

Names have been changed to honor client confidentiality.

It Takes Two to Tango

He makes her feel like she should keep the house spotless. And if she's watching TV, he changes the channel, justifying his blatant lack of consideration by saying he paid for it. Not surprisingly, Amy refers to her husband, Matt, as a "control freak."

In our counseling session, Amy poured out the unhappy details of a recent motorcycle trip that included other couples. Before getting out the door, he yelled at her for not baking cookies. "What are they going to think if we don't bring something?" he barked.

Amy didn't have time to bake cookies. For several days leading up to the trip, she worked 12-hour shifts so she could take the time off. She also was dealing with a death in the family. Throughout the trip, Matt called the shots. Amy kowtowed. According to Amy, this scenario was standard fare—a sampling of what occurs every day.

"I feel like a little girl with Daddy," she lamented. "How do I change this?"

"It starts with you," I said.

It's not about the power another person wields or takes; it's about the power we surrender, I explained. When we feel controlled, it's because we've vacated the driver's seat.

"Because you allow yourself to be submissive," I continued, "the probability is high that your husband will take the lead. So, if you're feeling controlled by Matt, it means you are letting him. It means you've abandoned the power to direct yourself."

This doesn't mean that Amy's husband is an innocent bystander. Far from it. He needs to own his part. Instead of operating a dictatorship, he should be cultivating a partnership. For example, instead of expecting Amy to bake cookies, he should realize that refreshments are a joint responsibility.

Collaboration would characterize their relationship—not domination and yielding. In planning a trip, they would openly discuss and decide on the particulars, seeking win-win outcomes. And, too, in a partnership, Matt would have cared about the distresses that weighed heavily on Amy's spirit leading up to the trip. Showing compassion for her would have been the right course—not berating her. It's just cookies! His wife should mean more to him than possible judging attitudes from their friends.

Amy's responsibility is to stop folding. Instead of feeling like a powerless victim to Matt, she needs to ask herself how she co-creates the situation and how to strengthen herself to bring

about changes. People are easily swayed by the clues we send out; thus, we unconsciously train them on how to regard and treat us. Amy's kowtowing manner feeds the very qualities in Matt that she finds disturbing. A powerless stance not only gives the green light to his dominating tendencies, it keeps Amy little and ineffective.

"Your habit has been to mouse-down," I told her. "Shake off that self-defeating habit."

Instead, I urged her to take control of her own life. This includes being assertive by openly expressing her thoughts and feelings. We must speak our truth, I told her, in part because it might change the other person, but mostly because it changes us. So, speaking up isn't done with the expectation of changing Matt, but as an act of valuing herself.

Matt just might change. The likelihood of that happening is greatly enhanced as Amy does a better job of respecting herself and demonstrating self-empowerment. Compromising her self-respect should not be an option. With self-respect she would hardly stay quiet when barked at. The same goes for changing the TV channels and expecting the house to be spotless. Bottom line: If she doesn't want Matt to be her daddy, she has to stop being a little girl. As an equal player, she would have initiated the collaboration process prior to the trip. Without any hesitation, she would be up front about what she was going through and what she needed from him—stated respectfully, of course.

Amy began to realize the influence of her upbringing. "I grew up believing that if I'm pleasing people I'm doing the right thing," she said. "Now, I'm seeing that it's just the opposite."

The desire to please our loved ones is a natural response. It takes on a negative coloration when it seeks to appease and placate, when it stems from weakness and reinforces self-diminishment. Pleasing others is a healthy response as long as we don't go to extremes and allow ourselves to become doormats.

The best way to curb others from taking control is by refusing to be controlled.