

Are you afraid of your partner?

“Are you afraid of your partner?” is a question I frequently ask couples who attend for couples counselling. It is surprising to realise that fear plays a significant part in many intimate relationships. In fact I would go so far as to say that it is an integral part of every relationship.

At the most extreme end are relationships where one partner is abusive, controlling, and at times violent. If you are to assume that this person is the man, which is not always the case, then his wife or partner experiences fear pretty much on a constant basis. Even when he is not behaving badly, she is walking on egg-shells, fearful of doing something that will upset him. Fear becomes her constant companion. She is afraid of saying the wrong thing, doing the wrong thing, or not doing the right thing. She ends up rushing back home to be sure everything is all-right and finds it impossible to relax if there is a doubt that he may be upset about something as he is capable of becoming irate over any triviality.

She finds that she is afraid of his moods, his reactions, and his unpredictability. She is aware that he is a Jeckly and Hyde character: Even when he seems to be in a good mood, it will only take a minor incident for him to become cranky and irritable. Because he needs to be in control, when things are not going his way he becomes truculent and abusive.

She gets so used to being blamed for everything that it does not take long before she feels she carries the emotional responsibility for everything he feels. She becomes so fear-ridden that she feels the constant pressure to get everything right because of her fear of his reactions.

He needs only to “lose it” from time to time in order to keep her intimidated. Every now and then he will viciously “lay into her” over some minor issue. He will verbally and emotionally beat her up leaving her battered and distraught. Though he may then behave like an angel for the subsequent couple of weeks, and seek her forgiveness, she knows where she stands. She has been “taught a lesson”, becomes quietly terrified, and is constantly afraid of it happening again. All it takes is a tone of voice or a sigh for her to get the message.

The fear is so constant as to, at times, be unrecognizable by the woman. When asked if she is afraid of him she may even say ‘no’, and name her constant fear as worry, stress, pressure, or depression. It can begin to feel like these things. His control and abuse gradually gets her to turn her fear into self-rejection. “What is wrong with me?” she will ask of herself all the time. Her fear becomes anxious self-doubt and insecurity.

If you feel these things, don’t be alarmed because you may put even more pressure on yourself. What you need to do is to start naming these feelings for what they really are. If you are forever walking on egg-shells like this, begin to talk to someone, take fear seriously, and begin to take back the threads of your own life.

Less extreme examples are relationships where one partner behaves poorly but not to an extremely abusive degree. If we consider this person to be a woman it is her husband that will walk on egg-shells. Not because she is going to be extremely emotionally abusive but because of her constant over-reaction to things. He will be afraid of her temper, her blaming of him, her ridicule of him, and of being made to feel pathetic. He will walk on

egg-shells wondering what kind of a humour she is in and be afraid of saying or doing the wrong thing. He will feel anxious and fearful around her most of the time and do his best to try and please her or keep her happy. He may even get attacked for being afraid of her. She feels and acts like she is the 'Queen'. She is self-righteous: She feels she is right about most things and therefore entitled to belittle or ridicule him. This happens when he does not do something properly, does not anticipate her needs, or when seeks to do something that does not fit in with her plans.

Many men live in constant fear like this. It is, however, hard for them to justify this fear. Like the woman in the relationship above, his fear is turned into self-doubt, hesitancy, anxiety, and stress. Gradually, rather than feeling that his fear is a normal reaction to her extreme behaviours, he begins to feel that he is weak and inadequate. And, like the extreme relationship above, the more he feels like this the more control she can begin to exert. The frightened person then finds it harder and harder to extricate themselves from the emotional corner of self-doubt and self-loathing. This is compounded by the 'terrorizer's' apparent competence and intelligence. On top of things, the fear-filled person feels stupid.

Verbal skills play a huge part in these kinds of relationships. The more verbally fluent, articulate is the controller the more difficult it is for the fearful person. Most abusive people have razor sharp memories and ability to log and document every transgression and failure of the other person. So much so that in a verbal disagreement the abused person is no match for the righteous person who can give countless examples of the other person's past failures and inadequacies. The verbally skilled person "wipes the floor" with them.

The third type of relationship where fear plays a part is every other relationship. Every single person in an intimate relationship feels and knows fear. In fact it is a consequence of intimacy. Intimacy requires vulnerability, trust, and openness. This is hurt from time to time. In every relationship the lover has to ask themselves, "will I risk being hurt again?" In the good relationships the answer is "Yes" because the consequences of such risk are positive. They are positive because they know the other person respects them. When the lover, while feeling some fear, knows that their partner will not ever seek to intimidate, shame, or hurt them, then he/she can hold their fear and talk to their partner safely about it.

When this kind of trust is not present, the abusive person will become offended or outraged that their partner even feels fear. They will see their partners anxiety or fear as another example of their weakness. The consequence of this is that the frightened person has to retreat. It becomes quietly tragic. Remember, counselling can be of help if for no other reason than to give fear its name. Consider the Cork Marriage Counselling Centre on Paul Street as a possible starting point. No magic solutions. Just honesty and openness. Take Care.