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# Meet the Marriage Killer

*It's More Common Than Adultery and Potentially As Toxic, So Why Is It So Hard to Stop Nagging?*



By ELIZABETH BERNSTEIN

Ken Mac Dougall bit into the sandwich his wife had packed him for lunch and noticed something odd—a Post-it note tucked between the ham and the cheese. He pulled it out of his mouth, smoothed the crinkles and read what his wife had written: "Be in aisle 10 of Home Depot tonight at 6 p.m."



Marriage counselors warn that nagging is one of the leading causes for discord and divorce, Elizabeth Bernstein reports on Lunch Break. (Photo: Getty Images)

Mr. Mac Dougall was renovating the couple's Oak Ridge, N.J., kitchen, and his wife had been urging him to pick out the floor tiles. He felt he had plenty of time to do this task. She felt unheard.

"I thought the note was an ingenious and hysterical way to get his attention," says his wife, Janet Pfeiffer (whose occupation, interestingly enough, is a motivational speaker), recalling the incident which occurred several years ago. Her husband, a technician at a company that modifies vehicles for handicapped drivers, didn't really see it that way. "I don't need a reminder in the middle of my sandwich," he says.

Nagging—the interaction in which one person repeatedly makes a request, the other person repeatedly ignores it and both become increasingly annoyed—is an issue every couple will grapple with at some point. While the word itself can provoke chuckles and eye-rolling, the dynamic can potentially be as dangerous to a marriage as adultery or bad finances. Experts say it is exactly the type of toxic communication that can eventually sink a relationship.



Dominic Bugatto

Why do we nag? "We have a perception that we won't get what we want from the other person, so we feel we need to keep asking in order to get it," says Scott Wetzler, a psychologist and vice chairman of the Department of Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences at Montefiore Medical Center in New York. It is a vicious circle: The naggee tires of the badgering and starts to withhold, which makes the nagger nag more.

Personality contributes to the dynamic, Dr. Wetzler says. An extremely organized, obsessive or anxious person may not be able to refrain from giving reminders, especially if the partner is laid back and often does things at the last minute. Other people

are naturally resistant—some might say lazy—and could bring out the nagger in anyone.

It is possible for husbands to nag, and wives to resent them for nagging. But women are more likely to nag, experts say, largely because they are conditioned to feel more responsible for managing home and family life. And they tend to be more sensitive to early signs of problems in a relationship. When women ask for something and don't get a response, they are quicker to realize something is wrong. The problem is that by asking repeatedly, they make things worse.

Men are to blame, too, because they don't always give a clear answer. Sure, a husband might tune his wife out because he is annoyed; nagging can make him feel like a little boy being scolded by his mother. But many times he doesn't respond because he doesn't know the answer yet, or he knows the answer will disappoint her.

Nagging can become a prime contributor to divorce when couples start fighting about the nagging rather than talking about the issue at the root of the nagging, says Howard Markman, professor of psychology at the University of Denver and co-director of the Center for Marital and Family Studies. For 30 years, Dr. Markman has researched conflict and communication in relationships and offered relationship counseling and marriage seminars. He says that while all couples deal with nagging at some point, those who learn to reduce this type of negative communication will substantially increase their odds of staying together and keeping love alive. Couples who don't learn often fall out of love and split up.

Research that Dr. Markman published in 2010 in the *Journal of Family Psychology* indicates that couples who became unhappy five years into their marriage had a roughly 20% increase in negative communication patterns consistent with nagging, and a 12% decrease in positive communication. "Nagging is an enemy of love, if allowed to persist," Dr. Markman says.

The good news: Couples can learn to stop nagging. Early in their marriage, Ms. Pfeiffer, now 62, repeatedly reminded her husband about household tasks and became more demanding when he ignored her. "If I was asking him to take care of something that mattered to me and he was blowing me off, that made me feel like I didn't matter," she says.

Mr. Mac Dougall, 58, says the nagging made his muscles tense, he would become silent and his eyes would glaze over in a "thousand-yard stare." "Her requests conveyed some sort of urgency that I didn't think was needed," he says. "If I said I was going to get to it, I would definitely get to it."

Ms. Pfeiffer decided to soften her approach. She asked herself, "How can I speak in a way that is not threatening or offensive to him?" She began writing requests on Post-it notes, adding little smiley faces or hearts. Mr. Mac Dougall says he was initially peeved about the sandwich note but did show up at Home Depot that evening smiling.

Ms. Pfeiffer sometimes writes notes to him from the appliances that need to be fixed. "I really need your help," a recent plea began. "I am really backed up and in a lot of discomfort." It was signed "your faithful bathtub drain." "As long as I am not putting pressure on him, he seems to respond better," Ms. Pfeiffer says. Mr. Mac Dougall agrees. "The notes distract me from the face-to-face interaction," he says. "There's no annoying tone of voice or body posture. It's all out of the equation."

The first step in curbing the nagging cycle, experts say, is to admit that you are stuck in a bad pattern. You are fighting about fighting. You need to work to understand what makes the other person tick. Rather than lazy and unloving, is your husband overworked and tired? Is your wife really suggesting she doesn't trust you? Or is she just trying to keep track of too many chores?

Noreen Egurbide, 44, of Westlake Village, Calif., says she used to give her husband frequent reminders to take out the garbage, get the car serviced or pick up the kids from school. "I thought I was helping him," she says. Jose Egurbide, 47, often waited a while before doing what she asked. The couple would argue. Sometimes Ms. Egurbide would just do it herself.

A few years ago, they got insight into their nagging problem after taking a problem-solving assessment test, the Kolbe Assessment. Ms. Egurbide, a business coach, learned she is a strategic planner who gathers facts and

organizes in advance. Her husband, an attorney, learned that he is resistant to being boxed into a plan. Now, Ms. Egurbide says, "I don't take it personally when he doesn't respond." "There is a sense of recognition about what's happening," Mr. Egurbide says. "It's easier to accommodate each other."

### *Death by a Thousand Reminders*

Is nagging a problem in your relationship? Here are some tips for both partners to help curb it.

- Calm down—both of you.** Recognize the pattern you are in and talk about how to address it as a team. You will both need to change your behavior, and ground rules can help.
- Look at it from the other person's perspective.** 'Honey, when you ignore me I feel that you don't love me.' 'I feel that you don't appreciate what I am already doing when you nag me.'
- If you are the nagger, realize you are asking for something.** Use an 'I' not a 'you' statement. Say 'I would really like you to pay the Visa bill on time,' instead of 'You never pay the bill on time.'
- Explain why your request is important to you.** 'I worry about our finances when you pay the bill late. We can't afford to pay late fees.'
- Manage your expectations.** Make sure you are asking for something that is realistic and appropriate. Does the light bulb need to be changed immediately?
- Set a timeframe.** Ask when your partner can expect to finish the task. ('Can you change the car oil this weekend?') Let him tell you when it works best for him to do it.
- If you are the naggee, give a clear response to your partner's request.** Tell her honestly if you can do what she asks and when. Then follow through. Do what you say you will do.
- Consider alternative solutions.** Maybe it's worth it to hire a handyman, rather than harm your relationship with arguing.

Source: WSJ reporting

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