

But My Partner is So Extreme!

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At this point you might be thinking, “I can get with the idea that there are legitimately different ways of navigating relationships, but you don’t understand...my partner is so extreme! She gets upset about *every little thing!*” or “If it was up to her, I would *never* spend time with my friends.” If your partner’s behavior is extreme or rigid, consider the question, “Why is she like this? Why is she so extreme?” An enormous amount of research has been devoted to this question in recent decades, and we now have some pretty good ideas about why people become more rigid or extreme in their relationships over time.

Most people who are upset about their partners’ extreme or rigid actions can remember a time when it seemed like their partners were less extreme. They might have had the same basic personality tendencies, but they were more willing to give and take and were less rigid. Is this true of your partner? If it is, an important question for you to consider is: “Why has she gotten worse over time?” “Why didn’t this show up as a problem this strongly in the beginning?” The most common reason given to explain one’s partner’s increasing rigidity or inflexibility over time goes something like this: “In the beginning she was trying harder. She was putting her best foot forward...but you can only put your best foot forward so long. If you’re basically selfish, or controlling, or lazy or whatever, it’ll begin to show up sooner or later. I think my partner was like this all along...it just took a while for her true character to show up.”

This is a sensible hypothesis, but there’s another explanation that fits in nearly every situation we’ve encountered at our clinic. If you feel your partner’s behavior or attitude has gotten worse over time, consider this: *Your partner may have become more extreme or entrenched in direct proportion to the extent that she’s felt criticized or told by you that there’s something wrong with the way she prioritizes things or conducts herself in your relationship.* She’s gotten more extreme in reaction to feeling written off by you as substandard in some way.

Let me put it another way: if your partner has sensed that you believe there’s something wrong with her natural coping style in one or more of the core difference areas I have described elsewhere (see the article: *Core Differences in Ways of Maintaining Emotional Stability*), there’s no way of knowing how much of her increasingly extreme or rigid stance is due to her underlying personality, or how much of it is a reaction to feeling judged by you. The only way you could know this is for you to find a way to stop judging her, to be willing to meet her halfway, and to ask her to do the same. Then see if her rigid or extreme stance continues or not.

This is a huge point, so let me elaborate. If you’re like most couples, it’s very likely that you and your partner entered your relationship with at least one of the differences in nervous system wiring I have described in the article *Core Differences in Ways of Maintaining Emotional Stability*. It’s very likely that your partner’s way of maintaining emotional stability in at least of these areas directly interferes with yours. This happens in almost all relationships. Now here’s the important point. Rather than seeing her behavior as arising from a legitimately different way of coping and feeling good in life, you may have interpreted her behavior from within your own framework. From within your own way of looking at things she may have seemed out of

line, and you might have found yourself thinking things like, “I would never treat her the way she treats me!” or “I would never make such a big deal over something so insignificant!” You probably weren’t wanting her to do anything that you weren’t willing to do yourself. It’s not like you had a double standard or anything...it’s just that you were holding her to a standard that she didn’t share, or maybe she shared it, but it wasn’t as high on her priority list.

If you were judging her by your own standards, and she was continually falling short, it’s likely that you began to write her off as having a character flaw of some kind. You might have started to see her as selfish, controlling, irresponsible, lazy, or something like that. If she started sensing that you were writing her off as defective in some fundamental way, she felt threatened—and when you feel threatened it’s natural to dig your heels in even more. It’s almost impossible for people to make the changes wanted by their partners if they feel their partners are unfairly judging them. It becomes a matter of survival. If your partner made changes in these areas, it would have felt to her like she was admitting that you were right all along. If she sensed that you felt that you were normal and she was defective, her reactions probably became more extreme. The last thing she would want to say is, “OK, I see what you mean. You’re OK, but I’m screwed up. Here, let me fix myself for you.” No, what she probably wanted to say was some version of, “Screw you! I won’t budge an inch, because I’m not wrong!” She probably believed, and maybe correctly, that once you developed a view of her as flawed, she’d never be able to prove otherwise, even if she tried. This might have led her to think, “What’s the point in even trying? I might as well just do whatever I want.” And her behavior may have become more extreme.

I’m suggesting that you may be seeing an extreme or exaggerated version of a basic tendency of your partner which is quite normal but very different than yours. Your partner’s behavior may be exaggerated not because of a personality deficiency, but in response to feeling threatened by your critical judgment. She may feel that you don’t value or understand something very important to her. This has been alarming and has triggered fairly intense and sometimes extreme behavior on her part. By being unable to recognize and support the legitimate dreams and needs that are critically important to her, you may have unintentionally perpetuated the very behavior in her that you wanted to change. If your conclusion has been that her extreme behavior is evidence of a fundamental personality flaw rather than a reaction to feeling threatened, you likely have driven your partner to even more extreme behavior. Without intending to, you may have brought out the worst in your partner. If this is true, there’s only way out of this. Let go of the idea that there’s something fundamentally wrong with your partner’s views or priorities or expectations, and grab onto the idea that she’s probably so extreme because at some level she feels written off by you.

At this point you might be thinking, “OK, maybe there isn’t anything wrong with my partner’s basic personality or coping style, but my style is different, and she isn’t willing to make room for mine. She won’t meet me in the middle!” If this is the case, first of all, consider that she may not be willing to meet you in the middle because she doesn’t *hear you asking* her to meet you in the middle. She may think you’re saying that there’s something wrong with her priorities and that she needs to think and act according to yours. Most people who are extreme or rigid do feel that their partners want to impose their values on them. But let’s assume for a moment that your partner doesn’t think this about you. You’ve managed to convince her that you’re not saying there’s something wrong with her way of thinking or doing things, and she

understands that you're just asking her to meet you in the middle. But she won't! She won't budge an inch! If your partner won't meet you in the middle, then you need to take it a step further and stand up for yourself without making a big deal of the fact you have to. I've reviewed in detail elsewhere how successful people do this (see the article, *Reacting Effectively When Your Partner Says or Does Something That You Don't Like or Agree With*). In this case, standing up means dropping the idea that she's some awful person for refusing to meet you in the middle, and instead firing a friendly warning shot, and if she doesn't respond, being willing to go toe to toe with her until she's willing to give your ideas and priorities equal regard.