

CAN THIS BE LOVE?

HIS TRULY AWFUL HABITS How to cope with a tooth-tapping, hair-twirling, knuckle-cracking man

To paraphrase the dictionary on my desk, a habit is any pattern of behavior that is regularly—and often involuntarily—performed. Smoking comes under this heading, as does calling one's mother. Then there are those body-connected habits we all possess, physical involvements we have with ourselves, like tapping our teeth to the beat of "Old MacDonald." These are innocent enough pastimes, but they can cause problems, especially when we perceive our *partners'* habits as being less innocent than (a) annoying (cracking his knuckles) or (b) disgusting (picking his feet).

If your partner's habits drive you to distraction, or points east, you would probably like to break him of them. To do that, or to cope with his habits in a more productive way than by screaming that if he doesn't stop biting his nails you will pull them out with a pair of red-hot pincers, follow the suggestions below:

1. Since a lot of habits are performed unconsciously, alert your partner to what he is doing. Whenever he indulges in a particularly annoying habit, you might (a) crash a pair of cymbals together or blow loudly on a police whistle, (b) put on a pair of shoes with cleats and noisily clomp from the room, or (c) mimic him, exaggerating his behavior and adding animal sounds for emphasis.

2. Fear is a good deterrent to a bad habit, so if your partner persists in his unwanted behavior, consider frightening him out of it. Inform him that if he doesn't stop biting the inside of his lower lip, *you* will bite the *outside*. Tell him that swinging his crossed leg up and down and jingling the change in his pocket are both considered masturbatory habits and are indicative of an unfulfilled sex life, as any of his friends will quickly be able to infer. Suggest that exploring the inside of his nose could result in damage to his nasal cavity, and an inability to smell the cheap perfume that he seems to find so provocative on your seventeen-year-old cousin.

3. Urge him to seek professional help. Do you suspect that the way he twirls the hair on the back of his neck stems from an unconscious desire to be a majorette? Do you

worry that his audible and obsessive swallowing of saliva may come from a gnawing feeling of inner emptiness? Then he needs your support, not your scorn. Tell him you like him just the way he is, and that *you* don't think of him as a hollow shell. You might get him a copy of Sigmund Freud's little-known work, "The Interpretation of Disgusting Habits."

4. If your partner has a particular habit that you can't stand, suggest a substitute habit that you *can* live with. For instance, he could exchange his habit of audibly drawing air through the gaps in his teeth for one of buying you expensive jewelry. Or, instead of pulling at his eyebrows, he could substitute the habit of making dinner every night.

5. To soothe your annoyance with your partner's habits, compare them with those of other men you know. My friend Susan did this; she was annoyed by her husband Ted's habit of idly scratching his chest as he lay reading next to her in bed, until she remembered her first husband's habit—of lying next to *other* women in bed. Likewise, I used to be annoyed at my own partner's habit of pulling at the hair on the back of his head until I recalled the boyfriend who occasionally pulled at the hair on the back of *mine*.

6. You can also up your tolerance of your partner's habits by understanding their origins. Perhaps the nervous way he pinches his mouth together with his fingers stems from the time he was a youngster and his mother constantly threatened to wash his mouth out with soap. And maybe the way he continually licks his lip bespeaks an early concern with being taunted by other children for having a milk mustache. You're likely to be more tolerant of his habits if you view them as unconscious reactions to life's stresses rather than as deliberate attacks on your sanity.

7. If there is an awful habit that you can neither tolerate nor remove from your home, try removing yourself. Take a course in self-hypnosis. Then, every time your partner clears his throat with a noise like that made by bulldozers clearing a major excavation, you can mentally transport yourself from your home to some place more appealing, like Mars.

Finally, keep in mind that tolerating a partner's habits is a reciprocal business and may have unexpected rewards. If you can tolerate his incessant and toneless humming without trying to stop it by the lethal use of his tie, perhaps he'll be more tolerant of *your* innocent little habits (like your habit of borrowing and losing a rather broad spectrum of his possessions). And maybe, if you can stop nagging him about his habits altogether, he'll feel like breaking the one of never saying "I love you" in broad daylight.

by Bette-Jane Raphael