

When Love isn't Enough: The Roots of Couple Conflict

Ryan: *Honey, your parents are going to be here in a couple of hours and the living room looks like a disaster zone. Can you please put your stuff up?*

Jim: *In a minute, I'm busy.*

.... 25 minutes later

Ryan: *Honey, what are you doing? I really need you to do something with your stuff so I can finish cleaning.*

Jim (annoyed): *I'm playing a video game. I'll help when I'm done playing.*

Ryan (pleading): *Jim. I can't finish cleaning until your stuff is out of the way. It should only take a few minutes.*

Jim (with more of an edge): *I'll be there, when I'm done, OK?*

Ryan (exasperated this time): *Look, it's not like I ask you to do much around here. The house looks like a pig sty and it's all your shit.*

Jim (angry): *Geesh. It's not like the world will end if my parents see a little clutter.*

If this exchange sounds familiar, you're not alone. Most couples, at some point experience some sort of tension or conflict about housework. This tension can lead to major power struggles in couples where one partner is notably more concerned about tidiness than the other. The neater partner usually pushes the less tidy partner to conform to their standard of neatness and ends up feeling resentment when the less tidy partner doesn't comply. The messier partner often feels frustrated because they are less concerned about having a super tidy house or fabulous meals and resentful that they feel pressured to help create a super clean house when they would be ok with having socks on the floor and frozen pizza or mac n cheese and poptarts for dinner.

The standard self-help advice on how to deal with this sort of tension is to have partners work on their communication patterns and find ways to compromise. Better, more compassionate communication is always a good thing in a relationship. Both help improve the level of safety, respect and trust both partners feel in each other and in the relationship. And yet, limiting the focus of the problem to communication patterns is a lot like being vigilant about shoveling the shit that seems to keep piling up in the living room and not acknowledging the elephant that's producing it.

Few self-help books acknowledge the fact that the source of the conflict is rarely the actual issue couples are struggling with. That is, when couples are fighting about the laundry, the checkbook, the dishes in the sink, how to raise the children, or how to squeeze the tube of toothpaste, they are really struggling over the fact that one or both partners doesn't either feel respected, doesn't feel emotionally or physically safe or doesn't trust the other partner.

Think about it, when you have made it clear to your partner that you are really bothered when they turn the living room into a laundry basket only to come home, yet again, to find their clothes laying

everywhere, do you feel respected? Likewise, if you are a packrat and keep piles of old newspapers or magazines laying around because you are planning to read them one day and you come home to find that your partner has tossed out everything, do you trust him or her? Or, do you find yourself feeling anxious about what else of yours they might decide to toss?

Unfortunately, for some couples, the true root of conflict isn't even this "simple. Power dynamics, especially unacknowledged ones, sabotage the type of communication most self-help books recommend. These power dynamics are often based on economic resources, political power, and social status. So, for example, if Jim and Ryan are on a relatively equal playing field and Ryan feels frustrated by Jim's lack of tidiness, he might say to Jim, "When I come home and find your clothes scattered all over the living room, I don't feel respected and I think that I don't really matter to you. And, it makes the house feel chaotic to me. I don't feel like I have a place to sit and relax." If Jim is willing to follow the communication tips, he might empathize with Ryan about how important it is to have the living room in some state of order and how his behavior leaves Ryan feeling, "Having my clothes all over the place must drive you crazy. And it must feel really crappy thinking that I don't care about you." He might also share, "When you talk about my clothes in the living room, I what I hear you saying is, 'You pig. I'm sick of cleaning up your mess.' And I feel like I'm 9 years old, and nothing I ever do is good enough or right for my mother and I sort of give up." Note that to really communicate in a clear, respectful way takes a lot more time than Ryan saying, "Mr. piggy pants, clean up your mess." And Jim's likely retort: "Fuck you, asshole." The pay off is that clear, compassionate communication can actually deepen the intimacy that Ryan and Jim have. And, the theory is that if both partners really feel heard and can empathize with the other, then the pattern that gets in the way of connection can be repaired with relative ease.

However, if Jim has a lot more social power than Ryan, Ryan may be reluctant to be honest with Jim about how he feels because the cost of losing the relationship will be greater for him than for Jim. He may sit in the living room and seethe at the mess or he may clean things up with a great deal of resentment or he may withdraw and refuse to talk to Jim. At the same time, Jim is also likely to expect that Ryan will be accommodating to his needs and wishes and not feel the same pull to accommodate Ryan's needs and wishes. In practical terms, because of his power, Jim is unlikely to really take Ryan's feelings about the clothes all over the living room seriously even if Ryan does express them. The bottom line is that Ryan is more vulnerable than Jim and this vulnerability gets in the way of the sort of connection that helps couples work through conflict.

The bright side is that, at least in this area, gay and lesbian relationships are actually at an advantage relative to heterosexual relationships because the differential of social power is likely to be less. To state the obvious, we suffer the same type of oppression based on our sexual orientation and the very nature of who we are means that we hold similar amounts of power based on gender. Still, in order for us to maintain deeply satisfying intimate relationships, we need to acknowledge and address the power differentials that exist between us. More powerful partners need to be willing to let go of some of the expectations they feel entitled to hold and do the hard work of empathy with their less powerful partners. Less powerful partners need to find ways to empower themselves, even if it's an acknowledgment that they can survive ok without the shelter of the relationship, and find gentle ways to speak their truth to their more powerful partners. And both partners need to work towards feeling empathy for their partner's experience. And that communication advice, it's still good. Even though it's tedious, it takes a lot less time and emotional energy in the long run than seething, withdrawing and fighting.

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