



The Flaws of Attraction

You and your partner are probably having the same fight over and over. And that, says one couples therapist, is what brought you together in the first place. **BY RORY EVANS**

WE ARE HURLING SOUTH on the West Side Highway in Manhattan—one of those perilously narrow strips of pre-SUV highway. The speed limit is 50, but the red needle of our speedometer nudges 70. Jamie's knee presses against the four o'clock of the steering wheel—which frees up his hands.

To color-sort jelly beans.

And this, in a sugar-coated shell, is my husband: Man enough to take the wheel and boy enough—dumb enough?—to abandon it for fear of polluting his licorice mouthful with a rogue cherry flavor.

I think this little scene would infuriate the most easy-going wife but it especially enraged me, because I'm a stick-in-the-

mud. A funny and social stick, to be sure, but mud-residing nevertheless. To let me enter a room is to unwittingly ask me to report back—in 30 seconds or less—on how many strangulation hazards, accidents waiting to happen, and gruesome death traps are contained therein. Wanna crank up the music and dance? Yeah, well turn it down—you'll give yourself lifelong tinnitus. (And take off your shoes before you scuff the floor!)

My first reaction when I saw Jamie separating his jelly beans was to dramatically clamp a hand onto the steering wheel. The second was my usual rejoinder when he is doing something asinine on the open road: "You realize there are two beating hearts in this car that would stop beating due to your idiocy?" I've noticed that gory medical stuff tends to snap Jamie back to the realm of the grown-ups. And my tugging him back into adult territory is the recurring theme of our marriage.

Does that mean we prove ye olde "opposites attract" chestnut that dominates so much mating pop-psychology? Not according to marriage counselor Stephen Betchen, Ph.D., author of the recent book *Magnetic Partners: Discover How the Hidden Conflict That Once Attracted You to Each Other Is Now Driving You Apart* (Free Press, 2010). Based on Betchen's 30 years as a couples counselor, he presents an intriguing new theory about why couples fight—and it may help explain why so many seem doomed to repeat some version of the same argument over and over.

It's not that couples are opposites, Betchen says. Rather, his theory is this: Within each individual are two opposing inner forces: a "master conflict." It's like "two politicians inside you, arguing about some issue, and you can't make up your mind whom you should believe." One example of a common conflict is

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"conformity vs. rebellion"; one part of you may want to fit in, while the other yearns to break rules.

When you look for a mate, Betchen argues, you're drawn to someone harboring the same master conflict as your own. There's a sense that someone with your same conflict understands you deep down where it counts. And yet, he explains, that same shared inner struggle that draws couples together often pushes them apart. The key to maintaining a happy relationship is stabilizing these forces. "It's like a seesaw," Betchen says. "Each side of the conflict is in one seat. Everything is

I HATE THAT NAGGY-WIFE STEREOTYPE, IN WHICH THE HUSBAND STARES DOWN LIFE THROUGH THE WINDSHIELD WIPERS OF HER WAGGING, TSKING FINGERS.

going to be OK as long as you are balancing your conflicts."

In his book, Betchen identifies 18 other master conflicts, including biggies like "closeness vs. distance" and "justice vs. injustice" (see p. 71 for more). His argument dovetails with conflict theory, the basis of most psychoanalysis, which posits that "unfinished business" from childhood, as relationship therapist Harville Hendrix, Ph.D., calls it, shapes who we are as adults. According to Betchen, our "family of origin"—a.k.a. dear old mom and dad—not only factors into our master conflict but essentially creates it. Deadbeat parents might beget kids with trust vs. distrust conflict; parents with lots of strict rules may raise kids with justice vs. injustice conflict.

Hendrix, creator of Imago Relationship Therapy, a counseling regimen rooted in his notion that we choose

romantic partners who resemble our parents or early caregivers, backs up Betchen's assertion that individual master conflicts affect adult romantic relationships and determine who we're attracted to. "Unresolved issues in childhood impact our choice of partners," he says. "You're looking for someone who can heal the wounds." Essentially, we're not so much destined to become our mothers but to marry our mothers.

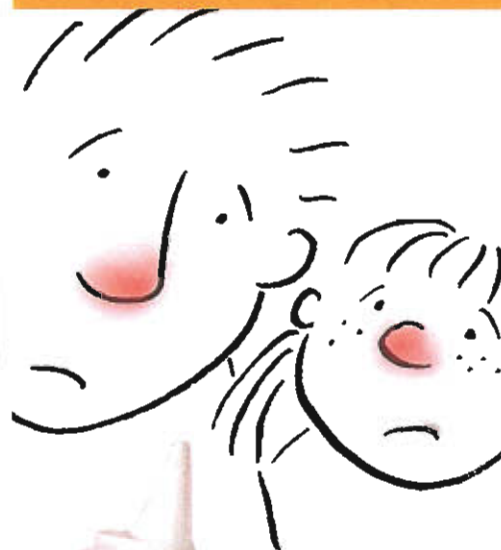
Just as weekly shrinkage aims to help patients be aware of how their inner conflicts affect their behavior, Betchen urges his patients to identify how their master conflicts influence (or infect) their

romantic relationships. Mostly it boils down to recognizing recurring themes: What's the fight you keep coming back to? What feelings get roiled up, or what behavioral patterns emerge around those arguments? And does that remind you of how you felt or were treated as a kid?

As I read Betchen's book, I found it disconcertingly easy to diagnose all the master conflicts at play in my friends' relationships (hello, M. & husband and your textbook closeness vs. distance dynamic!) but nearly impossible to pinpoint my own. Then I talked to Betchen on the phone and gave him a brief run-down of the recurring flash points in my marriage (yes, jelly beans were mentioned). He delicately suggested that it might be the power vs. passivity conflict, in which one of us likes to be in charge and the other is happy to follow. Betchen was onto something.

Look no further than our mailbox for proof: My husband doesn't have a key to it. For the first five years we were married, he didn't once get the mail. (It was only when our daughter, still in utero,

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was sitting breech and there was a chance I would need an emergency C-section and be hospitalized for a week; he temporarily added a mailbox key to his key chain.) Then there's the fact that whenever we travel, I spend days making lists and amassing what we'll need to bring, sorting it into piles and putting it into bags; usually the only thing he has to remember is his own toothbrush—and I will still (still!) wake the next morning in the hotel to find him up and at 'em ... and a fresh dampness to my Aquafresh Flex.

Unsurprisingly, when I talked to Betchen, he wanted to know what our families were like. Not to get too pop-psych, but I am certain that along with my mom's nose and right-foot bunion, I got her penchant for being a stick-in-the-mud. And for being highly organized, hyper-efficient, and always scanning for the next hidden danger. She got everything done around our house, but I can't think of a single time she ever plopped down on the floor and played with me and my three sisters. In reaction to my mom's type-A ways, I could have gone in the opposite direction, Betchen points out, and become kind of a slacker (which might explain about 93 percent of the habits of my little sister, Baby Alex).

"You wanted someone to play with," Betchen told me. With Jamie, I found that person. He's been playing with his parents since he was born. His mom was always game for anything—once she hand-drew an intricate road system on which he and his brother played with their Matchbox cars. On summer nights, his dad met him at the golf course after work to play nine holes. To this day, his entire family still plays golf together in a scrum of tan legs and sand wedges and can after can after can of beer.

Part of my allergy to recognizing the power vs. passivity dynamic in my marriage is I hate that naggy-wife stereotype, in which the husband stares down life through the windshield wipers of her wagging, tsking fingers. Long before I knew of Betchen's theory, my blood has run cold when I've overheard men react to a simple request from their wives with an exasperated, "Yes, Mooommmmm." Surely, my mud-encased stick was more nuanced than that, wasn't it?

According to Betchen—bless him—it actually is. Because on the seesaw of our master conflict (or a custom tweak of it, the "power vs. play" conflict), I'm not always the joyless scold. Sometimes my side teeters away from "power" to "play,"

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and I get to be that person on the rear seat of a tandem bike, my feet resting happy-go-luckily on the fixed handlebars—maybe a daisy tucked behind one ear. And while I rarely admit this, I have inner lazy bones. I almost never vacuum. I rarely wash dishes (and when I do, I do a lousy job). Whenever anything goes wrong with the plumbing/heating/electricity/woodwork in my home, I never have to worry because Jamie takes care of it. It turns out that although I spend so much time trumpeting how powerful I am in my marriage, I don't acknowledge how passive I can be too.

What will keep Jamie and me happiest (and our master conflict well calibrated), Betchen says, is balancing our power dynamic on a regular basis—making certain that I am not in full-on joyless mode, and that he is not in full-on idiotic-child mode. Maintaining equilibrium is as easy as making a habit of checking ourselves, committing to projects that exercise both sides of our equations, and talking, talking, talking. Or, at the very least, alternating between who has the power and who gets to play. In some ways, it's a lot like taking turns driving and being the passenger. And from here on, only the passenger gets to sort jelly beans.

THE SEVEN MOST COMMON MASTER CONFLICTS

POWER VS. PASSIVITY

Both partners feel conflicted about responsibility. The one "in charge" needs power yet feels "burned out." The passive one wants to be taken care of but not controlled.

GETTING YOUR NEEDS MET VS. CARETAKING

Some kind of addiction is often involved. One "selfless" partner focuses on the troubled mate to the detriment of his or her own needs.

CLOSENESS VS. DISTANCE

The partners will shift between periods of wanting and shunning intimacy, and they may be out of sync.

CONFORMITY VS. REBELLION

One side of each partner wants to conform to others' expectations; the other side is rebellious.

JUSTICE VS. INJUSTICE

The partners share a strong sense of fairness and a heightened sensi-

tivity to injustice. People with this conflict can become very angry when they feel wronged.

SUCCESS VS. SABOTAGE

Both partners have potential to succeed but find ways to block themselves from reaching their goals.

SPECIALNESS VS. ORDINARINESS

Each partner struggles with feeling plain and ordinary; to compensate, the other side feels entitled and extraordinary.

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¹National Kidney Foundation. www.kidney.org/news/newsroom/ks_new/prlinkd&urologd.cfm Accessed July 2010.

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