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*Sample Columns*  
The Atlanta Journal-Constitution

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**SOLVING THE RELATIONSHIP PUZZLE  
SAMPLE COLUMNS  
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# GOOSED BY THE GUPPIES

*By Dr. Tom Merrill, Bobbie Sandoz Merrill, MSW*

Cox News Service

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**Dear Tom and Bobbie:** I have been married 24 years and have two daughters, ages 19 and 8. My husband and I have also held jobs throughout our marriage. My problem is my husband's hobby. He is a fish hobbyist. This hobby has now turned into a second FULL time job. He has 145 fish tanks ranging in size from 10 gallons to 300 gallons in our basement. He imports fish from Africa on a routine basis. The shipments come into Chicago, so he has to drive from Ohio to Chicago to pick up the fish, deal with brokers and customs agents, unpack and acclimate the fish and so on and so on. Basically, each shipment involves three full days of morning and night activity. Between these shipments he makes several trips to the airport to send fish to other hobbyists all over the United States. This does not include the daily maintenance of the fish and equipment. My problem is that besides his hobby — which continues to grow — he has a 40-hour-plus regular job that requires travel. There is no time for anything else. The quality time of our married life and childrens' lives is dwindling because he is either too tired, grumpy or on the run to spend time with us. I know he loves us. But just saying it is not enough. I know he is not at a bar getting drunk or having an affair. I know it could be worse. But...I got married for companionship and sharing our lives and the lives of our children. I am alone raising our kids and taking care of everything else. He doesn't see it. He claims he is handling it. Am I selfish? I have tried to get involved in the hobby but I just can't deal with it in addition to keeping up with my job, our kids' school activities and everything around the home. And, to be honest, I hate the fish. I hit an all time low recently when he gave me his retirement plans. I wasn't even included. His retirement will be based on how he can increase his fish hobby, including selling our current house so he can have land to put in ponds and have more FISH. This hobby is no longer a hobby. It has become an obsession. I welcome your advice.

**Signed:** *Lonely in Ohio*

**Tom says:** Wondering if you were for real, we Googled 'fish hobbyist' and got 123,000 hits on the first pass. I simply did not realize the level of interest in *piscis*. So we are taking you seriously. And so should your partner.

While your issue deals specifically with the havoc wreaked by his obsession with fish, there is a larger relationship issue here, which is: how do we meld private passions and interests with partnership? For whether it is fish, football, golf, road racing (or off road racing), stamp collecting, orchids, or...whatever, it doesn't matter. The question is the same.

We come into relationships with our own set of interests, and for some these reach the level of a passion. If our partner shares the same level of interest in the same area, no problem. And in successful relationships there usually are numerous areas of commonality. However, should one partner have or develop a singular focus that holds no interest for the other, significant problems can arise if not dealt with openly and directly.

You have to understand that I hold the opinion that there is nothing more important than my relationship with Bobbie. Nothing. If there were, I would not have entered into a marital relationship with her. Dating relationship? Yes. Movie buddy? Sure. But marriage, no. Because I know that the marriage relationship I want is not possible unless I make it the most important thing in my life and then act as if it is.

Does this mean there is no room for individual interests and passions? No. It is not a question of either or. Rather it is a question of when does the interest or passion turn from serving my sense of self-identity and the relationship to tearing at the fabric of the relationship? It does when I or my partner says it does.

And at that point a side by side conversation is required to bring things into balance again. It need not be a difficult process if both partners are committed to the importance of the relationship. Where it becomes

difficult, if not terminal, is when one partner's behavior is in service of the passion rather than the relationship and they openly make that choice.

The degree to which I involve myself in my interests to the exclusion of my partner should be a "we" not a "me" decision. If I do not want it to be that way then I should not be married. Or if I hold out for unilateral decisions that affect both partners, I need to understand that I am willing to be in a settle-for-less relationship and am asking my partner to do the same.

It appears this is what your husband has done. He is choosing piscis passion over partnership. It appears to have taken a long time to reach this point with his emotional, psychological, physical and financial investment now seeming to be all consuming. So, you can either settle for less, in which case you may wish to open a Fish 'n Chips stand, or settle for more, which will require professional help and some tough decision making.

And this gets into the complex question: when is it time to leave? Bobbie and I will take up this part of your apparent dilemma in the next column. Until then, you may wish to hang a sign on your door that says, "gone fishin'."

**Bobbie says:** As Tom mentions, we initially assumed your situation was a hoax due to the intensity of your husband's hobby and the clear implication that he is addicted to it in the same way a gambler or drinker is addicted to their vices. Thus, although your situation seems more harmless than other addictions, it is in fact a serious threat to your relationship and marriage.

But before you will know how to respond appropriately, it's important for you to understand that you, too, appear to be addicted. It seems your addiction is to your hope that his obsession will contract at some point, even though it never does. In short, his addiction is one of acquiring more fish while yours is the hope that his desire to do this will cease. You are probably also addicted to the hope that he would love you enough to give up his addiction.

This is the same addiction most women (or men) in your position adopt when their partners are addicted to one thing or another. They hold onto the hope, to the point of absurdity, that the addiction will stop ... even when the addict has no interest in stopping the addiction.

And so here is the rub: until you face that this is going to get even worse, you are not taking a genuine inventory of the real situation. Instead, you are assessing the situation with the inclusion of the possibility that it will change. For if you faced the true situation, there is very little chance you would want to stay in the marriage or impose this on your children.

In fact, this is why we thought at first your question was a hoax. Your asking what you might do about it could only be asked if you were not fully facing what has happened to your's or your children's lives as a result of your husband's failure to act responsibly. Tom has injected some humor into his response in an effort to help you get out of your failure to face how absurd things have gotten and to inspire you to face the real choices before you.

So, face the facts ma'm. It can only get worse from here.

Thus, I would suggest that you seek some very real help for the very real problem before you ... not the one you wish you didn't have. Our hope is that you will choose to settle for more by having less fish in your life. And if your husband values your partnership enough to welcome a "we" decision about this, then he too can settle for more by having less fish in his life.

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# IT'S HER STUFF, NOT MINE

*By Dr. Tom Merrill, Bobbie Sandoz-Merrill MSW*

Cox News Service

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Dear Tom and Bobbie: I am writing to you because my wife won't. I say you will take my side, but she says she doesn't care because she has about had it. The problem is that she has problems and will not deal with them. We have known each other since we were kids and have been married for six years. I really love her and want the relationship to work but I don't know that I can continue to put up with her jealousies and insecurities. She is a beautiful and successful person but does not feel good about herself. She expects me to do things that will make her feel good and not do things that set her off. I don't mind doing things such as bringing her flowers once in a while, even though I usually don't do things like that, but why should I stop doing things I have always done just because they make her feel uneasy? I tell her that it is her stuff not mine and that she should see a therapist and get it handled. We have tried couples counseling but the counselor sort of agreed with me and said my wife had some issues she was going to need to resolve. I keep waiting for her to follow up with the therapist but she says I just don't understand or care about her. She says if I did, I wouldn't do what I do. So, does she need help or not?

**Tom says:** So help me out here. I just want to make sure I've got this right. This is the person you have committed to spend the rest of your life with. She is "beautiful" and "successful" and the one you "really love." In marrying her, whether formally in your vows or not, you promised to honor, support and cherish her. Am I correct so far? If so, then admittedly she may need some help but it sounds as if you are at greater risk than she.

What are you thinking young man? So, she has "issues." We all do! You, me, your wife, mine, my mother, yours, all of us. The question is not just how is she going to handle her "stuff," but rather how are the two of you going to handle hers and yours? If you have some notion that partners don't have stuff, or perhaps more absurd, that you don't have any, you are horribly mistaken. While some may have such debilitating problems that they need to go to the "stuff-doctor," certainly most can get along fine without therapeutic intervention. However, we all need the support of our partners.

You need to understand what this means for your role. If you are doing things that trigger what you have described as her jealousies and insecurities, then stop them. It is that simple...and that important. As long as what she is asking you to do is not illegal, does not endanger anyone's physical or mental health or put them at risk in any way, then why wouldn't you "do things that would make her feel good and not do things that set her off?"

The answer is, you are not being loving, supportive, honoring, etc., so doing things such as those won't make sense to you. And you will lose her. After all, this is the woman you love.

If you will start being the partner she is asking you to be your behavior will follow suit. You will also find yourself doing things she likes far more often than once in a while. Then you will see there is no room for such nonsense as "I don't do flowers."

How about flower behavior every day for the rest of your life? That's what it will take whether your partner's issues and problems are active or dormant. You can't do it? Then you either need to see your own stuff-doctor and get some retraining or get out and stop making both of your lives miserable.

I don't know what your marriage counselor told you but I doubt that he or she gave you a free pass. Your partner may have things she needs to deal with. But this requires you to do your job as well. Good partners do whatever they can to make the relationship work. When we see something has hooked our partner and is causing pain, we don't yank on the line, set the hook good, tighten the drag and then tell them to get it

handled. We stop pulling on the line, remove the hook and do everything possible to salve the wound and stop casting in that area forever.

So, to answer your question, I don't know whether she needs help. Perhaps. But for sure, you are going to.

**Bobbie says:** You mention your wife is having jealous and insecure reactions to your actions. Although you don't specifically mention what your actions are, I will assume they include things that make her feel left out or threatened by a loss of time and attention you give her. In truth whenever a woman feels left out or ignored, particularly when other people are tended to in her place, most will be, to use your words, "set off."

Some will get mad enough to dump and run. Others will feel insecure, as your wife does, and ask their partners to be more concerned about their desire to feel loved and attended to. These are the ones who are willing to find ways to fulfill their desire for love in the context of their primary relationship, rather than quickly replace you for someone more loving. Although the tendency to feel insecure when ignored can be described as "stuff," your interest in helping her to feel safe with you — as well as loved, honored and cared for — would be the correct caring reaction. Instead, you label her as having "stuff," try to find others to agree and then push her away.

My question to you is why would you or your therapist expect her to like being treated in a manner that makes her feel increasingly less valuable to you? Or is it that you are expecting her to "tolerate" your treatment of her and your therapist has joined you in this idea. Interestingly, many of us expect women to tolerate the loss of time and importance, including therapists who often suggest women refocus their lives on things other than their relationships so that the lack of attention won't continue to hurt or offend. In fact, I used to be one of these therapists prior to our 'settle for more' approach to partnership.

By contrast, men are rarely asked to be more loving and honoring of the woman they claim to love and give her the kind of time and attention they offered her at the outset of the relationship. Women who are hurt by this loss are considered weak, while the ones who demand to have attention are viewed as bossy.

But few who subscribe to this approach have considered its costs to both partners and ultimately the relationship. Yet the costs are great—so great in fact that they lead to people in your wife's position successfully learning to deal without their partner, as you are asking her to do, and then wanting out of the relationship altogether. If this is the outcome you want, then speed up the process and free both of you to be on your way as soon as possible. If not, reconsider why you think your absence and then dishonoring her reaction to it will make her happy or more in love with you or how it will in the long run serve your own happiness or the relationship.

If you really want to be right, then find another therapist — or columnist — to agree with you. But if you want your relationship to work, reconsider what you are doing and take Tom's suggestion of doing whatever you can to draw her closer to you, rather than continue to do things that "set her off." Our hope is that this will serve as a wake-up call and you will realize that if you choose to settle for more by being more loving to your beautiful and talented wife that you will be the greatest beneficiary of this decision.

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# WHEN IS IT TIME TO LEAVE?

By Dr. Tom Merrill , Bobbie Sandoz-Merrill, MSW

Cox News Service

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Two weeks ago *'Lonely in Ohio'* wrote to us lamenting her husband's obsession with his fish hobby. In responding to her dilemma we opined that one of her options was to leave the relationship. We said the question of if and when to leave a partnership was more than we could cover in our initial response but that we would take it up in a later column. Here is the continuation.

Tom says: In truly rotten relationships where remaining in it would risk someone's physical and/or emotional health, the reasons for leaving are clear and the question of whether to leave is simple. However, in most relationships the issue of staying or leaving is not black or white. It is truly gray...sometimes light gray and sometimes dark, but still gray with tremendous consequences either way. This is one of the reasons why making the decision is so difficult and why so many live in what Thoreau described as quiet desperation.

Relationships with significant others should be neither quiet nor desperate. But it amazes me how many choose to live in such partnerships. There is a rather spooky statistic that says 93 percent of relationships are not the kind we would want. . . they are more quiet and desperate than not. They are what a colleague describes as "lump-alongs."

So, what is it that keeps people locked into unhealthy and destructive relationships? What keeps them muddled in the world of gray, seemingly willing to inflict emotional pain on each other and suffer indefinitely? Is there anything that can serve as a guide to assist in either getting the relationship we want or getting out of one that is not what we want? The answer is that because of our culture we keep ourselves locked into unhealthy relationships. However, we can develop a guide that will greatly increase our chances of relationship success.

But you have to understand that because the culture seems to have a great deal at stake in the existence of lump-alongs you will be waging an uphill battle. Often you will have little support either from those around you or, perhaps, even from your partner.

We are bombarded every moment of our waking day and night with images of inadequate relationships. Starting from our earliest recollection, we saw that our parents didn't know how to make relationships work any better than we do, but they were our first model to emulate.

Movies, novels, television, DVDs, CDs, newspapers, magazines, all continue to present a model of relationships that is guaranteed to not get us what we want. Look at the top-rated situation comedy that just finished its final show. It should have been titled "Everybody Loves a Terrible Relationship." Weekly we are besieged with intergenerational relationship harangues as caricatures of what we seem to think relationships should look like.

Out of these billions of messages during our lifetime have come such marital myths as:

- Marriage is difficult and has to be hard work.
- You have to be guarded and can't tell your partner everything.
- Arguing and/or disagreements are healthy, they clean the relationship pipes.
- You have to compromise; or its corollary, it is OK to agree to disagree.
- It's natural for romance to fade.
- Marriage has its ups and downs ...

And there are many others.

Is it any wonder that with all this input only 7 percent of relationships are considered ones we would want?

So, the first thing to do is to identify exactly what kind of relationship you want. Articulate it clearly. This is not something that you should do in the dark and then hold close to your vest. You should do it openly so that your partner knows what you want and, more importantly, knows what you will be standing for. This is the way you are committing to be.

Want an honest, loving, honoring, etc., relationship? Then say so and be honest, loving and honoring. . . no matter what your partner does.

If you are very clear about how you want your relationship to be you greatly increase the chances of getting what you want. And there will be no mystery when or why you do not. You will no longer be languishing in the gray. You then will be in a far better position to choose to stay or leave.

**Bobbie says:** I agree with everything Tom says and will add to his sound guidelines a completely different approach for assessing when it is time to leave a relationship.

The problem with youth is that you think you have years and years before feeling any pressure to get around to doing the things you want to do, living the life you want to live, or being the person you want to be. The joy of getting older is that you realize time is running out and thus accelerate your pursuit of reaching for the best.

I happened to be born into a life filled with so much grace that the desire to continue to live it at its highest level was a goal of mine from the start. Yet even with this objective, I failed to fully grasp just how precious each moment is and thus frittered away far too many of them.

However, as I matured I not only raised the bar on how I wanted to live my life, but became even clearer about doing so now rather than in the future. When Tom and I then agreed to keep the bar raised at a very high level in our personal partnership, our results were so rewarding that we dedicated our careers to showing others how to do it. My only regret is that I did not understand the value of using this standard earlier.

In fact, a client I have been working with on the importance of doing this shared with her husband during a session that she was recently struck by how deeply precious the gift of her brief time on Earth is. She then explained that as a result of this realization she had raised the bar on what she wanted to accept in their relationship and was no longer willing to tolerate being treated less carefully than he treats others. He was surprised and pointed out that he treats her better than most of his friends treat their wives. She agreed that this was true, but clarified that her standard had shifted beyond what she considered to be this group's fairly low standard or the even lower standard of society in general.

Her new standard was defined by her desire to never be the one selected to be snapped at when he feels stressed or angry. She said she also expected to be treated with at least the same level of respect and kindness he consistently offers friends, customers and even strangers and others who play a casual role in his life. This has become her new bottom line, and though she understood it was a high standard it was the only one she was willing to use.

Although this is indeed a very high standard, it is not unreasonable. It is a standard we should all consider using if we truly want to settle for more. And whenever our partners don't want to join us in this we have every right not to be forced to spend our precious lives arguing with them about why they should improve. Nor should we have to remind them to be respectful and kind. We should never be in the position of building up a secret hate for our partners when they fail to respond to our desire for high relationship standards.

Because I now understand the importance of this, I offer it as a primary guideline to use when deciding if your relationship is working for you.

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# HOW CAN HE POSSIBLY THINK I AM LUCKY?

First of several columns on marriage myths.

Today: acceptable relationship behaviors should be defined by  
what others do rather than what you want.

*By Dr. Tom Merrill , Bobbie Sandoz Merrill, MSW*

Cox News Service

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**Dear Tom and Bobbie:** Nine years ago I married a man everyone considered a real catch. We were in our early twenties and our relationship was based primarily on partying and having fun. He is five years older than I am, and when we met I was very unsure of myself. He was an outgoing, athletic, charismatic guy who paid attention to me and made me feel special and safe. That was then. Moving forward, I have completed graduate school, my career is going well and we have two children. I have been in counseling and feel like a very different person who has had some wonderful growth during the past nine years. The problem is my husband acts just as he did when we met, including the partying. He hasn't grown one bit. He couldn't even come to the hospital when our last child, who is 6 months old, was born because he had a softball game. He does nothing around the house unless I ask. I feel as if caring for the children, maintaining our home and earning an income are my job. He says it is my job to take care of the inside of the home while his is to take care of the outside. We live in a condominium! There is nothing for him to do. When I try to talk with him about it he says I should feel lucky because compared to his friends' wives I have it easy — his buddies all play sports, go drinking without their wives at least two nights a week and none has ever changed a diaper. While he is attractive, funny and has family money, he is the focus of his life. He has said that our relationship and the children have to come after him if he is going to be happy. How can he think I am "lucky"?

**Tom says:** When people feel the world revolves around them, they find it easy to think that others involved in that world are indeed lucky to be there. You have described how you trained him to think that way in your early years. He made you feel safe, secure and good about yourself, and you needed him for that. While you have grown up since then it would appear that he has not. You are now asking that he do more just show up, and he cannot understand why.

Bobbie discussed in the last column how as we go down the road in our relationships we can lower our expectations to accommodate what we find unacceptable. This is the path to settling for less. Another option is raise the bar on our expectations for partners, ourselves and our partnership. With this option, more likely than not, what was once acceptable just won't make the cut. Through your personal growth and increased understanding of what it takes to be in the relationship you want, you have raised the bar and are letting him know what will be baseline acceptable. You would think that this would be something simple for him to comprehend. However, you would be amazed how many men will respond the way your husband has. For those who do, their logic goes something like this:

First, what you do is good or bad, black or white. They are quick to point out that what you are doing is either right or wrong. And if they are not pointing it out, they are keeping score. Count on it.

Second, their behavior is all in gray, no absolutes. Their actions depend on the circumstances, which allow them to justify their behavior should you question them. Making unacceptable behavior relative is the work of the relationship artist who paints in grays. This makes for a very uncertain world for their partner, who is simply unable to rely on them.

Third, they see it as their right to question and direct what you do, a right they do not extend to you. The more unequal the relationship, the more they think it is working for them. The longer this perspective is in play, the more distorted their thinking becomes. This is the way it should be and, clearly, in an uneven relationship they have more votes — what they say should be gospel and not argued with.

In this context is it any wonder that your desire for the relationship to be more along the lines of a loving, supportive, communicative, honoring, fully participative partnership has been met with a response that sounds as if it is coming from Bevis and Butthead? Feeling you are asking too much of him and do not appreciate all he does for you, he may well chat with his buddies about the burdens he must bear.

Seeing it through his lens they most likely will chime in with a chorus of "ain't it awful." After all, he works so hard, is faithful (by their definition) and has really given up so much to be married. . . . "She doesn't realize how good she's got it." And generally the culture will support this mantra.

Surprisingly, these will not just be male musings. A number of women who have settled for less will take the opportunity to justify why they lowered the bar in their relationships.

You can see that your husband's statement that you should feel lucky is not a simple stand alone comment that reflects his own idiosyncratic narcissism. Attempting to find clarity and an understanding while many of your friends are trying to normalize and excuse poor relationships is not easy. Others in a situation similar to yours, while knowing something is wrong but being less certain of what they want in a relationship, would ask, "Why don't I feel lucky?" However, your questioning how he can possibly think this way suggests you are well along the path to defining and standing for a settle-for-more relationship.

Now you need to ask yourself the question, "What am I going to do about it?" If you find this a difficult question to answer. . . which it should be. . . and you need some help, get it. Don't just put it on the back burner thinking that things will get better on their own. They will not.

Support for and normalizing relationship behaviors and thoughts that are counter to successful partnerships are at the core of many of our cultural myths about marriage. They are destructive, insidious, all pervasive and have tremendous intergenerational support and modeling. Bobbie and I will be taking on these myths in the next several columns. There is no room for them in a settle for more relationship.

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# PART II: MARRIAGE MYTHS

Second in a series on marriage myths.

By Dr. Tom Merrill, Bobbie Sandoz Merrill, MSW

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*This week's myth: it is "harmless" to quietly "look around," secretly "lust" after people of the opposite sex and even engage in sexual fantasies so long as we conceal these activities from our partner in order to avoid hurting their feelings.*

In our last two columns we launched a series on cultural relationship myths by addressing the first of the various myths that contribute to both pain and breakdown in partnerships. The first myth we discussed was the idea that it's appropriate for partners to measure the conduct of their partnership against the behavior of other partnerships. Thus, rather than establish a personal settle for more standard in the way they interact in their most important relationship, partners default to a low standard simply because it's what most people are doing. This week we are addressing a second myth that interferes with a good partnership: it is "harmless" to quietly "look around," secretly "lust" after people of the opposite sex and even engage in sexual fantasies so long as we conceal these activities from our partner in order to avoid hurting their feelings. The notion is that as long as we don't actually "act on" these fantasies or let our partner know about them we have not done anything wrong or hurtful to the relationship.

**Bobbie says:** This myth is so culturally accepted that many therapists promote it as a normal, possibly unalterable, aspect of human nature. Thus, rather than help couples return their attention to each other, they advise the "lookers" not to flaunt their looking and partners of the "lookers" to "loosen up" and even the playing field with their own visual and emotional wandering. Many therapists defend fantasies and flirtations as harmless to the relationship. Some even encourage using them to stimulate sexual fantasies as a vehicle for keeping the couples' sexual relationship alive.

It is not surprising then, with this kind of advice in a culture that actively accepts fantasies and flirtations as normal relationship behavior, that adhering to this and other relationship myths almost always leads to broken rather than good partnerships. In fact, it seems relationship myths have consistently led to more than 80 percent of partnerships marred by one member having an affair, 93 percent of partners characterizing their partnerships as mediocre, more than 50 percent of partnerships breaking up, and partners in only 7 percent of relationships describing themselves as happy.

Here's how this particular myth seems to contribute to these poor results in a manner that may surprise you.

We usually think the problem with culturally sanctioned "stolen looks" and "secret fantasies" about others lies in getting caught and upsetting our partners. In truth this is part of the problem. Neither men nor women like it when their partners do this, even if it is considered "harmless" by our culture. And why would they? It's a clear indication that their partner's interest, attention, eyes, and heart are elsewhere, rather than with them. This hurts, and it should. As a result, the moment someone does it there is a relationship problem.

The offended partner is forced by the very nature of the wandering action to have a reaction. Different partners will react differently. Some will become openly angry and will attempt to scold and scare their partner out of doing it again. Others will be more covertly angry and find ways to get even. This may include quietly withdrawing their attention and love, which may or may not include sexual interaction. They may overtly flirt with others and think of them while making love to their partner. Still others will begin to live their lives separately, finding more and more friends and interests outside of the partnership. Whatever the method, the bond of partnership will become increasingly unglued as partners slowly but surely drift apart.

But something else is happening as well, and this is an equally, if not greater, threat to the partnership, even though it is rarely identified or addressed in our culture. The partner who is looking around is, by the very act of looking, taking their own heart out of the relationship. Their eyes are no longer on their partner, noticing the qualities about him or her that first attracted them. Their hands are no longer caressing and comforting that partner or enjoying the way touching him or her stimulates their own heart and holds it to this particular person. The glue that bonds the partnership is forced to loosen in the act of looking at others, since the two cannot hold a place in their heart simultaneously. As a result, their loss of interest in looking at their partner or holding him or her to them serves as the real danger to their partnership. Instead their thoughts are with others who have stimulated their fantasies, and as these get increasingly in the way and come between them, their desire to talk or do things with their partner also wanes. They have moved on and are no longer really there.

Ironically, most people fail to notice this is the result of their reckless acts of "looking." Yet, it is both a powerful and pervasive consequence since it is impossible to stay in love while looking at others. They simply don't go together. This is something we fail to talk about in a culture that so broadly sanctions these "harmless" moments of letting interest and attention wander. In fact, when former President Jimmy Carter once tried to speak about his own error in doing this, he was mercilessly teased by the media for taking his emotional dalliances so seriously.

What is even more troublesome is that in spite of having moved on emotionally victimized partners continue to stay in the partnership. Although it seems they stay to be "loyal" to the person they committed a lifetime of partnership with, there is no loyalty in such an alliance ... nor is there commitment. Although their body remains, their heart is gone, and their partner can feel this.

All of their interactions from this point forward involve their various attempts to deal with the hurt, find the love that was lost, and see what can be done about getting back on course. But in truth, so long as this culturally sanctioned "looking about" remains in the equation, the problem can't be fixed. It not only hurts the ability to love, but to be loved and to enjoy a positive partnership experience.

So if you truly want to settle for more partnership and life, don't be lured by a mediocre standard that suggests it's okay to continue your search. Instead, tend to the prized person you have already found. In doing this you will bring to yourself the true joy you seek ... and in so doing you will be settling for more.

Although most people in partnerships want to maintain unhealthy habits and still improve their relationship, it can't work this way. Something has to change if relationships are going to improve, and defrocking the myths is a good start. Tom will continue to challenge this myth in next week's column.

*Tom Merrill, Ph.D., ABPP, and Bobbie Sandoz Merrill, MSW, are married and veterans of the relationship puzzle.*

*Tom (TomMerrill.com), a clinical psychologist, and Bobbie (BobbieSandozMerrill.com), a therapist and parenting specialist, bring their personal and clinical experiences to this column. They have co-authored*

*"Settle for More: You Can Have the Relationship You Always Wanted... Guaranteed", to be published in September 2005. They welcome reader responses and questions: Merrill@lava.net.*

# MARRIAGE MYTH # 3: MARRIAGE IS HARD

Third in a series on marriage myths.

*By Dr. Tom Merrill , Bobbie Sandoz Merrill, MSW*

Cox News Service

The Atlanta Journal-Constitution, Published on: 06/22/05

**Tom says:** We hear this refrain from folks who tell us their relationships are working as well as from those who report their's are going down for the count. The "happy" ones tell us it takes hard work to get and stay there and those who are not fairing so well say it takes too much hard work. And both will question whether the effort is worth it.

If you are one of the many who think making relationships and marriage work has to be difficult you have bought into the cultural myth. You have been hustled and you have been ripped off. Sure, you have reasons and examples to "prove" your view. But that is all they are...reasons or excuses why your relationship is that way. And if you are talking about someone else's situation or relationships in general, then you are clearly only participating in building the myth.

So, about now you may be asking, "well then, if it isn't hard, why does it seem so difficult?" The answer is either:

1. You are difficult and therefore making it hard
2. Your partner is being difficult and you have chosen to stay in the marriage any way, "putting up with" the difficult behavior or
3. You are both being difficult.

It doesn't matter which of the three it is, you can turn things on a dime.

If it is door No. 1, stop being difficult. It really is that simple. How hard was it before you married and were dating? How difficult was it when you were fully in each other's hearts, when you were preoccupied with loving thoughts and anticipation of seeing him or her again? When you were first feeling the rush of the new relationship, how hard was it to not be difficult? It wasn't hard at all! That's why you and your partner got pulled in and committed to each other.

So, why did you change to being someone who is difficult? Why would you change something that was working and guaranteed to get you what you want? Why? Whatever reasons you come up with do not matter. They are just that ... reasons.

We often hear people say they can't help being difficult. That their behavior simply comes from "being who I am." But they weren't being that way when they were getting their partner to fall in love with them. Sure, I know we all have issues we need to take care of. I don't know any healthy neurotics who do not, including me. But you don't have to get your early toilet training trauma handled in order to stop being difficult.

You can work on your stuff and be a loving partner. The truth is you are now being difficult because you choose to be. Pure and simple. So choose to go back to being the way you were in courtship.

Door No. 2? You are most likely really being difficult as well. If so, see door No. 1 above and stop. However, if you are truly being the ideal partner and have chosen to stay in a difficult relationship, stop complaining about it. That's like continually sticking your hand into a Cuisinart and then complaining that cooking is difficult. I would say, stop with the Cuisinart! You will have a very different cooking experience.

Again, assuming you are being the ideal partner and are making no contribution to the difficulties, being honest with your partner about the damage being done to your heart and feelings by their behavior is a way to remove yourself from the Cuisinart. If your partner really understands and wants the relationship to work, they can and will return to courtship behaviors. If they do not, you have a choice. Stay in and settle for less or settle for more and act appropriately.

And if it is door No. 3, the answer is first, the same as for door No. 1. If that does not produce a dramatic change in your partner, then you are now at the door No. 2 option.

The point is marriage is not difficult or hard work. Hard work? I spent summers in my youth digging ditches on a construction crew. That's hard work. Marriage and significant relationships are a piece of cake. Not making them work is the difficult part. And it seems that most folks are not making them work...or at least that is what the statistics tell us.

A remarkable book, "The Exceptional Seven Percent" by Gregory Popcak suggests that roughly 50 percent of marriages fail. Of the half that remains, 93 percent are marriages that fall short of the mark. Only seven percent are exceptional. So, it is from this 93 percent that the marriage-is-difficult myth has originated. If you are in this group, I invite you to be a myth buster. Here's how.

First, you have to want to be in the seven percent group. Second, you have to know and be able to clearly articulate what you want your relationship to be like. If you are in the ninety three percent you most likely have never done this. You will need to in order to be one of the seven percenters.

Think about it. How can you ever get to what you want if you do not know what it is? So, ask yourself, "What would my relationship look like if it were one of the exceptional ones?"

As you begin to flesh this out, write down the words you use as descriptors. For instance, among the things I want my relationship to be are loving, honoring, inclusive, sexual, communicative, honest, spiritual, connected and humorous. While there are many other descriptors, this will give you the idea.

Now, here's the million dollar tip to being in the seven percent group and joining the myth busters: if this is the kind of relationship you want then you have to be loving, honoring, inclusive, sexual, communicative, honest, spiritual, connected and humorous, etc. ... all of the time!

You don't get to stop just because your partner isn't being one of these ... no tit-for-tat in the seven percent. And you have to be this way all of the time. The minute you stop being consistent with your picture of the exceptional relationship, you are no longer in that relationship. Quite simple ... and quite powerful.

So, if you want to continue living in the fantasy of the myth that marriages and relationships are hard and difficult, terrific. However, if you want to join the seven percenters and leave the myth to others then choose to do so. You will be making the choice to settle for more.

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# MARRIAGE MYTH # 4: FIGHTING IS HEALTHY FOR MARRIAGE

Fourth in a series on marriage myths.

*By Dr. Tom Merrill , Bobbie Sandoz Merrill MSW*

Cox News Service

The Atlanta Journal-Constitution, Published on: 06/29/05

**Bobbie says:** Even though I intensely dislike verbal battles, I have always heard that engaging in them was good for marriages. As a result, I accepted this premise to be true, even though I also knew that fighting didn't work for me, personally, nor has it ever made me feel closer to anyone, including past partners. Yet, because I assumed it was appropriate to fight about differences within the context of a partnership, I didn't pause to examine the true effect fighting was having on me or my partners.

When I later reflected on why most of my relationships failed, verbal battles were the primary reason. So, why does our culture assure us that these fights are not only essential to the health of a relationship but that not having them threatens partnership?

I suspect this myth is founded on the idea that if we are fighting we are at least working out problems rather than burying them, as people did when I was growing up in the '40s and '50s. Moreover, in that era these battles were condoned by psychology, a field that was becoming a more commonly accepted part of American culture. The popular view at that time was that fights represented a new freedom for women to speak up and for both parties to express their differences, rather than let them fester under a carpet of silence as they often had in preceding years.

Once under way, open fighting offered an illusion that marriages were in better shape than they had been in prior decades. In fact, fighting seemed like such a good idea that the concept of expressing anger and "getting it out" was tacked onto the notion that fighting was healthy for couples. And so, we were off and running with several decades of duking it out in an Edward Albee manner in the privacy of our living rooms.

Yet the results were so poor that psychologists came up with an array of ways to "fight fair" and an equal number of techniques for mopping up the messes when things didn't go well. But what nobody seemed to notice was that the statistics on marital disconnection and eventual breakdown were rising.

Not surprisingly, fights were tearing down positive feelings spouses held for each other and pulled apart the Velcro that once bonded couples. And why would the outcome of fights have been different?

Can you remember fighting with someone and then feeling closer to them? And then fighting again and feeling even closer? And so on? Why would we think fighting would make us feel closer to our partner? How did we miss that it would make us feel considerably less close and increasingly less interested in kissing and making up?

As Tom and I began to more closely examine what was going wrong in marital partnership, it became evident to us that fighting does not make partners feel close or stay in love with each other. By contrast it pushes them away from the person they once loved and leaves them with a mounting number of negative feelings. In time, it causes each of their hearts to pull away and shut down to the other.

So what should we do? Go back to silence and allow "invisible" elephants to stomp about our living rooms or hide under carpets while we sink into depression? No. That will lead to breakdown as well, since the unspoken conflicts will not evaporate as we hope.

We are clear that partners do need a way to address their disagreements. But we are equally clear that setting a standard for doing so in a non-combative and honoring manner is the only way to succeed. It is also the only way to truly resolve conflicts and it is the only way to settle for more.

**Tom says:** The view that fighting is a necessary and inevitable part of marriage or committed relationships is probably the major reason people actually do fight. The expectation and tacit acceptance opens the way for the occurrence. The question Bobbie and I keep asking ourselves is: what if folks held the view that fighting has no place in a relationship where one loves, honors and respects their partner?

The question should actually be: why don't we hold this view? Bobbie has given her thoughts on the origin of the myth, and they make sense to me. Historically, humans have always come up with some good reason for fighting, so there is a precedent for fighting in one-on-one significant relationships. The problem is that fighting in one-on-ones is no more successful than fighting on a larger scale. Hearts are damaged, feelings killed and partnerships irreparably broken by the pain of the battle, which is felt by all of those in the combat zone. So why do folks hold to and perpetuate this myth that wreaks havoc on individuals, couples, families and communities?

When we ask couples why they fight their answers reflect faulty reasoning and truly convoluted logic. Responses include "because I was angry," "he/she won't listen to me and it makes me so frustrated," "he/she is trying to control me," etc. My favorite and the one I nominate for the all time dumb answer? "Because I am right and he/she is wrong and won't admit it. . . or doesn't get it. . ." or some variation of this theme. No wonder the myth is so entrenched!

When did fighting ever constructively get to and handle the root cause of anger? When did fighting get someone to listen to you or stop controlling you? And when did fighting get someone to understand your point of view, say truthfully you are right and they are wrong. . . and mean it. . . and not lie in waiting to prove that you are really wrong with an 'I told you so' sometime down the road?

It's not that we shouldn't get angry or frustrated or want our partner to listen to us and not try to 'control' us. It's not that we shouldn't have a point of view different from our partner's. But where did we get the idea that fighting is the tool of choice to achieve a loving relationship in which we are listened to, understood, supported and acknowledged? It would seem that the myth gives us permission to use the tool.

Fighting in the long run is really just a way of staying in a settle-for-less relationship. There is some illusion that fighting is a way to register a complaint and maybe if it is done forcefully or loudly enough a partner will change. Part of the illusion is that if they don't change, at least the instigator of the fight can say 'Boy! I told *them*.'

Want a hot scoop? You NEVER — that's right, never — need to fight.

I am not suggesting you should give in, be a door mat, withdraw or do any of the things folks usually do when they are trying to avoid conflict. These reactions do not work very well. They simply put off the inevitable.

What I am suggesting is to first decide if you do want to be in a loving, supportive, honoring and respectful relationship. If the answer is no, then keep doing what you have been doing. If the answer is yes then with your partner choose to raise the bar in your relationship and hold firm to the notion that there is no room for fighting. You can't be loving, honoring, supportive and respectful if you are fighting and trying to be right.

You and your partner will still need to deal with your emotions and differences in opinions. But being in a settle for more relationship will give you the tools to do this successfully. We have found that as couples do this they can easily let go of the myths that are driving their relationship into failure. Me? I have absolutely opted for a relationship with no fighting. It is remarkably easy.

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### *Note to Readers*

Relationship specialists Tom and Bobbie Medrill are addressing the myths of marriage in a series of columns. In previous columns they have taken on the myth that it's appropriate to measure the way we conduct our primary partnerships against the way others behave in theirs; that it's "harmless" to quietly "look around" and secretly "lust" after others; and that marriage is hard work. This week they are discussing the myth that it's not only acceptable, but healthy, to engage in verbal battles with our spouses and that if we're not fighting about our differences our marriage is probably in trouble.

# MARRIAGE MYTH # 5: POSTURING AND POUTING ARE WAYS TO GET WHAT WE WANT

Fifth in a series on marriage myths.

By Dr. Tom Merrill , Bobbie Sandoz Merrill, MSW

Cox News Service

The Atlanta Journal-Constitution, Published on: 07/06/05

*Relationship specialists Tom and Bobbie Merrill are addressing the myths of marriage in a series of columns. In previous columns they have taken on the myths that it's appropriate to measure the way we conduct our primary partnerships against the way others behave in theirs; that it's "harmless" to quietly "look around" and secretly "lust" after others; that marriage is hard work; and that fighting is healthy for marriage. This week they are discussing the myth that it's not only acceptable, but healthy, to engage in verbal battles with our spouses and that if we're not fighting about our differences our marriage is probably in trouble.*

Some of our most common relationship questions come out of our relationship myths. For example, we often hear questions such as, "My wife makes it very clear that she's not happy. But when I ask what's wrong, she rolls back her eyes or shakes her head while whispering, "Nothing." Then if I probe or try to do something to please her, she becomes more upset. Yet if I don't, she gets even madder. She feels I should know what the problem is, and my failure to see it makes her madder still!. The counterpart to this question comes from women who complain, "My husband plants an irritated look on his face and then picks up his paper or harumphs about the house. Sometimes this escalates to snapping, particularly if I ask what is wrong or try to ameliorate the situation. In fact, it often seems he is looking for a fight." These common scenarios reflect another of our cultural myths on how to make our relationships work.

**Bobbie says:** This myth suggests that if we pout and harrumph, we can get our partners to understand our needs and respond to us in a manner more to our liking. As partners get "comfortable" with each other, many ramp up the volume and some go into full tilt tantrums with or without throwing things or hitting walls.

Whenever we are posturing and pouting in a manner meant to let others know we are unhappy with them, our goal is to get them to worry about our bad mood and then do whatever they can to change it. The hope of course is that they will eventually give us our way. Ironically, much of this behavior has its roots in childhood and doesn't look much different when we are grown than it did then.

Children who do this successfully with their parents are the most inclined to try it as adults with their partners. Even though they instinctively know not to reveal this part of their personality during courtship, they view it as a powerful tool, once they feel free to unveil it. But what they fail to notice is that it was not a good behavior for building relationship in childhood, and it is even less valuable in adulthood. So why would anyone use it?

Those who do, are operating with the illusion that their irritated moods are working. Here's why. Whenever they tried these tactics as children, their parents responded by scurrying to do everything possible to appease them. They not only gave into their demands, but unwisely expanded, rather than contracted their freedoms. This response fed the illusion that the child would eventually get their way whenever they huffed and puffed. Unfortunately, children raised in this manner fail to notice that others outside of the family may also seem to give them their way, but do so at great cost. For even while non-family members were allowing them to be "the boss" of the relationship, they were for the most part also looking for new friends.

Spouses often act as these friends did and for the same reasons. Because behaviors such as sulking and anger tend to make us feel uneasy, most people will do what it takes to get it to stop. If that means giving the unhappy person their way, then so be it. But this is the worst thing to do, since it trains the irritated spouse that bad moods work.

As a result, the person who is "winning" and getting decisions to go their way is operating with even more of an illusion in partnership than they were as children. This is because the partner giving them what they want is neither relaxed nor happy in their presence, and many are closing down their hearts and quietly stealing away.

The distance usually makes the upset partner even more upset, while it offers the one dealing with their anger a feeling of safety. The problem with this interchange is that their partnership is robbed of sustained closeness, and they are missing the opportunity for the closeness they might otherwise enjoy.

Meanwhile, the love, attention, affection, caring, help and understanding the petulant partner is striving to gain by acting this way is ultimately being pushed further out of their interactions. The relationship is being damaged and may ultimately break down altogether.

So, what can be done to stop the course this is taking and bring the couple back to the affection and closeness they once felt for each other? The first thing for the non-angry partner to do is to stay loving, even though it feels threatening to do so . . . not by giving their partner their way, but by having the courage to stop responding in a manner that reinforces the destructive behavior.

From this more genuine, yet gentle side-by-side position and attitude, the calm partner can let their moody spouse know that it is their goal to be there for them and give them the love, attention and understanding they desire . . . but that they are no longer willing to do so as a reaction to scoldings. If the scold continues, the calm partner can announce that he or she will take a short break and return to try again.

The key is for the calm partner to stay calm, even when their partner does not join them in this. Touch and petting also help to interrupt the pattern of separation created by going head to head or slipping away from each other, and in time the invitation for closeness, rather than conflict, will prevail.

The calm partner can then begin the process of surfacing the issue so that they are able to discuss and heal it. Yet at this juncture, there is often another problem. The person with the grievance may not really have anything of substance to discuss, but has been fanning the fires of an overactive imagination. And because they realize their problem will look silly once aired, they have used their emotions to deflect the problem and avoid any discussion of their complaint.

Others may realize that they won't be able to get their partner to discuss things cleanly and clearly with them, so they hold back talking about it while keeping it alive in their own head. And still others may feel their partner will be so defensive that it's not worth bringing up. These are the people who are the most dangerous, since their issues are real, but they fail to air and clear them.

Whatever the reason for avoiding a partnership conversation and then replacing it with pouting or anger, this tactic can never work. By contrast, airing the truth of things at the outset is essential to clear partnership, and it is the only way to settle for more in our relationships.

*Tom Merrill, Ph.D., ABPP, and Bobbie Sandoz Merrill, MSW, are married and veterans of the relationship puzzle.*

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# MARRIAGE MYTH # 5: PART II: AVOIDANCE IS BETTER THAN ENGAGEMENT

Sixth in a series on marriage myths.

*By Dr. Tom Merrill , Bobbie Sandoz Merrill, MSW*  
Cox News Service

The Atlanta Journal-Constitution, Published on: 07/13/05

This is the concluding column in a series on marriage myths by relationship specialists Tom and Bobbie Merrill. In previous columns they have taken on the myths that it's appropriate to measure the way we conduct our primary partnerships against the way others behave in theirs; that it's "harmless" to quietly "look around" and secretly "lust" after others; that marriage is hard work; and that fighting is healthy for marriage. This week, in the second part of a column that began last week, they are discussing the myth that avoidance is better than engagement.

**This week's myth:** Avoidance is better than engagement, Part II. Last week Bobbie addressed the very common relationship dynamic of pouting and withdrawing. This behavior comes from the myth that avoiding conversation by withdrawing and pouting is a successful method of getting what you want. In the conclusion to their series on marriage myths, this week Tom gives his view.

**Tom says:** The biggest, most commonly told lie in relationships comes in response to a partner's question, "What's wrong?"

Here's the lie. . . "Nothing!"

So indulge me for a bit while I attempt to give a male's perspective.

As Bobbie described so well in last week's column, the genesis of this sort of response is lessons learned as children. Some of us tantrumed, pouted, and withdrew when we did not get our way and were re-enforced in our behavior. Finding it a successful tool as little squirts, we have carried it in our bag into adulthood and trot it out whenever circumstances call for it. However, some of us did not do this, or if we did we were not rewarded. Yet we do not hesitate to reach into the old tool kit and pull it out at the first sign of things not going our way. So, what is it that makes this lie the most universal response to dealing with something that is bothering us?

Having been one of the best liars, I know of what I speak. But my thoughts about this do not come just from my experience.

Rather, the couples Bobbie and I have worked with as well as those I have seen alone, observed as friends, family and neighbors or seen or read about in movies, television, books, magazines. . . all model the general acceptability of "the lie." And it doesn't take much to realize on the face of it that it is an absolute lie, an untruth. Because if our partner picks up on something, and asks about it, the chances are very good that something is there. Saying "nothing" does not make it go away.

It would appear that there are two categories of the "nothing" lie:

One that comes before we think we have hooked the heart.

One that comes after.

This corresponds roughly with the before and after wedding time-frames as well. In the courting/dating/hustling stage of the relationship it is important that the object of our interest think the best of us. . . that we are accepting, loving, interested and open.

You're not on time? Hey, I am easy-going about it. . . it's OK.

You don't want to see the same movie as I? Hey, I am easy about it. . . let's see yours.

You can't see me tonight? Hey, I am easy about it. . . how about tomorrow?

But all along there might be a little internal saboteur mumbling in the background.

"You're late!"

"I don't want to see that dumb movie!"

"What do you mean you won't go out with me tonight?!"

Should our disgruntlement slip out and we get questioned we double our effort to appear placid and peaceful. We pull out the lie hoping it will put some lipstick on that ugly-pig behavior that eked out.

Post hustling/dating/courting or once married, our irritation is poorly disguised and in fact might be intentionally presented. But when queried by our partner, the lie remains the same. . . and "nothing!" is spewed out with such an obvious charge that it is almost humorous if observed from an objective vantage point.

I am certain those who employ this tactic can't possibly see how ridiculous and transparent this looks. The problem lies in the desire to have it be transparent because it is a way of registering a complaint, albeit a childish way as Bobbie has pointed out.

But here is the hooker. Whether the lie is a passive-aggressive way of bringing to the surface and dealing with our partner's unacceptable behavior or a poorly executed but genuine attempt to avoid confrontation, it is still a lie. It does not address the underlying fundamental relationship issue, that is, what you really think and feel about the behavior. . . what you interpret the behavior to mean, not the behavior itself.

So, if my being late makes you feel disrespected, misunderstood or dishonored, then that is what we need to talk about and what I need to apologize for, not my time management. I can be on time and still be disrespectful, misunderstanding and dishonoring. But being in a settle for more relationship, one that includes being honoring, respectful, and understanding means I will never be late.

The next time you are feeling upset by your partner's behavior and they want to know if there is something wrong, don't buy into the avoidance myth by responding with "nothing!" Rather, go directly to the way they are being that is inconsistent with the kind of relationship in which you want to be. Make that the focus, and you will be opening the possibilities for a settle for more relationship, rather than the guarantee of one in which you settle for less.

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# FIVE MYTHS OF RELATIONSHIPS

## *Myth 1*

### Marriage Is Hard Work

Marriage need not be any harder than courtship, which is often identified as one of the happiest times of a person's life.

## *Myth 2*

### Marriage Has Its Ups and Downs

**Why?** Marriage can and should always go up, and there is absolutely no reason for it to ever go down.

## *Myth 3*

### Marriage Requires Compromise

Compromise assures that nobody gets what they want, whereas The Third Story is not only more easily obtained, but gets everyone's vote.

## *Myth 4*

### Fighting Is Important for the Health of Your Marriage

There is never any excuse for fighting. All opinions can be politely, even lovingly delivered.

## *Myth 5*

### It's Natural for Romance to Fade

Being in love is a wonderful state, so why kill it with a rapid decline in civility the moment wedding vows are said?