



Claire McIntosh

Toxic Talk

It slowly poisons a partnership. Is nagging worse than cheating?



It's the little things that set me off, like my boyfriend's leaving cups in the living room or not folding the throw after he watches TV," says Carmen Alicia Belcher, 29, of New York City, who began living with her partner a year ago. "My thing is, if I've asked you once to fix the issue and you say you understand, then [no problem]. It's when one [repeats] an excuse, such as, 'I was rushing for work' that I become Ms. Nag. And I hate that!" We nag those we care about most, says Rhonda Richards-Smith, a licensed clinical social worker in Los Angeles. Although intended for good, "nagging can [damage] your relationship and lead to deceit, anger and poor communication," she adds. The Wall Street Journal warns, "Meet the Marriage Killer," and claims it's "more common than adultery and potentially as toxic." But like the faint gurgling of a toilet one ignores until opening a \$600 water bill, it takes its toll slowly in the background.

Pestering is a tension between both partners: You can't have a bossy nag without a stubborn mule. Either gender can nag. Ask once, that's a request; ask twice, it's a reminder. Beyond that, you're nagging. A pesky partner may repeatedly urge, criticize or tease (men may view asking as a sign of weakness and favor the last two options). However the comment is phrased, it signals an expectation of failure, says Patricia Johnson, co-author of *Partners in Passion* (Cleis Press). "Nagging is covert criticism accompanied by one-upmanship." Even when expressed as a question (He asks, "Why don't you exercise?"), it's really a complaint, she explains. Often, we don't recognize we're nagging (see "Who Me?" at right). Moya Ojarigi, 30, of Los Angeles, and her mate discovered that it often took the guise of advice. "Once [one of us] asked for guidance, it became the perfect opportunity to tell [the other person] about [himself or herself]," she says. The couple curbed this when they sensed growing alienation, says Ojarigi.

Nagging Doesn't Work

A nagged partner feels frustrated, annoyed and disrespected, says Teesia Evans, a clinical psychologist in Oakland, Calif. (S)he may create distance to avoid dialogue. The nag then turns up the volume. Ironically, "Focusing attention on behavior you dislike can make an individual want to [do it] more," says Richards-Smith. Your mate may comply in a passive-aggressive way—procrastinating or making intentional "mistakes." The vicious "cat and mouse" cycle erodes intimacy, adds Evans. Your mate sees your approval, respect and love as conditional. Accountability, trust and control are off-balance between you.

Here's What Does Work:

>DO UNCOVER THE REAL ISSUE. (S)he left towels on the floor. Is your concern that the bathroom's messy or that (s)he may view you as a lackey rather

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than as a lover?

>DON'T ASK A THIRD TIME.

Instead, ask what's behind the lack of follow-through. "It's possible that the complaint is registered, but your partner isn't clear on what the desired change is. It's also possible that (s)he doesn't agree that it's a problem," says marriage coach Lesli M. W. Doares, LMFT. Ask if (s)he is willing to change.

>DON'T LECTURE. Converse with your mate as you would your best friend.

>DO CONVEY CONFIDENCE in your partner's ability to fulfill your request.

>DO ACCEPT THAT "THE PERSON YOU HAVE CONTROL OVER IS YOURSELF," says Richards-Smith. You can't stop him from plopping his sweaty rear, post-workout, into that pricey upholstered chair. You can order slipcovers. You can enlist others (a cleaning service, plumber, etc.) to resolve many issues. **>DO SHARE HOW THE CHANGE WOULD BENEFIT YOU.** "I want to grow old with you," conveys a different message than "Doc said lay off salty chips."

Who Me? 9 Signs You May Be a Nag

1. You desire to take control.
2. You sound judgmental.
3. You use "you" statements (e.g., "You never take me anywhere," versus "I'd enjoy a night out.")
4. You speak as if to a child.
5. You repeat the question, hoping for a different response.
6. You desire to change your mate.
7. Your mate is resentful.
8. (S)he hesitates in situations where you have been critical.
9. (S)he avoids you by walking away or working late.



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