

# CAN THIS BE LOVE?

## WHEN LOVE MEANS HAVING TO SAY "GET LOST"

Even if your relationship runs so smoothly that you make Barbie and Ken look quarrelsome, you've probably found you need some private time away from your partner: to contemplate life's mysteries (like why the ten pounds that came off so easily at sixteen have settled in for early retirement on your hips); to catch up on reading and movie-going (since your partner refuses to see any film with "love" in the title); to see the five out of six of your friends he doesn't like; or simply to get reacquainted with the self you were before making all those changes necessary to a successful relationship (like eating breakfast and watching TV golf).

Your partner, too, is likely to need some time to himself. Still, negotiating private time can be difficult. This is because the kinds and amounts of time people need often differ.

Perhaps you need a night to yourself every couple of weeks—and he needs the months ending in "r." Perhaps you like to take your private time by yourself in the den—and he likes to take his with six friends in San Juan.

My friend Annie describes the situation with her husband: "The problem is that Peter's idea of private time is being with me, and *my* idea of private time is being with me. I tell him I've made plans to have dinner with a friend, and he reacts as if I said I've made plans to see a lawyer. He's been getting better, though, since I explained that my wanting to be with other people once in a while, or by myself, can be interpreted in ways other than that I find him totally repulsive."

Susan reports that her husband, Ted, is always offended if she goes off on her own, even at a party. They'll come home and Ted will complain that Susan didn't talk to him very much. Susan's position is that she didn't go to the party to talk to *him*, not when there were twenty or thirty other people there who, unlike Ted, would not be coming home with her. "Look at it this way," she tells him. "I don't have to put on pantyhose in order to talk to you."

I can sympathize with Ted, since at our house I'm the one who needs less private

time than my partner. I could hardly need *more*, since this is a man who, after four consecutive days in the same company (mine) tries to petition the governor for a pardon. The first three days of Thanksgiving, for instance, he's content and comfortable. Then, on the fourth day, I notice a certain jitteriness to his behavior not unlike that of Saint Vitus' Dance. On Monday morning he's likely to announce, "Don't expect to see much of me this week," and, true to his word, proceeds to have less personal involvement with me in the next few days than I have with the laundryman.

At my friend Sarah's house, conflicts about private time don't center on amount as much as they do on kind. This is because Sarah, who spends her private time with the fictional characters in books and movies, or with friends whom her partner is grateful not to see, enjoys recounting her thoughts and experiences. But to her partner, private time is just that—private—a fact that has her suspecting he spends it in the company of people with names like Candy.

Sue says she'd get down on her knees in thanks if only her husband would show some of the secretiveness of Sarah's lover. Sue has fairly decorous evenings out, usually dinner at a modest restaurant with one of her friends. She is home by 10:30 at the outside, sober and satisfied. Her husband likes to go out with the boys (a literal term, according to Sue, who maintains that none of them acts older than fourteen) and usually wanders in at two in the morning, dazed, incoherent and, worst of all, inordinately pleased with himself. He then insists on giving Sue a mostly incomprehensible account of his evening. "At this point I tell him that if he wants to behave like a sailor in Okinawa I can't stop him, but that I'd be obliged if he wouldn't make me nauseous in the middle of the night by telling me about it."

I think the trick in working out private time-related difficulties is realizing that no two people's needs are going to synchronize exactly—and that your partner's needs have less to do with *you* than you might think. He might need to be apart from you four nights out of five *not* because he can't stand the way you chew your food, but because every time he closed his door when he was a child his mother shouted, "Michael, we don't have any secrets in *this* house!" On the other hand, you might want very little private time not because you care for him more than he cares for you, but because you work at a word processor all day and are dying to see a human face come nightfall.

I guess I believe that when it comes to relationships, the amount of time you put in can sometimes be a lot less important than the amount of tolerance—not to mention the amount of love.

by Bette-Jane Raphael

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