



**CAROLYN
HAX**

Tell Me
About It

Taking abuse not someone else's fault

Dear Carolyn: My partner throws my attempts at compromise back in my face. For example, when I say I am angry or upset, she would say, "Normal people would not be upset at that." Or, "You should not need time alone; what is wrong with you?" It feels like I am living the cliché that she is always right. It gets old, always being wrong and at fault. — Md.

Dear Md.: So what do you plan to do about it?

She may be in the habit of making everything someone else's fault, but you've got a touch of that flu, too. When you describe your unhappy situation, you're pointing the finger at her.

Yet even though I do take you at your word that she has created an oppressive environment — an abusive one, in fact — you're still the one who's choosing to stay in it. And that's on you.

This isn't to pile on more blame. It's to point out that it isn't as simple as, "This person is bad, and I'm good." It never is. At the heart of every unhappy pair is this: two people satisfying a need.

Certainly you can decide you don't "need" this abuse, and break up. However, if you don't have that clarity or courage yet then I'd suggest looking past the "what" to the "why."

Why her need to be right? You know part of the answer all too well: because being wrong feels bad.

Here's the rest of it. People who feel generally good about themselves can handle a little bad. They can say, oops, I screwed up, I'm sorry, without its presenting a serious challenge to the value they place on themselves.

It's different for people who doubt their own worth — or people who see their worth as dependent upon visibly outperforming others. Then the vulnerability that comes with admitting fault looms a lot larger, and so the resistance to it is greater. An unwavering, "It's not me, it's you," plays like dominance, and that's exactly the point. That's what cornered animals do.

The more complicated question is where you come in, since you gave me so little. Often people are emotionally trained to seek out difficult company, as if they don't trust (or just aren't interested in) approval that's easy to get. Maybe that's your need that she fills.

But sometimes these relationships have a passionate start that masks the problem. By the time it occurs to you that you're always wrong — and possibly not even happy — the natural and generous human impulse to hold on to loved ones works against you, by making you willing to try to be better. That might fill a need to feel steadfast, supportive, good.

These are, obviously, very general points. You need to find the specifics that apply to you. That's how you get well. And when you do, you can find out whether she can get well, too — not to mention whether you even care to be there to find out.

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