

CAN THIS BE LOVE?

DOES HE EVER CALL YOU “HYSTERICAL”? Here's how to counterattack

According to a recent survey, a vast majority of women reports occasionally being described by their partners as “irrational,” “neurotic,” hysterical,” etc., terms traditionally used by men to imply that any female feelings with which they are uncomfortable are, ipso facto, those of a lunatic. These findings, together with my own less scientific observations, lead me to conclude that I and a lot of other women are accused by our mates of being emotionally out of control every time our behavior deviates from that of someone on intravenous sedation.

Many of us have developed strategies to combat such allegations. My friend Annie takes the offensive; I recently heard her tell her husband *he* was being “over emotional” because he spat out an expletive on finding that his favorite sports announcer had gone on vacation and was being replaced by a reporter whose usual news assignment is interviewing mail-fraud victims and organ-transplant recipients. Friend Annie has also taken to reading aloud newspaper articles about men who panic in emergencies (stories about Wall Street brokers have been particularly effective), and to clipping photographs of men in various states of emotional distress, just to prove to her husband that the word “hysterical” is not gender-specific.

Janice combats her husband's habit of alleging that she is overemotional by calling his bluff. If he calls her “hysterical,” she acts hysterical, hyperventilating and rolling her eyes back in her head until, her husband says, she looks like Glenn Close in the bathtub scene of *Fatal Attraction*. If he calls her “neurotic,” she affects a tick in her left eye, looks suspiciously over her shoulder, and insists that his mother is lurking in the corner “spying” on her. And if he says she's being “irrational,” she starts babbling gibberish and threatening him with a whisk.

Another friend, Sue, has taken an extremely useful tit-for-tat approach, turning her partner's accusations of excessive emotionalism back in his face. For instance, he recently called Sue “insecure” because she objected to his going away on business for a week with the vice president in charge of sales for his company, a woman whose previous job title was Miss February. Rather than deny the charge, Sue asked if the word “insecure” didn't remind him of something,

specifically his own recent behavior when he wouldn't join his class reunion until she had peeked into the gathering and ascertained whether or not his old cronies were wearing ties. In another instance, he called her “irrational” when she ripped up a picture of his former girlfriend, which he'd shown her because he wanted her to emulate the other woman's hairstyle. Sue calmly told him that *he* was the one being “irrational” if he thought she would take advice on her hair from someone who was losing his. And last year, when he accused her of being “distracted” because she expressed anxiety over reports of an earthquake in Los Angeles—where half her family lives—she wondered aloud whether the word “distracted” might not better describe his own behavior when he learned that his car needed a new transmission, at which time, she reminded him, he howled as if he'd been attacked by bees and tried to smash the offending vehicle with his bare hands.

In my own home, I use rhetorical questioning to defend myself against my partner's implications that my entire life is spent at the mercy of feelings run amok. Recently, he called me “neurotic” about cleanliness because I got angry at him for cleaning his running shoes with a bath towel. Instead of trying to stuff the towel down his throat, I asked him who he thought was more neurotic: I, for wanting to live under nominally sanitary conditions, or he, for deifying a pair of dirty sneakers as if they were the ruby slippers in *The Wizard of Oz*. When he alleges that I am being “demanding” because I ask for something other than sex, I question him on who is more demanding: I, for asking him to pick up milk on his way home, or he, for asking me to alphabetize his collection of polka records.

If your partner calls you “overemotional” because you start to cry when he calls you “neurotic” and “irrational,” don't take it lying down. Remind him that some people might call *him* overemotional if they knew that he got weepy when he came across a picture of his childhood pet, Petey the parakeet. Do so, and the next time he calls you hysterical, it will be because you actually *are* hysterical.

by Bette-Jane Raphael