

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! If I didn’t pitch a fit, he wouldn’t do anything around here!” or “He never even tries to understand why I’m upset.” If your partner’s behavior is extreme or rigid, consider the question, “Why is he like this? Why is he 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 he 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 he was trying harder. He was putting his 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 his 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 he’s felt criticized or told by you that there’s something wrong with the way he prioritizes things or conducts himself in your relationship.* He’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 his 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 his increasingly extreme or rigid stance is due to his 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 him, to be willing to meet him halfway, and to ask him to do the same. Then see if his 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 his behavior as arising from a legitimately different way of coping and feeling good in life, you may have interpreted his behavior from within your own framework. From within your own way of looking at things he may have seemed out of line, and you might have found yourself thinking things like, “I would never treat him the way he treats me!” or “I would never make such a big deal over something so insignificant!” You

probably weren't wanting him 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 him to a standard that he didn't share, or maybe he shared it, but it wasn't as high on his priority list.

If you were judging him by your own standards, and he was continually falling short, it's likely that you began to write him off as having a character flaw of some kind. You might have started to see him as selfish, controlling, irresponsible, lazy, or something like that. If he started sensing that you were writing him off as defective in some fundamental way, he 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 him like he was admitting that you were right all along. If he sensed that you felt that you were normal and he was defective, his reactions probably became more extreme. The last thing he 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 he probably wanted to say was some version of, "Screw you! I won't budge an inch, because I'm not wrong!" He probably believed, and maybe correctly, that once you developed a view of him as flawed, he'd never be able to prove otherwise, even if he tried. This might have led him to think, "What's the point in even trying? I might as well just do whatever I want." And his 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. He may feel that you don't value or understand something very important to him. This has been alarming and has triggered fairly intense and sometimes extreme behavior on his part. By being unable to recognize and support the legitimate dreams and needs that are critically important to him, you may have unintentionally perpetuated the very behavior in him that you wanted to change. If your conclusion has been that his 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 he's probably so extreme because at some level he 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 he isn't willing to make room for mine. He won't meet me in the middle!" If this is the case, first of all, consider that he may not be willing to meet you in the middle because he doesn't *hear you asking* him to meet you in the middle. He may think you're saying that there's something wrong with his priorities and that he 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 him that you're not saying there's something wrong with his way of thinking or doing things, and he understands that you're just asking him to meet you in the middle. But he won't! He 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 he's some awful person for refusing to meet you in the middle, and instead firing a friendly warning shot, and if he doesn't respond, being willing to go toe to toe with him until he's willing to give your ideas and priorities equal regard.