

### **The Bad-Mood Virus:**

Engaged couples who are preparing for marriage are fully aware that when they tie the knot they sign on for a life of sharing. This includes in-laws, finances, laundry, personal space, illnesses, and, as research now shows us, moods also. Not only are flu viruses contagious but so are emotional moods. Couples who have been married for many years will be aware of this tendency to be affected by their spouses humour and moods. This unconscious tendency to mimic the emotions of an intimate partner has been shown to affect spousal health.

For example, if you undergo major heart surgery, and you are married to a neurotic or very anxious spouse, you will be more likely to be depressed a year later than if your partner were emotionally strong. The research, which was done by psychologists at Washington State University, is troubling because depression is known to put recovering cardiac patients at higher risk of further heart attacks. Another study showed that hardening of the coronary arteries was more likely in people who express hostility during fights.

Couples in long-term relationships have emotional mood thermostat that is regulated by one or both partners. For example, the level of happiness in a relationship may be unconsciously manipulated by the man to remain at a certain level. In order to maintain the equilibrium of the relationship, the woman then adjusts his or her mood to the level set by the other. When this happens over a long period of time, the woman's mood and happiness becomes set in accordance with the level set by the unhappy one.

The same thing happens with emotional negativity. The cranky person often controls the level of cheerfulness in the relationship. As soon as the cranky person gets into a dark mood, the cloud spreads over to the other person, who despondently has to wait it out, but gets drawn into it in the process. If Mr. Cranky is in a good mood, then a cloud is lifted from the house, and the mood of the home lifts. However, cheerful people, who have a good emotional immune system, can equally lift all boats in the house with the tide of their infectious humour.

As for how one catches a partner's humor, the brain's aptly named "mirror neurons" are to blame, says John T. Cacioppo, PhD, director of the Center for Cognitive and Social Neuroscience at the University of Chicago and co-author of *Emotional Contagion*. These neurons fire in response to other people's actions and intentions, especially when you care about the individual. So if you see that your husband is anxious or depressed, you literally feel his pain.

In troubled relationships, if one partner is constantly negative and cynical the other person ends up feeling the same and gets drawn into the mood and feeling of negativity.

It is useful to think of bad moods as being contagious and that you can pick them up like a virus. When you see your partner's grumpy face coming through the kitchen door in the evening, it is hard to not only notice it, but to find your own previously happy mood immediately re-adjusting and changing. Equally, when your partner's voice

on the phone is cheerful and positive, you will find your own mood more likely to mirror or pick up the same 'viral infection' coming down the phone line.

When the moods are bad there are, however, a few ways to inhibit or prevent spousal mood infection.

When he makes a nasty remark and you give it right back, you're usually off to the races. You can avoid getting stuck in this loop by planning how you will respond to his negativity. One option is to take a 'time-out' or walk away: Take a stroll up to the shop to get the *Evening Echo*, turn on the radio, or maybe listen to some music. Once you're on your own, you can see how much your partner's mood is really affecting you. If it's substantial, you might schedule more alone time in your relationship. Or ask him to exercise with you or see a counsellor to try to improve his mood.

If *you're* the problem, leaving the room or the house when you feel a nasty humour coming on is also a good way to keep him or her—and the marriage—healthy.

Taking these temporary breaks are not a way of avoiding the situation but rather a recognition that bad moods are contagious. It is also a realization that most bad moods are temporary or triggered by unimportant things. Most couples realize, for example, that they end up in arguments when they are tired, hungry, or stressed. Keeping out of the orbit of the other person's influence during these transitory times is usually helpful.

Sometimes you need to consciously and deliberately buffer yourself from your partner's bad or irritating moods. One way to do this is to plan ahead. I bet your bad moods are confined more to the 6.00 p.m. to 8.00 p.m. shift in the evenings. This is usually the time of the day when family members get hungry, tired, and irritable. From small children to stressed-out teens, to worn-out adults. How you as a family co-ordinate this high-stress segment of the day is very important.

On the flip side, in a happy marriage, one partner's optimism may rub off on the other—an actual health benefit. The good news is, when it comes to optimism, you can catch that too