that you’ve cultivated a gradual but, by now, febrile attraction to your neighbor, Andrew. The feeling, conveniently, is mutual. And, although you’d always promised yourself you’d never get between a man and his wife, things have changed: for starters, your personal fulfillment is at stake, which isn’t to say this should change your ethics, but it does.

So the equation’s different now. If you’re careful, you can have this thing with Andrew, this surreptitious life, yet *not* break up the family. It’s not like you share anything with your spouse anyway, other than co-parenting responsibilities. In fact, *he’s* probably been living a double-life for years, and if he hasn’t, he *should* have been. In a sense, there’s been an implicit, if not complicit, agreement that you’ll live parallel lives, essentially stay out of each others’ faces, if only to avert the chaos and void of divorce.

From this angle, you’re almost not even being dishonest. Nobody gets hurt. Everyone gets satisfied on some level. Family units are preserved. Andrew’s wife (your girlfriend) doesn’t even have to know. Why should she? It would only ruin your

friendship, and to what end? It's not like you're sleeping with two men: you haven't slept with your spouse in a long time, and have no plans to.

Of course, there's the constant risk of exposure. This can weigh on you, less from a guilt aspect than from worry of the practical consequences that could ensue. For instance, you don't want to slip-up and share with your girlfriend how "hung" Andrew is, and how lucky that makes *her*. And, when she's *griping* about Andrew, who gives *her* so little (and *less* since he hooked up with *you*) you don't want to slip with, "Let me tell you something, he gives me *way more* than Jerry does, or ever did."

Double-lives give your kids the wrong message, but no one yet has been able to decode it. If you're wise, your kids will never know about it anyway, until they find your private, dusty journals in the attic 20 years hence—that is, if you're foolish enough to have documented any of it.

Word of advice: if you have a self-destructive need to document the existence of your double life for posterity's sake, find a way to suppress it. Your ancestors don't need to know what you pulled off generations earlier. *Nobody* needs to know. Only you and Andrew need to know.

### **My spouse has been acting strange lately.**

Your spouse may just be strange. Perhaps he's always had some dubious tendencies, but lately he seems to be crossing a line? And his responses to your confronting him about his escalating behaviors trouble you.

Responses like:

■ "I'm not really tailing these girls late at night, honey. And even if I was, is there some law against it? Who can *prove* it?"

■ "I'm not obsessed with smut, honey...and no, I don't get off on seeing women strangled to death in these movies" [*as his erection becomes obvious*].

■ "There seems to be a trust issue here, Claire. I realize I've been out riding-off my insomnia at the same time these women have been raped. But there's a word for that, honey: *creepy*." [*and he laughs weirdly*]

■ "Honey, this is who you married. I've always been interested in under-aged children. If you remember, I was babysitting for a living right up to the time we got married. What's changed, other than your perceptions?"

■ "I'm not gonna give that saliva test, Rachel. Hell no. I don't care if every goddamned man in this county submits one. Nobody...*nobody's* got a right to my saliva, except you, when we're french kissing."

It's never easy to make sense of changes in a spouse, especially unwelcome ones. For starters, has *he* changed? Or have *you*? Do *others* in his life notice these changes? For instance, when you ask his best friend, Bob, whether he's seen unusual behavior from your spouse, and Bob says, "Matter of fact, I haven't heard from him in about six months, he doesn't return my phone calls," that's troubling. When you call his boss discreetly for

a little touch-base, and his boss says, “Stan quit four months ago. He didn’t tell you?” that’s a red flag. When you ask your spouse to explain the alarming increase in his alcohol consumption lately, and he replies, “Thirst,” that’s worrisome.

When a spouse has gone notably wayward, sometimes you have to roll out the heavy artillery. You may have tried confronting him directly, to no avail. In such cases, it may be necessary to deploy the classic *intervention* which, with luck, can return your spouse to his *baseline level* of under-functioning.

### **How do I put the intervention together, and what should happen?**

The intervention will consist of a carefully selected, small group of individuals who, one way or another, *know* your spouse pretty well. Like you, they will have seen his troubling changes, and, if not, they'll pretend they have.

A close friend or two, several intimate family members, and a boss (if your spouse has managed to keep his job) will suffice. If you want to throw a priest or rabbi into the mix for a little added spiritual authority, that's okay.

You will elect a leader, who will initiate and guide the intervention. The leader, above all, must be sober.

This isn't rocket science. You will confront your spouse—all of you—after *first* making sure he's secured immovably in his chair. You will confront him with what you've seen; the idea isn't to leave him feeling ganged-up upon as much as utterly ambushed and without a single opportunity to have his protests taken seriously. In other words, his rights as a free-thinking man will be disdained and, more importantly, crushed.

In no particular order, he will hear something like:

**Intervention Leader:** Stan, we're here today to tell you that we're very worried about you. For this reason, although we'll be glad to hear what you have to say, we won't be listening, because this is about *your* hearing what *we* have to say. At the end of this honest process, Stan, we will arrange your transport to a facility where you'll spend several weeks *at least* in an environment that will make this one here look like a hippie commune. If you choose not to cooperate, Stan, and of course that's your choice, Rabbi Schlomo over there will be instructed to use his registered stun-gun to render you physically immobile, at which point you'll be transported to same said facility. Stan,

every one of us in this room over the last several weeks has noticed, and been *troubled*, by your disturbing behaviors. We're not accusing you of anything, although many of us here, and I think I speak for the assembled, suspect your involvement in some of the more heinous unsolved crimes in the community; but we're not here to accuse; only, as you suspect, to intervene. Stop trying to loosen the knots, Stan, it's useless. Stop fighting; I advise you, instead, to listen. Listen to everyone. *[To you, spouse]:* Marsha?

**You:** Honey, it's true. You've been acting so strange lately, so creepy. Not like your usual depressed, lazy self, but something far more sinister. You need to go away for awhile, honey, so I and the kids will know that we're safe from you, and that you're getting the help you need, in whatever form is needed.

**Team member 3:** Yeah, Stan, I've noticed this too. You've really been acting pretty bizarre for the last few months.

**Team member 5 (rabbi):** Baruch atah adonai, Stan. Eloheinu melech ha'olam. What that means, Stan, is, you need to spend some time in Arizona. A little sunshine. Some fresh air. A little electroshock. You'll be good as new.

By now, your spouse will be making peace with his Kafkaesque predicament. The coup de gras will be the ushering in of your children, each of whom will address him along the lines of:

■ "Dad, you are not the father we've needed. We want the old you back, even though mom really doesn't."

At this point, he will likely volunteer for that flight to the Southwest. There, he will have ample time to reflect on, and process, the trauma of the intervention experience which, of course, will have scarred him for life.

**Sometimes I feel as if my spouse,  
at bottom, just doesn't want to please me.**

This is a disconcerting feeling that, if held up to scrutiny, likely will prove well-founded. You're likely even to realize that "pleasing you" has been among your spouse's lowest priorities for a very long time.

There are "signs" that a spouse has lost pretty much any interest to please you. They include:

- She has no sexual interest in you.
- She has no need to *feign* sexual interest in you.
- You start finally making "I statements" of your needs, and she laughs.
- She goes out whenever she wants, wherever she wants, and with *whomever* she wants, unaccountably.
- You threaten to bolt, and she says, "When?"
- You are the only member of the house whose dinner and laundry are conspicuously ignored on a regular basis
- You ask her who "Jim" is, and she says cryptically, "my boyfriend." You say, "You're kidding?," and she says, "No."

These are just a sprinkling of many troubling indicators; ask yourself if any of them apply? But even if none do, it's important that you register that a development is unfolding, typically characterized as your spouse's *indifference to you*.

And make no mistake: her indifference *does* impact her motivation to please you. It is a bad, seriously portentous sign that she can walk past your computer, on which the screen-saving image is that of a local escort service, and not give a crap. This is ominous of a deeply compromised level of marital investment.

But because I'm an optimist, I'd never tell you that all hope is lost. But I do need to tell you, all hope may be lost. Then again, until the "D" word has begun to be flung around more wildly than a Sunday afternoon of Brett Favre passes (and by D-word I don't mean chants of "Deefense"), there's still a chance of your taking your spouse back from "Jim," whoever the hell he is.

**Okay, I've cheated. In fact, I'm cheating now.  
Should I 'fess up or keep it secret?**

The general rule is to examine the motive to disclose an affair. As I indicated earlier, if you're looking for an easy way out of the marriage, *let him discover it*. And then pray he's not one of these "forgiving" types who believes that, with the help of a horrible couples counselor, this could be the beginning of a better, stronger bond?

On the other hand, as we've noted, if your interest is to protect the marriage, be careful. Few men respond affably to news of their wives' cheating, because they interpret this to mean that their wives have been *fucking someone else*. Occasionally you'll get a man so disengaged and self-absorbed, he'll react as if you've told him there's a problem with the gutter that needs fixing. It's hard to know whether he didn't hear you, or whether he heard you and simply tuned you out, as he does everything and everyone.

Many believe that disclosing affairs is a selfish act, the motive being to *unburden the conscience* of the cheater versus offering something of true generosity to the betrayed?

And what *would* constitute true generosity to the betrayed? Maybe, for starters, laying *him* instead of your lover? Or, letting your lover know that, despite his infinitely greater appeal and assets, nevertheless you're making the apparently senseless decision to return to your spouse, to give the marriage one last, fair shot?

### **I can never forgive my spouse for her infidelity.**

Woah, don't jump the gun, here. First of all, there's no *proof* of her infidelity; but even *if* she cheated, or *is* cheating (and this is a big *if* because, let's be honest, your perceptions of others, and yourself, have never been exactly *dead-on*)—even if she *has* cheated, or *is*, what gives you the impression that she's even *seeking* your forgiveness? While it's possible that you won't ever forgive her, it's also possible that *she* might not care?

Having said that, you *will* be able to forgive her. You'll be able to forgive her for several reasons:

- You are a realist, and know that you were fortunate to find *any* woman, even one with the gall to cheat on you.
- Through therapy, you will realize that, while her straying was wrong, it made sense in the context of your chronic, global cluelessness to her needs.
- Your wounded, embittered posturing will have a limited run with a wife who will tell you, sooner than later, to knock it off or she'll leave you. (And, because you don't want to be left, you will knock it off.)

And let's not minimize: you'll forgive her because, let's be honest, in the final analysis, your options are soberingly limited. Sure, you can say, "I don't need this shit, I didn't bargain for this!," yet when you evaluate the situation unemotionally and *yourself* objectively, it's likely you'll conclude that your spouse, even traitorous, isn't nearly as expendable as your posturing would suggest.

**What about sexual massages?  
I'm pretty pent-up, and I'm thinking this could be a solution?**

I can't officially endorse this path, but if you should choose it, be smart. Your spouse, unless she's very unusual, will not be thrilled to learn that your masseuse—the one you've been raving about for months—for a little extra cash has been doing more than cranial work on you. Don't get me wrong, the "Happy Ending" description under "services delivered" on her bills (discovered by your spouse) can be explained, just not easily. But if you find yourself in this jam, you can take a stab with these desperate explanations:

- "Honey, 'Happy Ending?' That just means she guarantees her clients leave happy?"
- "Honey, would you rather I'd had an *affair* with someone? This is cut and dried, all business, no emotions. See?"
- "Honey, you're misunderstanding this: I was just horny, and didn't want to bother you, because I know you hate me and have no sexual interest in me anymore. I thought I was doing both of us a favor."
- "Honey, the threesome wasn't my idea. It was the girl's. She had her sister with her, and, uh, I figured, 'what the hell?'"
- "Honey, relax. I haven't been using the kid's college tuition savings to finance these massages. I've been using some of the leftover cash your parents lent us for the kitchen job. God, who do you think I am?"
- "Honey, I wasn't planning this. I swear. I went for a massage, and before I knew it, she was massaging my...you know. I couldn't stop. I tried to say 'no,' but I couldn't."

■ “Honey, I went back figuring the prior time was just an exception, an aberration, having no idea that it would happen...again.”

■ “Honey, I’m not addicted, I swear. I just...like it.”

■ “Of course I’ll discontinue the massages if it means reassuring you how deprived I’m willing to be for you.”

Bottom line, when it comes to sexual massages, you will want to examine your conscience and values carefully, and make absolutely certain that the masseuse has been rated highly (online) by other customers.

**My spouse is pretty brilliant and accomplished;  
sometimes I think she expects that from me.**

This is unfair. No one in your life, even in your childhood, *ever*, even when *drunk*, had unrealistic expectations of you. Indeed, throughout your elementary and secondary school education, “slow” was the word your teachers most often used to describe you. This didn’t mean you were dumb, or stupid, or retarded—your teachers stressed otherwise—just that you processed things somewhat like a dumb, stupid, or retarded individual.

Yet you managed somehow to graduate from grade school, then high school, and later, miraculously, college, if not with honors, without honors.

Now, years later, here you are, having accomplished about as little as people who knew you well expected, perhaps even less, but not much less. And you are married to a formidably bright, ambitious, *successful* spouse who, years earlier, somehow misjudged your lack of interests and opinions for reserve. She liked the way you looked, and you weren’t a loud-mouth, and she convinced herself that you were a “diamond in the rough” with—and here is where she miscalculated—*potential!* Potential that *she* envisioned coaxing out of you.

But it didn’t happen as she imagined and that surely couldn’t be ascribed to her faulty motivational methods. Your accelerated training program at PetCo was supposed to poise you, within *two* years, to manage the *big* store, yet here you are, *six* years later, still stuck in the fish and aquatics department, steering people to the aquariums and spooning out and bagging tropical fish.

And while you’re reasonably content with all this, because you’re a reasonably content guy—capable, if left alone, of actually liking yourself—your spouse *isn’t*

contented at all. She's just not impressed by your PetCo employee discount and the funky pet toys you bring home regularly to the kids.

Realistically, though, what does she want from you? Your excellent work evaluations (which you've saved) have earned you raises every year, to the point you're earning \$10.50/hour? And you've got family health benefits that, while restricting you to a deeply limited pool of medical providers, comes with just a standard \$65 copay? And she doesn't know (because she doesn't *have* to) that the PetCo vet even agreed to do your vasectomy in the back, saving you a trip to the urologist.

Most importantly, you're a good dad, and a good guy. You're home a lot (according to her, too much). You're pretty much everything she bargained for, except the rocket scientist part.

**I find myself growing increasingly nostalgic for my single days.**

You may be approaching a stage in your life scientists call “death,” and as a result you’re asking some probing questions, like, Where is the nearest brothel? Does it test its girls reliably for HIV? Is sex with a prostitute cheating, or does it qualify, especially at *my* age, for some sort of exemption status?

While these may be deeper questions than you’re accustomed to asking, don’t fool yourself into believing you’re becoming deep. This nostalgia for your past is essentially about your memory of having gotten laid more often than twice a year. You are remembering how *easy* it was to meet, and *score* with, attractive women. Of course, most of these are false memories. It was never easy for you, and most of the women you scored with (and they were few) were distinctly pretty hideous.

Still, you’re thinking of one particular girl, Andrea, to whom, to this day, you regret *not* having taken seriously? You’re forgetting that she never had any interest in you, regarded you as dangerously “delusional,” and took out a restraining order to keep you away, in high school!

But that’s neither here nor there: she was the love of your life, whether she admitted it or not, and *you* knew the deal: you could have had her *if* you hadn’t been so mixed-up; she was the one you let slip away.

### **Are there any magical ways to transform my spouse into a pleasant, less oppositional person?**

Anyone who promises you magical solutions to complex problems is someone to listen closely to. The answer to your question is, yes. I'm going to give you a strategy you may be tempted to dismiss as ridiculously simple, but trust me, if you apply it, you'll see some remarkable results. Your task is to acquaint yourself with the phrases below—and their like—and to start using them with your spouse on a regular basis. You must use these statements liberally, whether they feel right or not, true or not. They are, in no particular order of importance:

- “I’m sorry, honey.”
- “I love you, honey.”
- “Yes, honey.”
- “What do you think, honey?”
- “How was your day, honey?”
- “I’ll do that, honey.”
- “Okay, sure, honey.”
- “I was wrong, honey.”
- “I appreciate that, honey.”
- “You look great, honey.”
- “Whatever you want, honey.”
- “No problem, honey.”
- “I miss you, honey” (cue for complete retards: use this line when *apart* from your

spouse)

I stress: If you can begin regularly to incorporate these cooperative, flattering, humbling statements into your otherwise resistant, defensive repertoire of responses, the return on your investment will prove more than satisfying.

### **Does my behavior have to correspond with the sentiment?**

Ideally, yes, at least to some extent. This is a good question, suggestive that you're beginning to get it. It's best not to say, "Okay, honey, I'll do it," and then *not* do it. This will erode the power of the gesture. So, although the correspondence doesn't have to be perfect, it's wise to do your best to minimize the dysjunction.

You'll notice that a number of these statements don't imply or demand an expected (at least immediate) follow-up behavior. So start out with these, and use them liberally.

For instance, "I love you, honey," is an obvious one. Even "I was wrong, honey," or "I'm sorry, honey," are concessions that can stand-alone. If, say, your apology seems to come out of context, she may ask, bewildered, "Sorry about *what?*," to which you can reply, "Everything."

If she says, "Wrong about *what?* What are you referring to?," you can say, "About so many things, honey, I don't even know where to begin."

None of this is deep, but that's okay, because you're not deep.

**But isn't it false to say things if I don't feel them, or mean them?**

Yes, so you may as well put your falseness to good use for a change. The fact is you're constantly saying things you don't mean, so you may as well be insincere smartly.

Statements like these, if expressed convincingly on a regular basis, will rack you up points faster than your frequent flyer plan, resulting in the kinds of slack-cutting concessions your spouse hasn't offered since the honeymoon days.

### **My spouse accuses me of sucking her dry for attention.**

Let's look at this again, because it's an important theme. It always feels a little shaming to be told this, because she may as well call you a big friggin' baby, because that's what she's really saying. What she fails to get is her role in the process.

Sure, you're annoying; sure, you require lots of attention; but starve a dog and watch him follow you around persistently, clingingly, until you fill his bowl with kibble. I'm not comparing to you a dog, because dogs are much less needy than you, but you get the gist.

This problem has two possible solutions: The first is to stop compulsively seeking her attentions *without* resentment. This, we know, is difficult, because your hunger for approval, for *her* approval, runs deep, very deep; in fact, forget about it, it's impossible and not even worth considering.

The second option is to approach her and request her recognition in a reasonably mature way, meaning a way you're completely unfamiliar with—for instance, with a non-accusatory, non-petulant, unpresumptuous, unentitled attitude. Look at these contrasting examples:

**Constructive**: “Say, uh, honey, I was thinking...it'd feel real good, once in a while, to feel, uh, that you appreciate how handsome I am?”

**Unconstructive**: “Y'know, Linda, when's the last goddamned time you've told me how handsome I am? Can you even remember it, because *I* don't!”

**Constructive:** “When you talk to me like that, Coleen, you leave me feeling very inadequate and expendable. Is that your aim? Because what I’d really like to hear more of is the opposite: what you value and respect about me.”

**Unconstructive:** “Coleen, go ahead! Go find someone else! If you think I’m that replaceable and upgradable, go ahead! Test the market!”

Although it’s tough, as we’ve discussed, to make “constructive” statements when feeling hurt, and angry, still it makes sense to try. The key is learning how to express your vulnerability in less defensive, more honest, ways. Your success at this will transform the way your spouse sees you.

**Isn't being vulnerable sometimes weak?  
Doesn't it give a predatory spouse an edge, leverage?**

If your spouse is habitually inclined to expose, if not exploit, your insecurities, then you are married to an unusually typical spouse. But this doesn't mean it's wise to suppress your vulnerability, even with such a spouse. The key question always is, how *do* we express our vulnerability? Effectively, or defensively? Because we are *all* vulnerable.

But don't be too quick to pigeonhole your spouse as predatory. One of her jobs is to keep you in line, which sometimes requires tough love (especially if you're difficult to break). Still, you raise a fair question: When is that line *crossed* unequivocally? When, for instance, can you know that your spouse may be insufficiently compassionate to merit your emotional trust? I'd be suspicious, for starters, if she says things like:

■ “Jesus Christ, Ronald, quit crying like a baby.” (*after first time you've cried in 10 years*)

■ “You were *raped* as a child, Ben? For godsakes, who the hell did it, and why the hell did you *let* him!?” (*after sharing your sexual molestation*)

■ “What makes you so afraid I'm gonna *leave* you, Phil, other than the fact that on *any day of the week* I could replace you with someone who can actually *support* me?”

These kinds of statements unfortunately don't encourage you to take the risk of sharing your vulnerability honestly. Your spouse should know this; if she doesn't and, upon your constructively explaining it, she *still* doesn't get it, this is troubling. It may be the case, as you've asserted all along, that she needs some serious therapy, or alternatively, a much less sensitive, evolved man than you.

**My spouse says, “What gives *you* the qualifications to be the sole dictator of what’s good for our kids? Doesn’t my feedback count? My life experience?”**

Look, nobody hands out official certifications in this business. You either know what you’re doing or you don’t. And *you* know what you’re doing. *You* know what’s good for your kids.

*You* are their mother, for godsakes—how’s *that* for a qualification? And if your spouse knows what’s good for him, he’ll desist in his wussy protestations for equality. Sure, you’ll take his feedback seriously, and yeah, you want him on-board in the rearing of your kids. But not if he’s going to make trouble. If he wants to cooperate, great. But if he’s going to whine about having his “voice” heard—if he thinks he can invoke absurd co-parenting psychobabble to get your attention—he *still* doesn’t know who he’s dealing with.

There’s a concept your spouse apparently continues to have difficulty grasping: it’s called the “real world.” In the *perfect* world, this child-rearing thing would be 50-50. In the perfect world, he’d question where you’re coming from, perhaps risk interjecting a differing suggestion in hopes of being taken seriously; and *you’d* give him the time of day. That’s the perfect world. But we live in the *real* world, a world in which his theoretical voice, for all practical purposes, is irrelevant on final matters of childrearing.

It’s not to suggest that you’re tyrannical, dictatorial, fascist and/or controlling in these matters; rather, it’s to emphasize how willing you are to work with your spouse so long as he demonstrates an awareness of his place.

**My spouse says she wants me *more* involved  
in the parenting, but when I *get* involved she criticizes me.**

This is confusing, but it's really not. Your spouse wants you involved on her terms. She wants you involved when she wants your involvement but when she doesn't want your involvement she wants you to understand that you need to back off and assume your designated place somewhere at the margins, where you're not in her way. This isn't nearly as contradictory as it seems.

And when you *are* involved, she reserves the right to critique your performance—to make sure that you're doing things the way *she* would. She's being less controlling than informative and educational. You see, she has a lot to teach you, if only you'd let your guard down. In fact, if you *could* let your guard down, you might stand a chance to really learn some things, like how to relate to your kids, feed them, bathe them, set limits, comfort them?

I'm not saying your position's easy. It's not. Your spouse, as you know better than anyone, is demanding; *far* more demanding than she thinks. She has yet to learn the concept of positive reinforcement, relying instead on tough-love guidance, like, "Gordan, are you a *cretin*, or *what!*? She's a *baby*, for godsakes!!"

Feeling criticized, perhaps shamed, certainly *not* uplifted, you're inclined to slink away defeatedly at the wrong time, eliciting comments like, "Where the *f* are *you* going? Who told *you* to punch out *now*? That's *exactly* what I'm saying: you're always ducking away, Gordon...always!"

And had you stuck around, and *not* slunk away, she'd have been likely to say, "You know what? You're useless! You just fed the baby some chicken with *bones* in it! You

know what Gordon, you're gonna *kill* the baby! You know what, just leave! I'll take care of her, so she'll have a chance to live!"

You feel you're damned if you do and damned if you don't. It's exhausting, and makes you want to go to sleep, or surf porn. Or call up your girlfriend and say, "Okay, Adrien, I'm ready. I think I'm ready to do this."

**I sometimes have morbid thoughts about  
my spouse disappearing from my life, forever.**

I'd be more concerned if these thoughts were rare, and connected to moments of conscious anger, than constant as they are in their intrusiveness and arising as out of nowhere?

Let's be clear: it's not that you'd *really* want to see your spouse disappear, only that, if, say, circumstances miraculously conspired to effectuate this development, well, then, you might feel quietly celebratory?

And this is *less* a statement of your flagging love for him than the experience of unremitting oppression you have when *with* him. But more than that, what underlies your thinking here is actually something magnanimous in spirit, not petty or cruel—in other words, your spouse is so miserable and negative that, *dead*, you know he'd be more at peace? (You've always had his best interests at heart, which is part of your problem.)

### **My spouse says I abuse *him*, not *he me*?**

This is one of the oldest tricks in the books: “*I do x to you?* Wrong...it’s *you* who does *x to me!*”

Just plug any negative behavior or attitude in for “*x*,” and you see how this strategy works.

“*I don’t let you make your point?* Wrong...it’s *you* who never lets *me* make a point?”

“*I don’t give the kids any time?* Think again: it’s *you* who never gives them any time.”

“*I don’t care about anyone but myself?* News flash: it’s *you* who doesn’t care about anyone but *herself?*”

But before we dismiss your spouse’s allegations as the product of a clearly demented mind, let’s quickly review the facts so that, afterwards, we’re left with no doubt that the allegations must be the product of a clearly demented mind:

- You do *not* run the house, your spouse and kids like a “tyrant,” but rather with a tight leash, and if your spouse can’t see the difference, this just confirms what an idiot he is.

- You have your spouse on a strict allowance not to *control* the family assets, but to *preserve* them. Furthermore, you recently *raised* his allowance to eight dollars a week, which is more money than several of your girlfriends allot *their* husbands.

■ You haven't forbidden him to hang-out with certain of his friends, you've just told him they're forbidden *in* the house; and you haven't proscribed his hanging-out with them *outside* the house, just not to come home if he does. And this isn't for *your* welfare, but *his*, because these guys are bad influences with sub-juvenile mentalities.

■ What he describes as hurtful, below-the-belt comments are, in fact, your honest feedback meant to challenge his growth. That he'd take personally remarks like, "Phil, take a look at yourself! What have you *amounted* to?," suggests his basic fragility, hypersensitivity, and defensiveness.

■ The *physical* abuse accusation? It makes you want to brain him with a heavy cast-iron pan. Where does he come off with *this* shit? Maybe he needs to add Mellaril to his drug cocktail, to calm his hallucinations? Repeat: You are *not* physically abusive. When you slap him upside the head for yet another of his bonehead behaviors, that's not abuse. And when you punch him in the arm with a closed fist, as hard as you can, and he yelps like a third-grader, he's being a friggin' wimp, is what he's being. You're tiny enough to go airborne in a stiff wind, so how is it possible that your punching him could leave his arm bruised?

■ You don't demean his judgement and censor his input. It's his *output* you dismiss. To say, "Ronald, what are you, an *imbecile*?," is merely asking the question that, under certain particular circumstances, any normal wife would be compelled to ask. You don't mean it to be taken literally, a point you stress when you follow-up by saying something like, "You idiot, Ronald, stop taking me so seriously."

If it wasn't evident already, it is now: Your spouse, just as you surmised, really doesn't know what abuse is, because if he did, he'd thank his lucky stars to have (as in

you) a partner dedicated to lifting him up, leaving him feeling as competent and adequate as you know he isn't.

**My spouse is a blamer; she's always blaming me for this, or that.  
I'm surprised she doesn't blame me for world terrorism.**

It's not easy being the target of incessant blame and recriminations, especially when, as in your case, the allegations are so exaggerated and unfair. Because *you* know that, when you get down to it, you're a pretty darned good guy, even *if* you're a lousy provider, partner, dad and friend.

Yours may not be the first image that's conjured up by the word "responsible," or in association with "dependable," "competent," or "genius." Still, in the grand scheme of things, you're not even close to the bottom of the barrel, as your spouse's girlfriends continue to assert. And she, your spouse, really ought to back those women off—remind them that *she* knows you better than they do, and that, contrary to their impressions, you do, in fact, have a redeeming quality.

**So it's possible that my chronic disappointment  
in my spouse is unjustified?**

You're being very hard on yourself. As you canvas your history, especially the litter of about 215 men who've ended up disenchanting you, ask yourself: what's the statistical probability that *all of these men* were fundamentally inadequate, versus the probability that *I* find ways to find the men I'm *with* deficient?

I certainly hope that you're strong enough, despite odds-against of 358 trillion-to-one, to conclude that it must be these men.

Regarding your spouse...sure, he's a decent, well-meaning guy. He chips-in with the baby (shouting to you that she needs a diaper change); through hard work, he's rapidly risen up the 7-Eleven ladder to become manager of the local store, right in town; he controls his anger reasonably well, especially when sober; and he's faithful or, at least, *has* been since you interrupted his eight-year, surreptitious affair with Minda, your Guatemalan housekeeper.

But none of this makes him exceptional. In other words, it's still *not* you, and never *has* been you. So don't let his fundamental decency shake your confidence. He's number 216, that's all there is to it. Don't overcomplicate it.

**I think my spouse is a cheat. Can I ascertain this through his replies to my accusations?**

Although we've been down this road before, it's an important one and we may have angles yet to mine. Naturally, the high conflictual index of your marriage places both of you at greater risk to sway. But then, many partners endure enormous marital privations and stay faithful. And yet, you're asking a somewhat different question: not so much, what is the *risk* my partner is cheating on me, as, can I *tell* whether he's cheating from his replies to my suspicions?

Not with complete certainty, but the following responses to the question, "You're cheating on me, aren't you?," strongly suggest that he may be:

- "You have no proof, Abby. Show me the proof."

- "If I was cheating on you, would I make it *this* obvious? Think about it."

- "Define cheating for me."

- "And let's say I was—and this is by no means an admission, because I'm not admitting anything—but, strictly for hypothetical purposes, let's say I was: what are the practical ramifications of this?"

- "Have you been following me around? (*you haven't*) Look, whatever you've *seen* you *asked* for."

- "Other than my complete emotional dependency on you, fear of poverty, and the knowledge that you'd take the kids from me, why wouldn't I just *leave* you before cheating on you?"

- "That's ridiculous, and you know it. Excuse me, I need to take this cellphone call in private; it's, um, a business associate."

■ “What’s the motive, Claire? Huh? Show me the motive? You’ve established the opportunity, but not the motive!”

All of these responses share in common a certain defensiveness, evasiveness, and gamesmanship that suggest guilt. More damning evidence are phone-calls in the middle of the night followed by his surreptitious exit from the bedroom; used condoms in his car about which he says, “I honestly have no idea how they got here?;” and your being confronted in public by a woman who says things like, “That was *me* calling last night at two a.m.! Hope I didn’t wake you?”

His full membership status with Match.com, EHarmony.com and JDate.com can’t be considered particularly vindicating signs, either.

**My spouse seems to enjoy hanging out  
with his buddies so much sometimes I think he's gay?**

You want to be careful with this: male bonding is often just that—gay. But it's often *not*, meaning it's often just male bonding. Many guys prefer hanging-out with each other not just for the common interests they share, but in the soothing knowledge that their pals will make no demands for substantive interaction.

Certain signs, however, require your attention, for instance:

- You discover a large dildo in the glove compartment of his car; when confronted, he says, “Honey, this is your Christmas present. I bought it early, to make sure I didn't screw up this year.”

- Seen partying and dancing at gay nightclubs, he explains, “I had no *idea* these places were gay. Admittedly, I was struck by the disproportion of men to women.”

But tread carefully here. The origins of that hardcore gay porn you found in his internet history may, as he suggests, be somehow “viral-related.” And when he says with incredible panic, “What the hell are you getting at, honey?,” you'll know he's as innocent as a lab puppy.

### **I try not to rip my spouse around my kids, but it's hard.**

Of course it's hard. But you know it's destructive for kids to hear their parents ripping each other. You know it's unwise to involve kids in parental conflict. Kids shouldn't have to choose sides, right? That can only put them in a terrible, futile predicament.

But kids are always choosing sides; they've grown up choosing sides—in games, with siblings, in conflict with friends. They've grown up picking favorites, whether a sports team, teacher, athlete, food, activity, friend, you name it. Why, then, should they find it so hard and traumatic to choose between you and your spouse?

And so, where is the line breached? What distinguishes acceptable strategies of manipulation from emotionally extortionate ploys to win your kids' allegiance? The examples below illustrate bids for attention that probably constitute overreaching and risk leaving the kids feeling unduly burdened.

■ “Kids, this wasn't your fault. You had nothing to do with the fight you just saw. You are never responsible for the ugly things that are said between daddy and me. Daddy is responsible. Daddy is fully responsible and he treats me (*begins crying*) so badly. Oh God, I wish that man would just *die*.”

■ “Kids, you are way too young to know this, but I'm gonna tell you anyway: that man just doesn't satisfy me, not in any way at all. Not sexually, not emotionally, not intellectually, not financially. Kids, let's keep this a secret, okay? What I've told you?”

■ “I'm not asking you to take sides, Randy [*who is 8*]. I didn't think I'd *have* to ask? Hey, you can side with *him*, that's your choice; but if you *do*, don't expect me to *ever* have your back again!”

■ “Children, if you haven’t figured it out for yourselves, *I’m* the one who runs this show, and your father still hasn’t comprehended that yet. If you’re smart, you’ll listen to me, agree with me, and *always* comply with *me* over dad. When your dad calls me a dictator, tyrant, fascist, or megalomaniac, these are just the desperate ramblings of a very disturbed man. Do you understand me, children?”

■ “Kids, you may have noticed that, in actuality, it takes just one individual—one irrational, disturbed, delusional individual—to ruin a marriage and cast a bleak, dark shadow of fear and discontent over the whole family. Do you understand me, children?”

■ “Children, I will always be here for you, I hope you know that. And I hope you know, too, that your father *won’t*. This doesn’t make your father less of a man, children, just less of a father. I want you to know that I’ll never say anything badly about your father, whom I happen to loathe with a passion as febrile as I felt lust for my high school boyfriend, John. But that’s neither here nor there. The important point is that you’ve got two parents who love you; it’s just that one loves you a lot more, and a lot more dependably.”

■ “Kids, your father and I have problems, as you can see. We are trying to work them out. But I want you to know that *even our couples therapist* recognizes your father as a particularly difficult and self-centered man. Even this therapist finds it hard to believe that I, and you as well, have managed to put up with his crap for *this* long.”

You can work with examples like these—specifically, modify them—to reduce their guilt-inducing impact while, at the same time, preserving their general effectiveness.

### **My kids seem to me to be in cahoots with my spouse.**

It's disturbing when your kids seem to have defected to your spouse. You'd think they'd know you well enough to know that, while you'd never punish them for their disloyalty, of *course* you'll punish them. The question is, *how*?

Here are some options:

- Withdraw from them.
- Inform them that you'll no longer be making contributions to their college funds.
- Remind them that, any time they come to their senses and are ready to weasel their way back into your good graces, you are prepared to forgive them and resume your emotional and financial availability.

These aren't perfect responses: Your withdrawal becomes problematic when you realize suddenly that *you* want something from them? How can you approach them later for a favor, or support, when you've been starving them of your attentions passive-aggressively for the last three years? And the college fund threat would have more teeth if you'd been *making* contributions in the first place (which you hadn't).

The most persuasive message you can convey to your traitorous kids, in a myriad of ways, is: "I will *always* be here for you, but *only* insofar as you betray your mother, and *not* me."

Sure, this puts them in a terrible, unfair bind, but from *your* perspective, didn't *they* get themselves in this bind?

### **My spouse accuses me of being manipulative.**

The problem is, you're a *bad* manipulator. When you learn how to manipulate *effectively*, you'll find your spouse conceding you all kinds of slack.

Here's the idea, so pay close attention:

■ “Sweetheart, I’ve cut the lawn and cleared-out the basement, as you requested.

I’m planning on going out now for a while to get loaded with the boys?”

■ “Arlene, happy birthday sweetheart. The flowers are coming and so is a special night out Thursday. If I’m late tonight, in fact if I *don’t come home* tonight, don’t worry about me. I’ll be fine. Again, happy birthday, honey. I love you so much.”

■ “Bev, I’m planning on giving you Saturday off, all day and night, to get some respite after your incredibly hard week taking care of the kids. I can’t tell you how much I appreciate your sacrifices. By the way, I bought that Porsche, but got a *fantastic* deal on it.”

■ “Honey, I booked us a trip in January to Anguilla, for a long weekend. Just you and me, no kids, no friends, not a soul to disturb *our time* together. I figured, before then, me and Kevin would do a short two-week jaunt to Australia for that dive?”

■ “Honey, do I tell you enough how beautiful you are and how important you are to me, and how confident I am that that sore on my penis I discovered this morning will turn out to be nothing, because what *else* could it be?”

■ “Honey, I’d give you the shirt off my back and take ten bullets in it, too, for you; for God’s sake, I’d walk miles barefoot over shards of glass if it meant saving you. But do me a favor, honey: how about, right now, you just let me watch this football game? In peace? With no complaints and interruptions? And just watch what comes back your way!”

I hope you don’t get the idea that I’m encouraging you to manipulate your spouse; actually, I’m *implo*ring you to do so, only smartly. If you preface your stated need or intention with a disarming compliment or, better yet, generous *gesture*, your spouse will give you more rope than you ever wanted—enough to hang yourself with ten times over. That’s because she’ll feel good about you, and when she feels good about you, she won’t hassle you. But you’ll need to practice this skill because you’re terrible at it.

**My spouse and I can endure each other during the week, when we hardly see each other. It's the weekends that really kill us.**

This is a tough predicament. The key is figuring out how to avoid each other as successfully on the weekends as you do during the week. Here are some ways to approach this idea with your spouse:

- “Honey, because it’s been apparent for some time that my value to you and the children has reached immeasurably minute levels, I thought I’d apply for weekend work at Border’s, where I’ll get the 30% employee discount and can feed my book-buying addiction even more recklessly.”

- “Love, because you hate me, and I hate you, I’m thinking about purchasing the house next door and taking up weekend residence beginning in January? I’m sorry it took me so long to conceive this plan?”

- “Barbara, I’ve decided to enter a very intensive psychotherapy program in Pennsylvania that happens to require my presence from 6 p.m. Fridays through 11 p.m. Sundays *every week*. The program is somewhat unusual in that it runs *forever*, with no vacations and no breaks for holidays, not even Christmas, Hannukah and Thanksgiving. I applied online and was accepted immediately with several diagnoses, including Borderline Personality Disorder, Narcissistic Personality Disorder, and Dissociative Identity Disorder. You were right, honey, I’m very disturbed.”

- “Sheila, because the weekends seem to place the greatest stress on our marriage, I’ve made the decision to stay in the basement, where I believe I’ll be less of a hindrance. You can send the laundry down the chute Fridays through Sundays, and I’ll be glad to do a load now and then. If the kids overwhelm you, you can call my mother?”

These strategies share in common the enabling of mutual avoidance, not exactly the conventional prescription for intimacy problems. But sometimes spouses need space, even lots of space, in order for hostilities to abate. This space can allow the exasperated, aggrieved spouse, now calmer, to pose and examine undefensively, honestly, and openly the really essential question: What's wrong with my spouse?

### **My thanks to you**

Many thanks for joining me on our journey to help you put your spouse in a clarified perspective. You are up against it, no question about it. Your spouse, as the evidence suggests, may be one of the more difficult spouses we've seen in a while. Sure, there's always someone who's got it worse, but probably nobody you know. And even if you *know* someone who's got it worse, so what? You're supposed to be content with the *second most difficult* spouse around?

But tempted as you may be to succumb to pessimism about your impossible spouse, I encourage you to stay positive. Ask yourself, what *can* I control, and what *can't* I control? If you *can* control your spouse, God bless you, and keep the clamps on him. But if you've got one of those irrational, dictatorial spouses who makes Kim Jong-il look like the Dalai Lama, well...that's what I'm here for.

And I'll be back, that's a promise. With more guidance for partners of impossible spouses.

P.S. I'd like to hear from you. Visit my website at [www.powercommunicating.com](http://www.powercommunicating.com); email me at [powercommunicating@yahoo.com](mailto:powercommunicating@yahoo.com); or call me at 908-233-5755!