

CONTROL

A few weeks back I mentioned that there are three issues which are of concern to couples: control, freedom, and affiliation. Let me talk today about control in marriage or intimate relationships. Having control is essential to our survival. If our relationship or life is not giving us the sense of control that we need we take steps to change things.

Whether we like this attribute or not, we all attempt to exert some control over those we love. For example, a parent will seek to exert control over a child's behavior, like stopping the child from doing something harmful. In adult relationships we do the same. We try to get our partners to behave in certain ways. We try to influence them or we try to change them. We pressurize, manipulate, coerce, dictate, boss, advise, and coax. In any given week, there may be a hundred different ways that we try to exert control or influence over one another.

We can do this passively or actively. Passive control includes things like manipulation, deceit, being nice, etc. Passive control is trying to get our partner to do certain things indirectly or without them knowing. It includes things like sulking, withdrawing, playing mind-games, indirect punishment, dependency, submission, people-pleasing, or just 'giving in' in order to get what one wants, etc.

Active control includes things like demands, coercion, emotional pressure or abuse. This kind of control is achieved directly through such things as threats, force, and self-righteousness. If active control does not get us what we want we will tend to increase the direct pressure or else directly punish our partner for not giving in. The punishments may include the silent treatment, verbal abuse, or by just being difficult. This is the adult version of the child bully who has a temper tantrum if his coercion does not work.

The truth is that we all do these things, whether we are aware of them or not. Most of the time this is tolerable if it is not a chronic habit and is part of the currency of everyday give and take in a relationship. Difficulties arise when the need to control or influence our partner moves from respectful forms of influence to an on-going pattern of dominance, coercion, or manipulative control.

At their worst, the female version of the control-freak takes many of the stereotypical and cartooned forms: The nagging wife, the castrating wife, the patronizing wife, the Diva, the high-maintenance woman, the 'cold bitch', the earth mother, the control freak, etc. In many Irish homes you will find an Irish version of the Simpsons with a father who is treated as an idiot by the wife and he holds a rank just above the children and just below the wife. It is an Irish version of the Hyacinth and Richard scenario.

At their worst, the male version of the control-freak takes the form of the narcissistic achiever, the compulsive husband, the domineering husband, the abuser, the philanderer, the social alcoholic, the marine sergeant, etc. Therefore, in other Irish homes you have the scenario where the father rules with an iron fist and confines the mother to being of the same status as the children. He is Charlo, he is sometimes the man whose footsteps everyone else in the family dreads hearing come to the door.

Most marital problems have to do with control. The management of it is so critical to domestic harmony. In fact, if you think of any chronic problem you have in your relationship you will be able to distill it down to a struggle about control.

If your partner *does not* have a problem with control he will willingly listen to what you have to say and is okay about doing what you ask. He will be able to confidently and comfortably surrender his own position and give-in to you without undue hassle or argument. In exerting influence your partner will respectfully help or advise you in such a way that you do not feel small or inadequate.

Your partner *has a problem* if he tries to force you to do things, takes charge of things without regard to your feelings or needs, or thinks he knows best and feels entitled to tell you exactly what to do or think. You might have a problem if you do something similar.

Dr. O'Connor can be contacted at celticspirit@eircom.net or at 021-4275678