

Signs of a Controlling Guy

By MARIE HARTWELL-WALKER, ED.D.

Letters like these come in to our “Ask the Therapist” column every week:

“My boyfriend freaks out if I go out with my friends for an evening — even though he hangs out with his friends almost every day,” says Angela. “I love my boyfriend to death but he’s always putting me down,” says Katie. “Every weekend we have to go see my boyfriend’s mom but he doesn’t want to spend any time with my family. It’s gotten so I have to lie if I’m going to see my own sister,” says Kieshi.

Angel’s letter is only a little different: “I used to have lots of friends but my boyfriend wants all my time. I used to think that was romantic. Now I’m scared I’m losing most of my friends.” And Melody echoes several other letters when she says, “My boyfriend is always accusing me of coming on to other guys when we’re out. Guys do look at me but I don’t invite it. It’s gotten so I don’t want to go out any more cuz we always end up in a big fight about it.”

It’s almost as if these young women are in relationships with the same guy who just zips himself into a different outer suit to appeal to the woman he’s with. In the name of romance or commitment or love, he increasingly limits his girlfriend’s life and chips away at her self-esteem. This is what is meant by a “controlling” boyfriend.

Why do some guys act like this? Generally it’s because they are scared of the vulnerability that comes with loving and trusting someone. They may have been betrayed by a former girlfriend and fear being hurt again. They may have grown up observing relationships where the man held the upper hand by controlling the woman. Their self-esteem may be so low that the only way they can be sure that someone will stay with them is to make the girl’s self-esteem even lower. Whatever the reason, it isn’t good for them or for the women who had the misfortune to fall in love with them. Relationships built on distrust and control are unhealthy. Relationships where love is held hostage don’t last.

There are some common signs of a controlling guy. If you recognize your boyfriend or yourself here, you may want to take a step back from the relationship. But please be careful not to jump to conclusions based on a list. It’s not at all uncommon for people to have some of these characteristics some of the time. When people get scared, they often try to get things back under control.

Signs like these become a problem when they become a pattern. If your guy shows some of these behaviors but will talk about them with you and will work consistently on making change, it may be worth it to hang onto the relationship. Part of becoming a couple is negotiating how you will manage different tastes, different opinions, and different ways of operating in the world. It’s the guys who regularly

behave in a number of these ways (especially those who get physical) and who see nothing wrong with it that you have to be concerned about. A guy whose standard operating procedure is “my way or the highway” is someone who is more interested in being in charge than being in a relationship of mutual respect.

7 Warning Signs of Men Who Need Too Much Control

You are his everything. Sounds great, doesn't it? It's not. When a guy needs to be attached to you at the hip and you can't do anything without his say-so, it's a big red flag. Sure, it's normal to be with each other constantly in the first blush of new love. But if it goes on after the first few months; if it limits your ability to do things independently; if it means that you have no privacy; then it has become an issue of control.

You find yourself losing contact with family, friends, and activities you once enjoyed. He may not even like you to be on the phone or Facebook or email unless he's around. He always has a reason. He says he doesn't like how so-and-so takes advantage of you. He says he wants you to spend more time with him. He says your family is too controlling. Some of it even sounds like it makes sense. But over time your boyfriend has isolated you to the point that you don't have many friends anymore and your family complains that you are neglecting them.

He has different rules for you than he has for himself. He gets to hang out with the guys. You don't get time with your girlfriends. He makes plans for both of you but flips out if you do the same. He flirts with other girls when you're out but makes sure you have eyes only for him. He insists on his right to privacy regarding his phone log or his email account or his Facebook password but gets angry if you draw the same boundaries.

He invites, then insists, that you join in his life but isn't interested in getting to know yours. Over time, the two of you end up spending your time going to events and doing only the things that interest your guy even if you're not terribly interested. You rarely if ever do things you love to do. You may justify it at first, figuring that you're more flexible, that you want to get to know his friends, that it's cool that he wants to teach you about his interests, that getting him to go to one of your events isn't worth his sighing and his restlessness and his comments. But somehow you end up making all the compromises and feeling like you've lost something that was important to you.

Finances are a big issue. Somehow you've ended up either not having any money of your own or spending it all on your life together. This is one of those issues where opposites produce the same outcome. In some controlling relationships, the boyfriend gradually, or not so gradually, does little or nothing to support the couple. The girlfriend finds herself working all the time to keep the bills paid and food on the table while he “looks for work” or

“waits for his band’s big break” or drops in and out of school or simply does nothing but make promises that tomorrow it will be different. On the other end of the spectrum is the guy who says that he will take care of his girlfriend, that she doesn’t need to work, that he needs her at home, that real women take care of their family. All that would be fine if the couple had a reasonable way of sharing and managing the family income. But the controlling guy doles out an allowance like it’s the last dollar and doesn’t let his girlfriend or wife in on many of the financial decisions that affect both of them. She ends up even further isolated and dependent on him.

He is never at fault. In fact, he is phobic about blame. The controlling guy always finds a way to make you feel that anything that goes wrong in your relationship is all about you. If you have a complaint, he will quickly move the conversation to all the things you’ve done wrong since the beginning of time. Instead of discussing your concern, you find yourself on the defensive. Instead of working out a compromise, you feel you have to give in or the fight will go on forever.

Often these relationships become physically abusive. If the guy is controlling because he doesn’t trust you, he may lose it when he is suspicious. Sadly, it doesn’t take much to make him suspicious. What generally follows are accusations, blaming, relentless grilling, and anger. When we’re talking about something as ephemeral as trust, it’s almost impossible to defend oneself. How do you explain away something that never happened in the first place? Not satisfied with the girlfriend’s answers, the guy gets increasingly frustrated and, though he’d never admit it, scared. It’s not uncommon for the guy to get physical at that point.

If you’re in a relationship that is more about control than about mutual respect, mutual support, and mutual care, do something about it. If you believe that there is real love underneath all the drama, by all means try to talk it out and work it out. But if your guy can’t make the compromises that go with treating a partner as an equal; if he needs to control you to feel like a man; it’s time for you to take back control of yourself and your life. Do what you need to do to extricate yourself safely. Hold out for the kind of love you deserve.

Resources

If you are afraid to end your relationship, you need help and support to stay safe. Call the National Resource Center on Domestic Violence at 800-537-2238 or visit their website at www.ncdsv.org/.

Why Women Stay with Controlling Men

By MARIE HARTWELL-WALKER, ED.D.

Why would a woman stay in a relationship with a guy who puts her down, hems her in, and perhaps even physically abuses her? Why would a woman hold down two jobs to keep the rent paid and food on the table while her boyfriend sits around smoking weed all day? Why oh why would a woman allow herself to be emotionally blackmailed by her boyfriend's threats that he will kill himself or her or both if she even talks about leaving a relationship that is going nowhere?

There's no easy answer. Often it's a complicated mix of a number of answers. If you wonder why on earth you stay with the guy who keeps hurting you in spite of promises to do better, in spite of protestations that he loves you, in spite of your obvious distress about how things are going, see if you recognize yourself in any of these common reasons.

But please be careful not to jump to conclusions based on a list. It's not at all uncommon for relationships to have some challenging times. Reasons for staying become problems when they become excuses or ways we fool ourselves into believing that things aren't that bad when in fact they are. If you keep getting hurt; if you know in your heart that the relationship is diminishing you but you still keep going back for more, it may be time for you to get into [therapy](#) or to find the resources in your community that help women extricate themselves from a controlling or abusive relationship.

8 Bad Reasons Women Stay in Painful Relationships

Because being someone's everything is intoxicating stuff – at least at first.

When you met, he only had eyes for you. He called to say good morning. He called to say "I love you" at lunch. He wanted to be the last voice you heard before you went to [sleep](#). When you left work or your last class for the day, there he was - waiting for you. If another guy even looked at you, he put his arm protectively around you. If a guy friend called you up, he pouted. He wanted all your attention. In exchange, he gave you attention as no one ever had before. He wined you and dined you (or at least took you out for pizza and a beer several times a week) and made you feel like a princess. Sounds like any romantic beginning, doesn't it? If your guy is so insecure that he needs control, his attention gradually became claustrophobic. Over time, his demands for all your attention all the time hemmed you in. You found yourself frantically explaining your every move that didn't involve him. Staying a bit late for work, a girls' night out, even a visit to your mother on a Saturday morning became grounds for a fight. What started out as wonderful

attention became not so wonderful control.

Because these guys can be absolutely charming. You didn't fall in love with your boyfriend for no good reason. He can be charming. He can be romantic. He can say the things that every woman would like to hear. Sometimes he lets you see a sweet vulnerability that melts your heart. He seems to feel genuinely terrible after the two of you have had a big fight. He brings apologies and flowers. He promises he'll be less jealous. He says you really are his everything. Lovemaking at times like these is delicious. He says all the right things to make you want to give him another chance. Things are wonderful for awhile. But then it starts all over again. You come home a little late and his eyes look stormy. You make a phone call and he has to know just who you're talking to. Pretty soon, you're feeling hemmed in again and you know that there's going to be another blow-out...

Because you don't feel you deserve any better. Maybe you grew up in a family where you were told that you were no good, ugly, clumsy, or incompetent. Maybe your father or mother even told you "No one will ever love you." Perhaps you were an ugly duckling in high school who never had a date or you were never accepted by the people you wished were your friends. Maybe you've had a series of disastrous relationships or no relationships at all. Your self-esteem is in the cellar. Even though a part of you knows that your family should have treated you better; even though you understand that high school is harsh for a lot of people, there's an even bigger part of you that feels that maybe all the people who rejected you were right - you really are a loser. You've become convinced you should be grateful for any smidgen of caring your boyfriend provides - even if it is painful.

Because you don't know any better. All the women you grew up with were in abusive, difficult relationships. All your girlfriends complain about men who don't do their share and who stopped being "Mr. Wonderful" long ago. Lacking role models for positive, loving relationships, you think good relationships only happen in the movies. Although you can agree in theory that women deserve to be treated with consideration and respect by the men who love them, you've never seen such a relationship up close and personal.

Because he scares you or manipulates you. There are men who aren't a bit subtle about their need for control. Try to leave and they threaten to hurt you or your kids or other people you care about. He may have even grabbed you too hard or hit you or locked you in a room or waved a gun around. When he goes into a rage, there's no telling what he might do. So you do everything you can to prevent it - including staying. The manipulators are equally effective in trapping their women. They say they will commit suicide if you leave - and it will be all your fault. They are masters at making you feel guilty even when you don't have a clue what you are guilty for. Fights inevitably shift to all the things you've done wrong - or at least wronger than him. You end up staying to make amends and make it right or because you can't bear

the idea of living with the guilt if he hurts himself.

Because you truly believe you can change him. Because the relationship started out so wonderfully and because he can be so terrific after a fight, you hold onto the idea that you can bring out the best in him. All you have to do is find the right words and behave in the right way, and you'll have the man of your dreams. Love conquers all, right? Wrong. No one can make another person be anything. He has to want it. He has to be willing to work on it. He has to want to change because it will make him a better person, not because he made an insincere promise in order to make up after a fight. Even though you know all this, you convince yourself that you're an exception. You're going to find a way.

Because you are more afraid of being alone again than of being in a painful relationship. You've been alone and it's lonely. You want someone to talk to in the evening, to cuddle up to at night, to at least once in awhile take the kids. Even picking up his laundry, cooking meals he doesn't appreciate, and fighting with him is more appealing than coming home to an empty house. If he does help pay the bills and do a few chores (and especially if he pays most of the bills and can be counted on to do some of the heavy work), it's even harder to think about going it alone. Supporting a family and doing everything to maintain a household as a single person is really, really hard. Maintaining the fiction that you have a partner feels better than dealing with the reality of going it alone.

Because you love him. The most common answer I get when I ask women why they stay in bad relationships is "because I love him." Love isn't always rational, it's true. There's no accounting for chemistry. But the fact is that love, especially one-sided love, isn't enough to sustain a relationship. It's like one hand clapping.

If you are always on the giving end in the relationship; if you've accepted indifference, abuse, or manipulation because you don't believe you deserve or can get better, it's time to take charge of your life and to make some changes. If your guy will agree, try out couples therapy. Couples can and do change with commitment to the process and love for each other. If your boyfriend won't join you in the project, get some therapy for yourself. Build up your self-esteem, develop the skills you need to be successful in the world, and increase your confidence in yourself. A stronger you will be able to hold out for the loving relationship that you deserve.

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