

"He Flirts Too Much"

Nick once swept Patty off her feet-- but now, she says, he spends his time charming other women. Nick angrily insists that Patty's jealousy is crazy. Can this marriage be saved?

By Margery D. Rosen

Her Turn

A Little Too Friendly

"I'm sick of the way Nick flirts," said Patty, 32, a tall blond who just celebrated her first anniversary. "Whenever we go to a party Nick gravitates to the most beautiful woman in the room and launches into a sparkling conversation before I can even get my coat off. And even when he does remember to introduce me, he soon walks off and leaves me hanging. We often have to leave early because we've gotten into another ugly, embarrassing fight.

"I don't think it's expecting too much for my husband to care about me and to show it. Nick has absolutely no idea how hurtful he is, and he won't admit he's done anything wrong. He's very quick and articulate, and manages to twist my words around and turn the whole story inside out every time.

"I met Nick, a management consultant, when he moved into my apartment building back in St. Louis. At the time, I was finishing my master's in speech pathology. I'd spent a year after college in L.A., trying to break into TV news, but I had decided to quit that crazy world and become a speech therapist instead. So I moved to Missouri and really found my niche-- I liked the city and my friends there.

"Nick's a charmer, and in the beginning he was attentive and really courted me. But at the same time, he also came off as a playboy. I wasn't crazy about the way he hugged all his female friends and would casually slip his arm around the shoulder of a woman he'd just met.

"Maybe I never should have gotten married in the first place. I don't want my marriage to be as unhappy as my parents' was. Dad, a lawyer, was very controlling, and Mother, an urban planner, used to tell me how miserable she was with him. But even though they didn't get along, I know they loved me.

"My sister, Andrea, was clearly our father's favorite, and I was jealous. Everything in our home revolved around her moods, her needs.

"But aside from that, I had a wonderful childhood. My parents encouraged me to try new things, and they were always there when I had to make difficult decisions-- where to go to college, what career path to follow.

"Now I've come to realize how very different we are. I'm a morning person, but Nick parties till the wee hours and sleeps till noon on weekends. I like to be at the airport two hours ahead of time; Nick is the guy who dawdles endlessly, then dashes to the gate just before the plane takes off. His seat-of-the-pants attitude gives me ulcers.

"For the last few months, we've been living separate lives. I'm so angry at the way he treats me that I can't imagine having sex with him. I don't even want to make his dinner anymore. Why should I do anything for him?

"Most of all, I want to be able to trust my husband-- trust that he loves me, that he'll be on my side, that he's not interested in other women. Right now, I don't. And I want out."

His Turn

"We Live Our Lives Differently"

"Patty has already left this marriage emotionally and physically," said Nick, 32. "We haven't made love-- hell, we haven't slept in the same bed-- for months. I'm the one in the guest room, thank you very much. She doesn't make dinner plans with me, refuses to join me for important business events, and she leaves my laundry in the hamper while she does hers. Is she trying to punish me? For a long time, I've suspected that Patty doesn't want to be married to me. This proves it.

"I'm not a flirt, and I don't ignore her at parties. Those accusations just aren't true. I love my wife, and she has nothing to be jealous about. But she's convinced that she doesn't measure up to everyone else, and that becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. She's one of the most beautiful women I've ever met, but that doesn't mean that I can't enjoy talking to other women. I'm a sociable guy who likes to be around accomplished people; what's wrong with that? I've always had a lot of friends. I don't know why Patty thinks I'm a selfish, belittling cad. Nothing I do wins her forgiveness.

"Frankly, I'm not sure I even want it anymore. Her insane jealousy stifles me. Patty misreads my actions and assumes the worst. Every time we go out, I assure her that she's the only one I love, but she doesn't even hear me. She gets angry at the drop of a hat, and next thing you know, we're in the middle of a huge public argument.

"Maybe we are too different. Patty's organized and careful; I've always liked to take chances, add some risk to the mix. I don't think you grow or achieve anything unless you do. I remember when I was eight, I wanted to walk to my cousin's house to play. Mom said I was too young to go that far by myself, but I did it anyway. I caught hell for it, of course, but I think my folks were secretly pleased at my initiative.

"They were role models in every sense of the word. Both grew up poor, put themselves through college and started businesses-- Dad runs a large clothing manufacturing business, and mom is a real-estate broker. My folks had high expectations for both me and my younger sister. We've always been competitive, but in a good way. I think we believe that if we want something and try hard enough, we'll get it.

"But Patty has no confidence in herself at all. She can't make up her mind about anything, from buying a new car to choosing a restaurant, without endless discussion and waffling. It drives me nuts. And everything becomes an issue with her. Back in St. Louis, I figured Patty was getting bored with her job and needed new challenges. I wanted to help her, so when I was negotiating for my job up here, I told the interviewers what she was looking for. It just so happened that they knew of an opening. Why does she look for an ulterior motive in everything I do?

"In the last few months, we've been acting like roommates who barely know each other. It's easier than getting into a huge fight every time we open our mouths. I work late, have dinner with a friend or colleague and sometimes go out to the clubs till all hours to avoid going home to another inquisition. I don't want to lose Patty, but right now, our marriage is a joke."

The Counselor's Turn

The Other Point of View

"Patty and Nick's marriage was a time bomb," said the counselor. "Each felt persecuted, misunderstood and unloved, and each insisted it was the other's fault. The key to saving their marriage was, first, to get both of them to accept responsibility for their problems, and second, to guide them toward compassion and empathy. "Charismatic and considerate when he wanted to be, Nick could also be a domineering man who was used to having his own way. He had learned long ago that he could use charm to his advantage, so he put a positive spin on everything: He wasn't flirting, he was 'sociable.'

"Nick frequently came late to our early sessions or even blew them off entirely. But when I told him that his lateness suggested that he didn't really want to fight for his marriage, he began to see how his actions could be negatively interpreted by others-- including his wife.

"Patty was a stunning, accomplished woman. Sadly, to a large extent, she was still wrestling with feelings of inferiority that dated back to when her father favored her sister. This gave Patty an insatiable need to be loved and praised. 'You're rejecting Nick in much the same way you always felt rejected yourself,' I pointed out. "Patty's parents had always told her what to do and encouraged her to quit if something became too difficult. As a result, patty never learned from her mistakes.

"When Patty saw how stuck she was in her old patterns, she decided it was time to make some changes. Instead of rushing to accuse her husband, she tried to look at things from his point of view. Seeing the changes in her, Nick began to change, too. He finally admitted that he really was flirtatious at parties, and he made an earnest effort to behave differently with other women.

"Now it was time for a total communication makeover. I established ground rules for fighting: no more accusations or blame. Instead, they were to use the 'I feel...When you... Because ...' technique. Instead of flying into a rage, Patty learned to say, 'When you spend the night talking to beautiful women, I feel insecure.'

"Leading the conversation with questions ('I know you don't like it when I chat with my women friends, but what exactly are you afraid of?') instead of direct attacks ('You're crazy-- I'm not flirting'), helped stop them from placing blame. They also reached a workable solution for dealing with social occasions. Nick told Patty, 'Just give me a signal when you want me to stop talking with someone, and I'll come over to you.'

"Within four months, the tension between these two eased considerably. Patty is much happier, more confident and doesn't need constant reassurance from her husband. Nick is thrilled to have Patty back on his side."

"Can This Marriage Be Saved?" is the most popular, most enduring women's magazine feature in the world. This month's case is based on interviews with clients and information from the files of Jane Greer, Ph.D., a marriage and sex therapist in New York City. The story told here is true, although names and other identifying details have been changed to conceal identities.

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"He Hates His Job -- and It's Ruining Our Marriage"

When a husband's job problems rock a marriage, it's time for the counselor to intervene. Can this marriage be saved?

By Margery D. Rosen

Her Turn

"I Want Help"

"Jon is so stressed I don't know what to do anymore," said Lara, 35, an extroverted woman who left a job in real estate to care for her now-1-year-old son, Toby.

"I love him so much, but he's become impossible. Jon comes home from work, gives me and Toby a perfunctory hug, then holes up in the den. He says he's working but sometimes I hear him crying in frustration.

"I want to help, but when I ask a question, he gives only a brief, hostile answer. I vacillate between feeling angry that nothing I do can ease his anxiety, and feeling guilty that I feel angry!

"The problem started 11 months ago when Jon took a position as the chief financial officer of a small engineering firm here in Denver. He'd been out of work for a year since his old company merged with a larger one. He had been asked to stay on, but would have had to relocate to Atlanta. We had just started dating, and Jon has told me that I was the big reason he hadn't wanted to pull up roots."

"At first, this new job seemed perfect: a senior-level position with a prestigious firm, with real power and responsibility. Jon had heard that the CEO was difficult. What an understatement! The man is a tyrant -- and as his number two, Jon gets the brunt of that tyranny. Jon takes to heart everything this ogre says and does.

"Look, I expected Jon to have long hours, frequent travel, and a fair amount of stress. But I never expected to be cut out of his life. Weekends, especially Sundays, are horrendous. He's too worried about the coming week to enjoy himself. I try to give him space. I don't ask him to do chores or watch Toby. He's so wound-up that he can't even sit and snuggle on the couch. Our sex life has evaporated. The saddest part is that I have no idea how to crack through his shell.

"I get scared when Jon pulls away. My father suffered from depression. He would stay in his room for days on end, avoiding all of us. That was before doctors understood mental illness or how to treat it. He died in a car accident when I was 13, leaving my mother to raise me and my four younger siblings alone. Mom worked as a dental hygienist and managed to put all five of us through college. Her courage is an inspiration; it's why I'm such a resilient person today.

"Jon and I clicked from the moment we met. He is brilliant, funny, and motivated, but also sensitive and kind. What really cemented the relationship was a three-week trip to Australia that we took after Jon left his old job. He'd been given a six-month severance package and wanted to travel before plunging into a job hunt. We'd been dating for only a few weeks, so I was surprised by his invitation. But then I figured, why not? We'd either find out we couldn't stand each other or fall madly in love. Well, by trip's end we were engaged. Four months later, we were married; two months after that, I got pregnant.

"Jon wasn't working through most of our first year together, and we managed fine on my salary and his severance. Job hunting is stressful, but we got along great during that period, talking constantly and analyzing the pros and cons of every company he interviewed with. I know Jon could find another job, so why doesn't he just quit this one? Why is he killing himself over this dreadful man?"

His Turn

A Bad Situation Made Worse

"I have every reason in the world to be happy," admitted Jon, 38, a handsome man with a deliberate way of speaking. "I'm married to a terrific woman. We have a beautiful, healthy son. And I have a job that, on paper, is perfect. But most of the time I can barely get out of bed in the morning. I have no energy to talk to Lara or play with my son. I've stopped playing basketball with my friends. Sometimes I'm so tense I find myself gripping the steering wheel with all my might. I know it sounds melodramatic, but my workday is a personal hell. At night I sometimes break down in tears.

"As Lara said, the firm where I'd worked happily for 10 years was acquired. The new management asked me to stay on, but I didn't want to relocate to Atlanta. I was excited when I got this offer. I'd been warned that the CEO, my boss, was hard to work with, but I was impressed by his intelligence and goals for the company. I'd handled tough work situations before; I figured, how bad could this guy be?

"The answer is, worse than my wildest imaginings. My boss is a bully who rules by ranting, raving, and steamrolling over everyone. He shoots down ideas I've worked on for weeks and rudely contradicts me in meetings. If he has a problem with someone, he comes flying out of his office and humiliates the person in front of everyone. I've been at the receiving end more times than I can count. Any time I have to communicate with him -- in person, on the phone, even through e-mail -- I get panicky. There's no escape: The guy sends me e-mails at 2 a.m."

"I feel terrible about pushing Lara away, but it seems like the only recourse when I'm feeling so out of control. This experience has really shaken my confidence. I had a happy, conventional childhood in Indiana. My family -- my stay-at-home mom, my accountant dad, my two sisters and I -- were about as close to the Waltons as a family can be. In high school I was all-state in football and track and president of the honor society. My parents didn't push me. I pushed myself, both academically and athletically. In fact, they used to tell me to take it easier!

"I recall two occasions when I felt an overpowering anxiety similar to what I feel now. One was in sixth grade when, of all things, I was eliminated from a spelling bee because I misspelled banjo. The other was when I had a verbally abusive high school football coach. The other guys on the team just let the insults and name-calling roll off their backs, but not me. I dropped off the squad for two years, rejoining only after that coach was fired.

"I feel stuck. Lara doesn't understand why I don't quit, and I'm not sure myself. Maybe it's the thought of another long job hunt. Maybe it's because my dad stayed in his job for 30 years, even though he hated it, because he was a devoted family man. And actually, if this one guy were just removed from the picture, I'd love my job. Barring that possibility, how do I keep every working day from sending me into a tailspin?"

The Counselor's Turn

Working It Out

"My goals for this couple were twofold," said the counselor. "First, to help Jon learn techniques for managing his stress, and second, to help them reconnect emotionally and physically.

"Jon grew up in a loving, supportive family and until now had moved easily from one accomplishment to another. But behind that confident demeanor lay a lifelong struggle with an 'am I good enough?' insecurity that didn't emerge until our fourth session. After recalling his experience with the abusive coach, which led him to quit the team, he revealed that he had often wondered if his success was a fluke. In the past, he'd been able to suppress that feeling. This time, he couldn't.

"Job stress is epidemic, but everyone reacts to it differently. A certain amount spurs us to function at our best, but too much can be toxic, emotionally and physically. People who feel stressed 24-7, like Jon, may become gridlocked by feelings of failure, hopelessness, and helplessness.

"But if Jon was suffering from a depressive collapse, Lara had a case of what I call 'excessive altruism.' She had fallen into a pattern of protecting Jon, placing no demands on him whatsoever, and ignoring her own needs -- for an equal partner, a lover, a companion. I urged Lara to be assertive about bringing her husband back into the family's daily life. 'Your job is to say, "Let's all go for a walk" or "You need to watch Toby for an hour," instead of doing everything and allowing him to isolate himself,' I said. Turning to Jon I said, 'And your job is to share your day with Lara, including what upset you as well as what went right. When you don't, you deprive her of a husband.'

"In her own work life, Lara had been a master problem solver, but she lacked knowledge of Jon's industry. So her suggested solutions to problems were rarely workable. Instead of explaining further, Jon dismissed her ideas, ratcheting up the frustration level. I taught Lara some key talk tactics. For instance, rather than ask questions that could be answered with monosyllables (Did you have a good day?) she should frame an open-ended question beginning with the word *how* or *what* (How is that new hire doing?) to nudge Jon into a conversation."

"I suspected that Jon's feelings of self-doubt were partly due to depression. I referred him to a psychopharmacologist, who prescribed an antidepressant. Within several weeks, Jon reported he felt more like his old self. His problems didn't vanish, but medication allayed his anxiety. 'The best way to short-circuit stress,' I told him, 'is to nurture yourself, something most people seldom do.' We talked about how he could resume his weekly basketball games with his friends, read a book, or go out for a nice dinner. 'Having something to look forward to can help you through a tough day,' I noted. I urged Jon to initiate sex at least twice a week. 'You'll see,' I told the couple. 'Sex is a wonderful antidepressant.' They quickly discovered that I was right.

"In all our sessions, we worked on strategies to defuse Jon's work tension. I taught him to tune in to the physical signs that his stress was escalating so that he could close his office door and spend a few minutes doing relaxation exercises. We also role-played specific scenarios to help him cope. 'You can't change a bully,' I said, 'but you can change the way you react to him.' So now, if his boss launches into a tirade, Jon takes a deep breath, says firmly, 'I'll be happy to discuss this when we're both calmer,' then leaves immediately. His boss was so stunned when Jon did this that he stopped in mid-sentence, allowing Jon to add, 'When the atmosphere gets too heated, I can't think clearly enough to solve the problem.' By responding calmly and making clear that he's unwilling to talk to his boss if his tone is derogatory, Jon has made his office a more positive environment.

"Finally, we worked on putting his current situation into perspective. He realized his life circumstances were different from his father's and that losing his job would not condemn him to lifelong unemployment. 'If I could handle one job hunt, I can handle another,' Jon said, 'especially because I have Lara's love and support.'

"Jon and Lara were in joint therapy for three months, and I still see Jon occasionally. He's no longer taking the antidepressant and feels much calmer in general.

"I'll never like my boss,' he told me recently, 'but I can work with him now without getting flustered.'

"Lara agreed. 'He still hates the way his boss behaves but it no longer consumes him,' she said. And she offered proof positive that Jon has mellowed: Now when the family goes out, he leaves his cell phone behind."

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"She Needs to Stop Texting and Start Talking to Me"

Listen in as one real-life couple works through a major crisis in their relationship with the help of a marriage therapist.

By *Cynthia Hanson*

The couple:

Heidi: 37, management consultant, **Brett:** 38, part-time paralegal, **Married:** 13 years, **Kids:** Emma, 12; Madison, 10

The Background: Heidi is type A, Brett's laid-back, but their differences were part of the attraction. Then six years ago Heidi was promoted and her schedule got crazy -- she's usually away four nights a week. Since her job paid six figures and Brett was making \$10 an hour, she asked him to quit to take care of their daughters, then 4 and 6. Now Heidi's always working and she and Brett communicate through e-mails and texts. When she is home, they're often fighting.

Heidi's Turn

I feel like I express myself better in writing, because I can think through what I want to say. But Brett hates my e-mails and texts. And he takes them the wrong way. At one point he said he wanted me to be more emotional in my communication, so before I left on a business trip I sent him an e-mail that said, "I love you -- and I'm glad we're not divorced, even though you do drive me crazy sometimes." I thought it was warm and witty. I even put a smiley face at the end. But he totally didn't get it. When I called him to let him know my plane had landed, he asked me if I wanted a divorce!

Brett says that texting is hurting our marriage. But I don't know what else I'm supposed to do. It's hard to find time when we're both free to talk, especially if I'm in a different time zone. And it's not like I never call. I try to phone Brett once or twice while I'm away. But that's not enough for him. The minute I get home he accuses me of ignoring him and we start fighting.

I send Brett about 15 texts and e-mails per day -- usually about the girls' schedules and things that need to be done around the house. They're short and to the point. But I guess he wants love letters or something. When I sent a 10-word text reminding him to pay the car insurance, he shot back a reply that said, "You write like a robot." What does he want from me? Brett's mad that I e-mail him orders, but he's not good with details or deadlines. Things would slip through the cracks if I didn't remind him.

It hurts to miss so much of Emma and Madison's childhood, but since Brett wasn't making much money I felt I had to take this job. Last year I bought the girls a cell phone so I'd be able to talk to them a few times a day -- when they're on their way to school, in the afternoon, and before bed. Brett sarcastically calls it "teleparenting," but it's the best I can do under the circumstances. At least I know what's happening in their lives.

Still, Emma and Madison complain that I'm too attached to my BlackBerry, and Brett feels like he's in competition with my laptop because I take it to bed with me and work until I fall asleep.

I feel like I don't have a choice, though. I love Brett but he has been underemployed for our entire marriage. I could work less if he made more money, but instead of searching for a full-time job he settled for part-time. If I didn't have to be away so much I wouldn't be constantly texting. If my job weren't so demanding, I wouldn't have to work 24/7.

Brett's Turn

I don't get why phone calls are such a burden to Heidi. I know she's busy, but if I were away on business I'd make it a priority to call and say hello no matter how busy I was. And that's the problem: Our marriage just isn't a priority for her. It's all about her career. She's a total workaholic. In my opinion Heidi hides behind her BlackBerry. If she just texts and e-mails, she doesn't have to have a real conversation -- about the real issues in our marriage -- that might blow up into an argument. But here's the irony: We've fought more about the stupid texts than we ever did about anything she's said.

Heidi's e-mails sound like she's writing to an employee: "Make a dentist's appointment for Madison" or "Did you take care of Item B from my previous e-mail?" Sometimes she'll fire off four of them within a few minutes. I've started to just look at the subject line and if it sounds like it's going to turn out to be more micromanaging -- I got one yesterday with the heading "Carpet cleaning info" -- I just delete it.

After six years I think I know how to take care of the kids and the house. Sure, I let some things slide. And God knows I don't fold towels the way she'd like. When Heidi is finished folding, they're so beautiful you don't want to touch them. On weekends she'll redo all the household tasks she thinks I screwed up, including refolding the towels. It's ridiculous. The girls are healthy and doing well in school and the house isn't falling apart. Heidi needs to get off my back and stop hammering me to get a better job. In this economy I haven't found a full-time paralegal job, but this part-time one lets me be there for our family. Why can't she appreciate that instead of always tearing me down?

Heidi expects a debriefing about the week every Friday night, and if the house isn't straightened up, she goes ballistic. It takes her at least 24 hours to start acting more like a wife and mother than a boss. But she's still not warm and fuzzy. Emma and Madison are both going through puberty, and they really need their mother now -- they don't want to talk to me about certain things. Heidi is kidding herself if she thinks teleparenting is working.

In the past year we've gone weeks without having sex because Heidi's either too busy or too tired. The last time I made a move she looked up from her laptop and said, jokingly, "I'll pencil you in for next Friday at 11 p.m."

I still love my wife. But the Heidi I married was spontaneous and adventurous, not bossy. I told her if this was how it was going to be for the rest of our marriage, then we really needed to talk to a counselor.

The Counselor's Turn

Brett had every right to be angry about Heidi's incessant texts and e-mails. It only takes a few seconds to call your spouse and say, "How's it going? I'm thinking of you." So if you can't find those few seconds, it's time to take a look at your priorities.

Still, Heidi had a legitimate beef about Brett. He wasn't lazy but he had grown comfortable with a low-pressure job while the kids were in school. Heidi was okay with that at first -- she'd asked him to do child care, after all -- but now she wants a partner who lives up to his potential and makes a decent living so she can start to find some balance in her own life.

I was blunt with Heidi: "Electronic communication can be great for business but you can't run a marriage the way you run a company. E-mails and texts are impersonal. You lose the emotion and nuance and words can easily be misinterpreted." Heidi got defensive, insisting that texting is a necessity because their schedules are out of sync. But I continued to press her: "You're giving more time and energy to a job you could lose any day than you give to your husband and kids. It's your choice: Talk to Brett about life and save your marriage. Or text him orders and lose it."

Heidi agreed to stop texting Brett and to phone him every morning and evening -- just to talk. Instead of the constant texts about chores, every Sunday she and Brett write down everything that needs to get done and on Wednesday they discuss the progress Brett has made so far. This system keeps Heidi in the loop without turning her into a taskmaster and it gives Brett a sense of accomplishment while keeping him accountable.

Heidi also agreed to disconnect her laptop for one day of each weekend, so she's available to participate in family activities. And she now keeps all technology out of the bedroom. Monthly date nights have strengthened her bond with Brett and also jump-started their sex life.

I've been seeing a lot more clients lately where the wife is the primary breadwinner. It's often hard for these women to leave their boss hats at work and let their husbands take charge of the household and social planning. In many ways the bossiness is an attempt to assert control over the home situation, which can be chaotic and unpredictable. But the micromanaging that might help with a chaotic situation at work tends to backfire at home.

Heidi's dad was an army officer, so she'd learned how to give orders and run her life with military precision. At work that was an advantage. But I reminded Heidi that Brett was her husband, not her subordinate. If she could put things in perspective and stop criticizing Brett -- about everything from the towels to his job -- they wouldn't fight as much. It hasn't been easy, but Heidi hasn't refolded a towel in months. And when Heidi backed off about his career, Brett realized he had his own reasons for wanting to take it a step further. He has recently landed interviews that seem promising.

The couple's marriage has improved steadily as they spend more time together and communicate better. Heidi tells Brett that she loves and misses him -- simple gestures that have drawn them closer.

"Counseling was the wake-up call I needed to stop taking Brett for granted," Heidi said. "It's great to have my marriage back."

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"He Started an Affair on Facebook"

Sue is devastated that Carl is having an affair with his high school girlfriend, whom he found on Facebook. Carl is sorry for being unfaithful and wants to work it out with Sue. Can this marriage be saved?

By Margery D. Rosen

Sue's Turn

"I can't believe Carl has been unfaithful," said Sue, 40, the mother of 17-year-old twin girls. "And with his high school girlfriend, Jill, who dumped him ages ago!

"I never saw this coming, though Carl has been acting distant for months. I'd ask what was wrong, but he wouldn't answer. One day, for some reason, I said, 'Are you having an affair?' He got furious and stormed out. But a few weeks later I went to use the computer. The monitor had gone dark, but when it lit up again, I realized Carl was still logged on. An e-mail from Jill was on the screen. 'We'll be together soon,' it said. 'We just need to take care of things in our marriages.'

"Despite my shaking hands I managed to dial Carl at work. I read him the e-mail, and he didn't deny anything.

"I hung up feeling faint, my mind reeling: When did the affair start? How often did they see each other? I knew Jill had friended Carl on Facebook a while back, but she lives 500 miles away, in Sacramento -- though her mom still lives here in San Diego. One day last summer Carl mentioned that she was in town and that they might have coffee. I didn't give it much thought, since people are always reconnecting on Facebook. Was I ever naive!

"I met Carl on a blind date when I was 20. He immediately announced that he'd just broken up with his long-term girlfriend. That was Jill. I liked him, but I was wary. Who wants to be in a rebound romance? Still, when he asked me out again, I said yes, and this time it was wonderful. He was funny, handsome, and thoughtful, and I felt close to him almost immediately.

"We got married two years later and had the twins a year after that. I went back to work full-time after a three-month maternity leave, and in some ways that's when our problems began. I'm proud of my career success -- I manage a 15-person department for a chain store -- and I was raised to be self-sufficient. My dad left when I was 13. Mom constantly told my younger sister and me never to count on a man.

"But I am overwhelmed. Carl seems to think that a wife, even one with a demanding job, is responsible for the housework, shopping, and cooking. We bicker constantly -- about big things and little things. He can't do something as simple as fix a curtain rod without a reminder. Often he walks out of the room while I'm still talking!

"We never discuss anything meaningful. 'What time is the swim meet?' is as deep as it gets. I've lived with this man for 18 years yet I have no idea how he truly feels. And the slightest thing sets him off. I'll accuse him of not listening and he'll explode. One thing I'll say for him, he's always been there for the girls. He shoots hoops with them, makes a big deal of their birthdays, buys presents. I can't remember the last time he did something sweet for me. Is it any wonder we never have sex?

"What's odd is that when we're out with other people, we get along and I'll catch a glimpse of the witty, wonderful man I married. I can't think straight right now, but I do still love Carl and want to save our marriage."

Carl's Turn

"I didn't expect this to happen, didn't want it to happen, and don't know why it happened," said Carl, 40. "Late one night I went on Facebook and saw that Jill had commented on a post by an old high school buddy. I friended her on a whim, although Sue thinks it was the other way around. Jill confirmed right away and sent me a cheery message. Her tone was quite a switch from the last time I saw her, 20 years ago. Back then she wanted nothing to do with me.

"Jill was more than my girlfriend. She was my first great love. We started dating in ninth grade and she dumped me in her freshman year in college. I didn't go to college -- I was a poor student and my parents never encouraged me -- and Jill said we were moving in opposite directions. She broke my heart, but I got over it. In fact, Sue and I got together about six months later.

"My cousin, who was dating her roommate, fixed us up. I acted like a jerk on our first date, mainly because I was still bummed out about Jill. So I called to ask if we could try again. Then everything clicked. Sue was pretty, smart, and fun. Jill faded from my mind.

"Truthfully, I hadn't thought about her in years, but that tiny Facebook photo of her, smiling and looking great, piqued my curiosity. We began e-mailing and it turned out she was married and living in Sacramento but was coming here in a few weeks to visit her mother. She suggested we meet for coffee.

"I had no intention of sleeping with Jill, but the minute I saw her, 25 years simply evaporated. Old feelings rushed back and one thing led to another. It sounds corny, but being with her made me feel more alive than I have in years.

"That was nine months ago. We've seen each other maybe six times -- we meet halfway, in LA, where I go on business -- but we talk on the phone and e-mail and text constantly. Her marriage isn't happy, either. She has a son and her husband travels a lot for work. We both know what we're doing is wrong but we can't seem to stop it.

"Until Jill came back into my life I didn't realize how unhappy I was. I can't stand the way Sue talks down to me -- as if I'm a pet dog. She claims I don't listen, but the real problem is that she's anxious about *everything*. The kids, her job, our house. There's always a crisis. If I didn't leave the room she'd go on forever. And her timing couldn't be worse. She'll launch into some important issue when I'm watching a basketball game. She's a micromanager, as was my mom, who bossed my dad and me nonstop. Like her, Sue is a dictator. There's no affection between us, and we almost never have sex.

"We put on a good public face, but our marriage has been in trouble for a long time, and it has nothing to do with Jill. We've simply muddled along, and I don't want to do that anymore."

The Counselor's Turn

"Adolescent relationships can leave strong marks," said the counselor. "This is a period of tremendous physical, sexual, and emotional growth. We often idealize young romance, but it forms a core part of our identities. Sometimes it smolders for decades and any spark, even a seemingly innocuous Facebook message, can rekindle the fire. Since reconnecting online is so easy, many people don't consider the implications before clicking 'send.'

"Sue and Carl communicated poorly on the most basic level. Instead of talking they traded accusations and brushed aside big issues, such as the loneliness each felt. 'Couples get stuck in negative patterns because it's easier to ignore a problem than deal with it,' I said. 'You two had an unspoken agreement: We'll focus on our kids, our jobs, and our friends and avoid confronting our unhappiness. It's not healthy, but it *is* predictable.'

"Raised by a bitter single mom, Sue believed it was up to her alone to get what she wanted. She managed her household the way she ran her department at work -- with firm ideas of how things should be done. Even a small deviation could trigger anxiety, which she often expressed by nagging Carl.

"Carl had little nurturing as a child and no real idea how spouses should communicate. He found it easy to let a woman manage his life. Except for the occasional outburst, he fumed silently and steered clear of Sue. At 40 he was dissatisfied with life. Reuniting with Jill not only made him feel vital again but gave him a 'do-over' -- a chance to fix a failed relationship.

"It's hard to save such marriages, where blame and hostility run deep. Both spouses must acknowledge their part in the deterioration and agree to change dramatically. When I told Carl he had to stop seeing Jill, he was unwilling to promise. But he did agree not to communicate with her for six months. I urged Sue to accept this compromise since it would buy us time.

"I asked Sue and Carl to write down their wants. Topping her list: 'I need Carl to put down the newspaper and pay attention when I have a problem.' Carl wrote, 'She has to stop hounding me and not push if it's a bad time to talk.' Both viewpoints were valid.

"Since Carl's relationship with Jill had flourished via e-mail, I suggested he and Sue use it to stay in touch. This allowed her to air her concerns and him to answer on his own timetable -- as long as it was within 24 hours. The 24-hour rule also applied to face-to-face conversations. If Sue wanted to discuss something, she had to give Carl advance notice. If he wasn't ready, they set a specific time to talk.

"To restore their emotional intimacy, I encouraged Sue and Carl to go out to dinner or take in a movie by themselves. 'We already know you do well in a group. Now it's time to enjoy being alone again.'

"The biggest challenge was rebuilding sexual trust after his affair. They began with nonsexual touching exercises. At first Sue saw any loving touch as a prelude to sex. But Carl was gentle and patient and after several weeks both were eager to make love. 'The sex was amazing,' Sue reported afterward, adding, 'now I'm more afraid of losing him than ever.'

"Fortunately, by then I was confident that that wouldn't happen. After six months of counseling, Carl didn't mention renewing his pledge not to see Jill. When I brought it up, he said, 'There's no need. I told Jill that Sue and I are a team and we're staying that way.'"

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"My Infertility Is Ruining Our Marriage"

Listen in as one real-life couple works through a major crisis in their relationship with the help of a marriage therapist.

By *Cynthia Hanson*

The Couple

Didi: 37, sales rep

Mark: 35, landscape designer

Married: 3 years

Kids: none

The Counselor

Carole Moretz, Allentown, Pennsylvania

The Background

After trying to get pregnant for a year, Didi checked in with her gynecologist. It turned out that she was in premature ovarian failure; her doctor recommended using donor eggs. Didi hates that idea and wants to adopt. Mark's afraid he couldn't love a child that isn't genetically his and wants to try in vitro fertilization (IVF) with his sperm and a donor's eggs. They can't even discuss this issue without fighting.

Didi's Turn

I feel so cheated that I can't have a baby. My mom and my sister both got pregnant easily. But when I tell Mark that I feel like a failure, he doesn't even respond. It hurts so much when he says, "Let's just get an egg donor. It's no big deal." It's a huge deal for me, and I'm not comfortable with it at all. Plus, I'll feel like a double failure if we use donor eggs and it doesn't work or I miscarry. I don't get why Mark wants to put me through this.

When Mark and I try to debate IVF versus adoption he totally loses it, starts yelling and name-calling, and we end up fighting about how he's out of control. I can't be in the same room with him when he gets like that.

Mark says I'm insensitive because I don't want to try to bear his biological child. I think that he's insensitive to expect me to carry a baby that doesn't share my genes. And he won't even consider adoption. He says that he thinks he won't love an adopted child the same way he'd love his own flesh and blood. That's ridiculous! I know he'd bond with the baby once we became a family. And I know he'd be an awesome father. Though frankly, based on our fights, his temper is starting to worry me.

Last week I did some research on both egg donors and adoption. Since I'm East Indian and Mark is white, I'd want an Indian egg donor to ensure that the baby would look like both Mark and me. The fertility clinics I contacted told me that Indian egg donors are rare, and if we found one, the fee would be somewhere around \$15,000. Then the IVF procedure is another \$12,000. So, for around \$27,000, we might have a pregnancy -- IVF doesn't always work. Adoption costs about \$20,000, which is still a ton, but there's a 99 percent chance that we'd get matched with a baby. Both options are out of our price range. So if going into debt is the only way we can become parents, why not pick the almost-sure thing?

But even with all that information, Mark said he wants to "roll the dice with IVF." I think his priorities are messed up -- he's more concerned about passing on his genes than he is about raising a child.

I'm worn out from fighting and tired of crying all the time. It feels as though having a baby, or not having one, is all I think about anymore. I don't know how we'll come to a decision that will make both of us happy. Despite our problems, I love Mark and I hope counseling can help us figure this out and move forward.

Mark's Turn

If I had my way, we'd stop talking about this for a few months so we could both cool down. Arguing isn't getting us anywhere. Yeah, I have a temper, but our disagreements used to blow over in a day. The stakes are so high now that I start yelling and Didi runs out of the room in tears.

I know finding out she's infertile was hard for Didi, and it hurts me, too. But I don't talk about feelings because she's already so focused on the negative and I don't want to make it worse. She's gone from being an upbeat person to being negative about everything. I hate seeing her like this.

From the start Didi's been in a rush to adopt, and the more she nags me, the more I ignore her. I appreciate that she took the time to get all the facts, but I won't let her pressure me into something I'm not comfortable with. I've heard horror stories about kids resenting their adoptive parents and the biological parents coming back to find them. Didi rolls her eyes about this, but I'm also afraid I won't love an adopted child as much as I'd love one that has my genes. She says I'm being ridiculous when I tell her how I feel. That's name-calling, too.

Didi has been talking about babies since we met, so I'm surprised she doesn't want to try IVF. Sure, adoption is cheaper. Yes, the odds are better. But life's short. Why not risk it? If it doesn't work, we'll know that we tried. I'm not ready to give up my chance to be a biological father just because she can't be a biological mother.

The Counselor's Turn

Infertility can strain a happy marriage, which is what happened to Didi and Mark. Most people assume they'll be able to have a biological child -- so when a couple can't conceive naturally, they often fight and grow apart as they try to come up with an alternative. And unfortunately, with both IVF and adoption, there are no easy answers.

Whenever a couple is facing a tough choice, they have to manage their emotions, communicate effectively, and work as a team so they can make the best decision. Didi needed to find some emotional balance and Mark needed to get his outbursts under control. I advised Didi to start exercising again to release stress and to plan fun things that might take her mind off the baby topic. She also needed to reframe her thinking. Instead of saying "I'll never have a baby of my own," she had to remind herself, "It's challenging, but with time and effort, I will have a baby to love."

I urged Mark to recognize when he was about to lose control and do deep-breathing exercises to calm down. He tried it for several weeks, but his outbursts continued. I sensed that he might be clinically depressed, since depression in men can manifest itself as anger. I referred him to a psychiatrist, who prescribed antidepressants, and Mark's irritability consequently subsided almost immediately.

From there I encouraged the couple to mourn their loss. "It's okay to be upset," I explained. "Infertility is devastating." I also told them that it's normal to avoid talking about something painful in an attempt to spare yourself more pain. But I pointed out that suppressing those feelings had backfired. It kept them stuck in their grief, unable to move forward. With my encouragement, Mark and Didi started sharing their feelings and fears. I taught them to listen without interrupting or passing judgment, which would help avoid arguments. "I'm a better listener now," Mark said. "I don't get caught up in the emotion anymore. I can step back, hear what Didi's saying, and understand her viewpoint."

I suggested that they both look really carefully at the issue from both sides and then take time to play out all the best- and worst-case scenarios. If Didi didn't agree to an egg donor, she'd give up the chance to be pregnant. What would that mean to her long-term? Would she have regrets? Or feel guilty she'd denied Mark a chance to be a biological father? What would she gain or lose if she agreed to raise a child that was biologically Mark's but not hers?

As for Mark, what would he gain or lose if they did IVF with donor eggs? Did he realize that, to prepare her body for an embryo transfer, Didi would have to take medication that can have side effects? Would he resent Didi if she refused to try IVF? If Mark agreed to adopt, he'd give up the chance to be a biological father. What would that mean to him?

"This is the most important decision of your life," I cautioned them. "It has to be the best one for both of you. Neither of you should feel as though you were forced into agreeing to something." That said, I advised them to stay focused on their ultimate goal: becoming parents.

Over the next nine months Didi and Mark talked about their choices. Both realized they'd been asking a lot of each other -- perhaps too much. They reached a compromise: They'd try to find an Indian egg donor, but if they couldn't, they'd try to adopt. Didi found a potential donor who wanted \$20,000 for her eggs and was a good match: She lived nearby and she looked a lot like Didi. They scheduled an interview, but the woman changed her mind about donating. They were crushed. At that point Mark had a change of heart. "It doesn't make sense to go through all this expense and stress for a maybe," he said. He suggested they adopt a child from India. Didi was thrilled. She immediately found an agency and started the paperwork. They got a home equity loan and tapped their savings to cover the \$25,000 adoption cost.

After a year Didi and Mark were matched with an 18-month-old Indian boy who is in foster care. Next month they will travel to India to meet Nikel and bring him home. In our final session, Mark reached for his wife's hand and said, "This was the hardest decision of my life -- but I can't wait for the three of us to be a family."

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"He Can't Handle My Illness"

Rachel is struggling with a debilitating disorder, but Adam, in his own way, is suffering, too. Can this marriage be saved?

Her Turn

"I haven't been well for a long time, and I get the feeling that Adam just doesn't care," says Rachel, 33, is stay-at-home mom. "Our once-great marriage is just a shell.

"It's been this way ever since I got sick. About three years ago, my fingers began to ache and swell up. Then the discomfort spread to my hands and shoulders, and I started to feel tired all the time. I bounced from one specialist to another, undergoing test after test. No one had answers. While researching my symptoms on the Internet, I finally found an article on fibromyalgia, a chronic disorder affecting the musculoskeletal system. The disorder, which is often misdiagnosed, can trigger a number of symptoms — many of which hit home for me. Though fibromyalgia is controversial and not all doctors believe it is a real disorder, I finally found a specialist who does.

"Some days, every muscle in my body hurts; other days, I just feel a sharp jab in the back. More constant are the insomnia and headaches. I have no energy for 8-year-old Brandon or 6-year-old Brett when they come home from school, and I feel guilty for pacifying Jake, our 2-year-old, with videos when I'm too tired to play with him. Simply getting through the day is hard.

"Because certain antidepressants in low doses can control pain, my doctor prescribed one for me. He also encouraged me to exercise in order to stimulate endorphins, the brain's natural pain relievers. I admit I haven't been very good about that. And even though doctors tell me that fibromyalgia won't disable me completely, I'm still terrified that it will. I keep checking the Internet for new information.

"Last week, as I put Jake in his car seat, pain shot through my wrists and arms. I panicked — I had this image of me incapacitated in a wheelchair and unable to mother my children. But when I told Adam what happened, he didn't seem concerned; he just mumbled a word or two and then changed the subject. Once in a while, he'll offer to give me a massage, but it's such a halfhearted shoulder rub that it's hardly worth the bother. The only time he takes any real interest in me is when he wants to have sex, which hardly puts me in the mood.

"Adam says I overreact to everything, and I admit I have found myself screaming about things I know aren't important. Last week, I chewed him out for planting a new rhododendron bush too close to our apple tree.

"But I'm not unreasonable when it comes to Adam's parents. I hate when they visit. His mother is always telling me how to raise the kids, and his father barely acknowledges me. Adam just says, 'Oh, that's how Dad's always been.' As if that's an excuse

"I never thought our marriage would turn out like this. We were always such good friends. Both of us grew up in the suburbs of Hartford, Connecticut. My father, an executive at a major department store, was warm and outgoing, but my mother was a total perfectionist. I know she loved my brother and me, but she'd snap at us if we didn't live up to her standards.

"Adam and I met in college, and I fell in love with his gentleness and romantic nature. We married after graduation, once I'd found work at an advertising agency and Adam was hired as a salesperson for a pharmaceutical firm. Brandon was born two years later, and I left work to be a stay-at-home mom. We always seemed to have time to go places and do fun things together — and I had the energy for it, too.

"But one thing did happen back then that bothers me to this day. When I was nearly nine months pregnant with Brandon, Adam's company offered him and several other top salespeople a four-day tennis junket in Florida. I had a nagging feeling that the baby might come early, so I begged Adam not to go. He insisted, saying he needed a vacation — and sure enough, I went into labor the day after he left.

"Now, once again, my husband is blowing off my concerns. If I had a broken leg, maybe he wouldn't think I was a hypochondriac. But this condition is far more debilitating, and I can no longer pretend we're this happy family. Things have got to change, or this marriage is over."

His Turn

"I don't want to live like this, either. It's like I've lost my best friend," says Adam, 34, who's been married to his wife for nine years. "Rachel was the one person I could count on to be a sounding board. No one in my family ever talked about much of anything, certainly not about feelings. But Rachel took the time to ask and listen. She was the one who taught me about intimacy.

"I do try to show that I care, but nothing I do meets Rachel's approval. If I give her a massage, she tells me I'm rubbing too hard or not hard enough. If I ask how she slept the night before, she thinks I'm being patronizing. Actually, I thought I was helping by not talking much about her illness. When I'm sick, I try to keep my mind off my problems.

"I'm not saying Rachel is a hypochondriac; I know she's in pain, and I feel terrible about that. But I do think she spends too much time obsessing about her condition. Some of the best doctors in the city have assured us that her illness is not fatal or progressive, and that she's got to be patient with herself. There's a point at which you have to accept gracefully what happens to you.

"I don't think Rachel knows how nasty and critical she's become lately. When I planted that shrub near the tree, she shrieked as though I'd committed a crime. She complains that I don't help her enough — cleaning up after dinner is her latest issue. I'd rather spend the time with my kids, so I tell her I'll do it after they're asleep. But she either storms into the kitchen and does the dishes herself, or else she hovers, telling me I'm not washing them thoroughly. And I can't believe Rachel is still upset about that Florida trip eight years ago. Isn't there a statute of limitations on a husband's mistakes? If you can never win, after a while you stop trying.

"Rachel reminds me so much of my father it's uncanny. My sister, brothers and I could never please him, either. If I mowed the lawn as a nice surprise for him, he'd point out the one tiny patch of grass that I missed. It's ironic that now it's Rachel who hates his attitude. As for Mom's parenting advice, she's only trying to help, and, after all, she did raise four kids. But Rachel won't even listen to her.

"I don't feel like we're a family anymore. I barely see my sons; Rachel insists that they be in bed by eight o'clock, and I usually don't get home until seven-thirty. After I help get them in their pajamas, I eat dinner alone while Rachel disappears upstairs, buries her head in a book and pushes me away if I try to kiss her. I'm not saying we have to make love every day, but she's never in the mood anymore. Maybe she's right — if our life is going to become one long fight, it's time for us to split.

The Counselor's Turn

"When one partner suffers a chronic illness and the other feels helpless to do anything about it, the anger and blame can become toxic. How spouses cope with this situation determines whether their marriage flourishes or flounders.

"Because fibromyalgia can take so long to be diagnosed, sufferers often have to deal with family and friends who think they're lazy, faking it or just seeking attention. This can make it hard to keep up their end of a relationship, as Rachel discovered. Compounding the problem was Rachel's need for control, which she had most likely learned from her demanding mother. When her expectations weren't met, she quickly lost patience.

"However, she was so quick to blow things out of proportion that I wondered whether her medication might be exacerbating her anxiety. Rachel's doctor switched her to another antidepressant, which helped considerably. She eventually bought a home treadmill and joined a gym with child care for Jake. Over the next few months, Rachel started to feel much better.

"Meanwhile, we had to help Adam feel less rejected and more appreciated. Though he was trying hard to be there for Rachel, he had his limits and she needed to respect them. 'Adam becomes overwhelmed when he hears the same complaints time and again,' I said. Once she understood this, Rachel began limiting the amount of time she discussed her illness and stopped getting on Adam's back about minor matters.

"I established some basic ground rules for Adam and Rachel to follow. They were to do something fun together at least once a week, and to call each other at least once a day to chat about anything they wanted to except trivial home problems or complaints like Rachel's illness. To keep them on track, I gave them a 'report card' to fill out every week on such subjects as hand-holding, phone calls and dates.

"One of Rachel's biggest challenges was staying patient. I told her, 'If you want Adam to reach out to you, it's important that you appreciate his efforts, even if they're not what you consider perfect.'

"But Adam had his obligations, too, such as protecting Rachel from his parents' criticism and intrusiveness. It was his job to stand up to them rather than to excuse their behavior. He finally found the courage to do so.

"Both were still gun-shy about sex. I urged Rachel not to say no every time he initiated lovemaking, and I told Adam to give her more hugs, kisses and other signs of affection throughout the day. Rachel responded in kind. In about six months they felt intimate enough to resume an active sex life.

"These two have continued to negotiate compromises in ways large and small. They've proven that by making adjustments in their actions and attitudes, they can both feel loved and respected — in sickness and in health.

"Can This Marriage Be Saved?" is the most enduring women's magazine feature in the world. This case is based on interviews and information from the files of Joyce Dolberg Rowe, M.Ed., a marital therapist with offices in Boston and Hull, Massachusetts. The story told here is true, although names and other identifying details have been changed to conceal identities. "Can This Marriage Be Saved?" is a registered trademark of Meredith Corporation.