

Your Personal Coach

Kathleen Brehony, Ph.D.

Dear Kathleen,

My husband and I are constantly fighting about stupid things. Today, we argued because he ate the last of the ice cream in our refrigerator. Last night we had a screaming match about whose turn it was to do the dishes. A week ago, we fought about which one of us was supposed to put away the clean laundry. Any simple, tiny thing seems to get us angry at each other. We've only been married a few years and our relationship used to be fun. But it's not now. Do we need help?

-- Debbie

Dear Debbie,

You and your hubby are in the middle of what I call "kitchen sink arguments." On the surface, the fighting appears to be about who did the dishes, who put the previous load of laundry away, or who gobbled up the last scoop of *Rocky Road*. But, these issues are convenient foils for what is really going on: A power struggle about much deeper concerns.

It's my bet that each of you may be feeling as if you are putting more into this relationship than the other. Some experts suggest that this is a normal part of the dynamic of a committed relationship. After attraction, comes the struggle for power and reciprocity. Yowza! Suddenly you go from candlelight dinners and flowers – pure bliss – into a real life relationship that includes dirty dishes and laundry. Most marriages experience this change of state sometime between six months and two years.

Interestingly, it is often the very qualities we most loved about our mate that are the ones that make us want to run screaming into the night once the bloom is off the rose. We go from: "No, honey, sweetie pie, you take the rest of the ice cream." to "Son of a gun! He's made off with the last of the Häagen Dazs!"

Romantic love requires nothing more than a working endocrine system, a little bit of chemistry, and someone who can hold our projection of being a good catch. Real marital relationships demand more – they ask us to know ourselves well, to heal childhood wounds, to trust, to communicate, and to compromise.

Many couples stay forever locked in this unconscious power struggle stage (or at least until the marriage hits the rocks – as 50% of first marriages do -- and the lawyers are called in). The good news is that if and when you resolve this phase of your marriage, you can expect subsequent periods of cooperation, co-creation, synergy, and, finally, completion. That means, completion of the power struggle and a settling of how you will divide responsibilities with no further, major conflict. Now, that's real love and real bliss.

Recognizing that all marriages/partnerships go through various stages is the first step to solving your problem. Sit down and talk together about what's going on. I mean what's really going on – get away from the arguments about trivial things and look below the surface. Are you disappointed in him? Does he feel like he "gives more" than you do? How about you – do you feel like you're the one who's giving more? What does it feel like – for each of you -- to be suddenly awakened from the dreamy "in love" state and into the real life of your marriage? Are either of you experiencing hurt,

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disappointment, or bewilderment? Are both of you feeling loved by one another? Talk about expectations that each of you have for your marriage. Honestly reflect on what you are doing (not what he is doing) that is adding to the discontent. Of course, he should be asking himself the same question. Accept each other's imperfections.

With the right ingredients, this stage of your relationship can transform into a richer, more authentic, truly loving one. If you don't see improvement after acknowledging your power struggle as a stage, communicating honestly, and making changes in how you compromise and relate to one another, then seek marital counseling.

Talk deeply, laugh often, and go out for ice cream together.

Send your personal coaching questions to kathleen@fullpotentialliving.com or call 473-4004. Kathleen is a personal and executive coach, clinical psychologist, and writer. (©2003 Kathleen Brehony. All Rights Reserved.) Columns are archived at www.fullpotentialliving.com.