

Relationship Power Struggles Put Intimacy At Risk

Who runs your relationship, and how does this fit with your sexual compatibility? More often than not, I've found that problematic power arrangements contribute to dysfunctional sex.

Alan and Denise have only been married two years, but their sexual enjoyment has dwindled to near zero. When they do make love, Denise's vagina has become dry, and intercourse is uncomfortable for both of them. Alan has lost his general enthusiasm for sex and has difficulty getting and keeping an erection. Lubrication and Viagra have only been partially effective.

In one of our individual sessions, Alan openly reflects on the last two years with an exasperated tone: "I can't believe how much my life has changed. I went from being a carefree bachelor to working more than 60 hours a week as a pharmaceutical sales representative, on the road four days out of seven. I married a woman with "champagne" tastes who is stretching our "beer" budget. We're always arguing about something. I've started asking myself why I ever married her!"

Alan is a large man with a neatly

groomed mustache, tweed jacket and pale gray tortoise shell glasses. At 27, he looks more like a stern college professor than a sales rep. His arms are stretched tightly in front of his broad chest, and he speaks with elocutionary exactness.

"I am not, I must tell you, at all happy with this marriage. There must be some changes."

I wonder if there is an unspoken "or else" punctuating his statement.

"What's upsetting you the most?" I ask.

"I'll tell you," he says without hesitation. "I feel duped, betrayed, made a fool of."

Alan's major complaint is that the marriage is not fairly balanced in terms of how much responsibility they each shoulder:

"When we were dating and talking about marriage, Denise led me to believe we'd be partners. She planned to get her nursing license and a full-time job. Now she works about 20 hours a week as a private-duty nurse and considers that full time, while I bust my back to pay for the big house she insisted on having."

Later, in a session with Denise, I ask her what she wants from their marriage.

She snaps, "I just want Alan to stop criticizing every little thing I do. It's worse than when I lived at home." Her small shoulders are slumped in resignation beneath her oversized yellow sweatshirt. "I can't do anything to

please him." As she lowers her head, wisps of her shoulder-length brown hair cover half of her face, giving her the look of a shy teen, not a woman nearing 30.

With prompting, she shares that when Alan arrives home from work, he performs the "white glove test" to see if everything is clean.

"Did you wash the kitchen counter today?" he asks, feeling the surface with his fingertips. "It doesn't look like you did." Or he scolds, "Why are the magazines still on the family room floor?" Denise says that Alan finds fault with how she dresses, wears her hair, even how she chews her gum. He is as controlling as her father, she says.

To get Alan to stop shouting, she says she is "sorry," but she harbors hidden resentment.

As you'd expect, their sexual relationship has suffered. She doesn't enjoy their physical closeness and rarely initiates sex. When Alan approaches her, she offers any excuse she can muster — "I have a headache; I have my period" — or she submits mechanically.

"I guess withholding sex is my way of getting even," she admits. "It's the only part of me I feel I can really control."

Alan agrees that there is no way he can "make" Denise respond sexually. Because of his lack of focus, his arousal is a problem, and he is also avoiding sex.

Power struggles and sexual problems are frequently interwoven. It is obvious

that Alan and Denise's sexual complaints have less to do with sex and much more to do with their growing emotional detachment.

Power-plays in relationships can take many forms, from overt battles about property ownership to who manages the checkbook. Criticizing your partner because he or she isn't picking up the children's toys or being moody or irritable may be your way to control. Perhaps you play good cop and force your partner to be the "heavy" with the kids, or you push your partner's buttons when you know he or she is trying to keep their anger in check. Forgetting or procrastinating is another common way couples control or avoid being controlled.

Because power dynamics are often unconscious, a couple may initially be puzzled by their growing sexual dissatisfaction. If one of you is behaving like a parent, and the other acts like a child, don't be surprised if your sexual passion takes a nose dive. A closer look may reveal that your interest has shut down because it triggers an uncomfortable "incestuous" resonance. Sex is an intimate joining experience between consenting adults — chronologically and emotionally.

As Denise and Alan created a more mature partnership, they were ready to address their sexual problems with more candor:

There are many kinds of power discrepancies in relationships, from mild to severe. One of the most extreme forms is the abuse found in domestic violence. The attempts of abusers to dominate their partners have been attributed to low self-esteem, unresolved childhood conflicts, hostility and a host of other variables. The abusive behaviors often represent extreme helplessness and powerlessness projected onto their male or female victim. But whatever the psychological explanation, abuse in any form is unacceptable and requires prompt professional (and/or legal) intervention.

For many couples, sex becomes the ultimate equalizer. It can be a powerful leveler — wounding pride and eroding trust. If you're secretly keeping score of who is "giving more" to the marriage and who is "taking more," proceed with caution. Your intimacy is at risk.

Dr. Sandra Scantling is a licensed clinical psychologist and certified sex therapist. She practices in Farmington. You may e-mail her at AskDrScantling@aol.com and her website is www.drscantling.com. This column is not intended as a substitute for professional, medical or psychological advice, diagnosis or treatment. Case material used here includes composites and is not intended to represent any actual couple or individual.



DR. SANDRA SCANTLING
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