

how to talk with your lover

You know couples are supposed to talk their problems out. But you also know talking sometimes backfires—your voice rises three octaves, he stomps out the door. Before you give up on communication, take a lesson in negotiation. It may sound unromantic, but it's guaranteed to bring you closer together.



ALL OF US ARE NEGOTIATING FOR what we want all the time, in every relationship: when we catch the waiter's eye so that we can order lunch; when we ask a friend for a favor; when we enumerate all the reasons an employer should promote us; when we encourage the owner of a '76 Toyota to sell the car for \$500 less than the asking price.

This same state of perpetual negotiation exists in our love relationships. From the day we decide who's going to sleep on which side of the bed, we are negotiating with the men we love on everything from fidelity to finances. We may be lovers, but that doesn't mean we negotiate any less than the summit-bound Americans and Russians.

Negotiating with our partners doesn't

necessarily mean drawing up contractual agreements with as many clauses as SALT II, but it does mean making our needs clear to them and working out practical ways to have those needs met. Doing so makes us equal partners, not children, in the relationship.

Unfortunately, many of us are rotten negotiators, and we sabotage our negotiating efforts with unrealistic attitudes and ineffective strategies. Happily, however, once we recognize these attitudes and strategies for what they are—fetters on our ability to deal positively with our partners—we can discard them. And then we can begin to negotiate in a new and better way: maturely, efficiently, and (more to the point) effectively.

Recognizing the Need to Negotiate

A lot of us undercut our roles as negotia-

BY BETTE-JANE RAPHAEL



tors by denying that negotiation is an integral part of intimate relationships. We resist the idea that negotiation and romance can coexist. We read with disbelief about couples who negotiate businesslike prenuptial agreements and maintain the naive belief that we shouldn't have to negotiate with our men for what we want, that if they love us they should be able to divine and meet our needs. This is a dangerous fantasy that can spell disaster for any relationship.

I spent a lot of unprofitable time expecting my mate to know instinctively what I wanted (for instance, that I wanted him to be home by six o'clock on any evening that he wasn't hit by a bus). When this wasn't what *he* wanted, when most evenings he came home two hours later than I wished, I took it as a sign of the faultiness of his love. And instead of negotiating—of proposing that he try to make certain nights

early nights, say, or that he give me an idea of when he would be home in the evening and call me if he was going to be late—I pouted. I felt victimized and accused him of ill treatment. Far from getting me what I wanted, this behavior had the not surprising effect of angering my mate. Nobody likes to be made the bad guy on a regular basis.

It took me longer than it should have to get things straight and realize that no matter how much he loved me, my partner couldn't intuit my needs in some mystic fashion; he had his own needs to worry about. It was up to me to see that my needs were met, and the way to do that was to negotiate with him for what I wanted, be it how many hours of the week I wanted for myself or how many slices of pizza I wanted to devour.

Romance and negotiation, I believe, are not only compatible, but they are nec-

essary in an adult relationship. Successful negotiating increases partners' trust in one another and enhances their feelings of closeness. I learn this every time I work out even a minor problem with my partner, every time he listens to me and tries to accommodate me, and every time I do the same for him. When, for instance, we come to an agreement about what are permissible times to turn on and off the air conditioner (before I melt or he turns blue), we are acting like two adults who can rely on each other to be fair and giving. That's a light in which neither of us can see the other too often.

We do our relationships a disservice if we avoid negotiating: to avoid negotiating is to risk feeling victimized by the fact that we don't get what we want—the way I felt victimized every night my partner didn't come home at six on the dot. It's

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FOR YOUR NAILS.

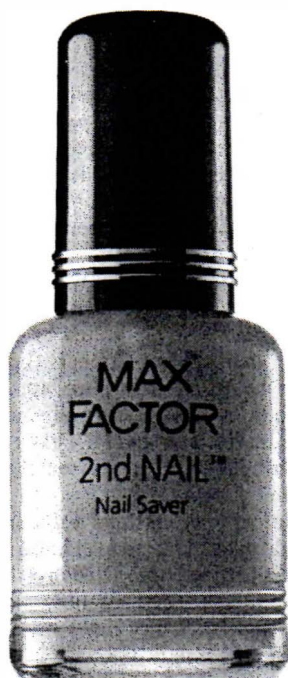
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a feeling that may very well lead to dissatisfaction with the relationship and even alienation from it. And although we would like to lay the blame for this in our partners' laps, the fault lies closer to home.

Finding the Right Voice

Some of us are bad at negotiating because we never find a comfortable voice in which to deal. We picture successful negotiators as tough tycoons and Teamster officials, and we conclude that we have to talk like union bosses in order to bargain competently. Or we mistake nagging for negotiating. But neither tough guys nor nags are in genuine negotiating positions; the first expect unconditional acceptance of their demands, while the second plead for what they want, assuming an unequal position in the relationship. Negotiators, on the other hand, assume equality and do themselves and their partners the service of stating their needs clearly, hearing out their partners, and compromising with them in those places where the two diverge.

"I was definitely a whiner," says my friend Nancy about the way she used to negotiate with her partner. "If there was something I didn't like about our relationship, I whined about it. Instead of working out a deal with him, I'd say things like, 'Why don't you ever help me when we have company?' As you can imagine, this set his teeth on edge and did me very little good. It took me a while to figure out that I was trying to deal with my husband the way I dealt with my father when I was a little girl and that the technique was a lot less serviceable at thirty than it was at three."

Nancy believes she's getting better at negotiating these days. While she still finds it hard occasionally to speak in adult tones when she has an issue to negotiate with her partner, she says that now she stops to listen to herself and to ask, "Does that sound like a mature individual talking or a five-year-old?"

In her search for a comfortable voice to use during negotiations, Nancy got no help from her partner, nor should she have expected any. It's not our partners' responsibility to speak for us or even to encourage us to speak for ourselves. They have their own priorities and their own agendas, and our silence is their ally. The good news is that we don't need their help. Once we recognize the rightness and naturalness of negotiating with them, we inevitably find the right and natural voice in which to do it, all on our own.

Confronting the Issues

If we're uncomfortable with the idea of negotiating, we tend to put off dealing with the issues that demand attention. Unfortunately, if an issue isn't attended to, it gathers emotional weight and be-

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comes more difficult to handle. Attending to it right away means we're less likely to be angry during the negotiating process and less likely to engender reciprocal animosity in the very person whose goodwill we covet. The woman who admits there's a question to discuss and who says, "Let's agree on one night a week when we both go out separately with our friends," is negotiating. The woman who tries to ignore the question and who finally screams, "If you go out with your friends again tonight I won't be here when you get home," is intent on punishing her partner and is much less likely to satisfactorily resolve things with him.

Also, by failing to negotiate promptly we deprive ourselves and our partners of vital mutual knowledge. We can't learn how our partners feel about an issue or even whether it is an issue for them if we don't bring it up. The fact is that what may loom as an important question for one partner may be minor in the other's eyes, and it may be something easily worked out in negotiation. But until the question is raised, this is unknown.

"Perhaps because I have to contest issues and confront people all day long," says a woman attorney I know, "I was reluctant to do the same thing at home. So I'd wind up waiting until I was furious about something before blurting out my feelings." This, she found, was a totally unsatisfactory way to approach sensitive issues between herself and her partner.

"I used to hate the fact that my husband never took responsibility for a meal," she recalls. "I was the one who always had to think up and shop for dinner, even if my day was just as crowded as his. So, one night when I was particularly tired, I just blew up about it. Well, my husband was stunned. Not only didn't he know I felt resentful, he actually thought I wanted to be totally responsible for dinner, that I didn't trust him to come up with a meal." Now, she says, they've worked out a way to take turns being responsible for dinner. My friend cooks one night, and her partner brings home a take-out meal the next, and they both feel

fine about it. But the more important outcome of her blowup, she reports, is that she now tries to work out a problem with her partner *before* she's at the point of murdering him.

Being Forthright

Perhaps because we're uneasy about negotiating, a lot of us sidle into the process, rather than being forthright with our partners. This used to be a favorite trick of mine. Instead of saying, "I think we should come to some agreement about who's responsible for which cleaning jobs around the house," I would ease into the subject by a back door, expressing tiredness, hoping my partner would infer that my pathetically run-down physical state was the result of too much housework.

Because this kind of backdoor negotiating presupposes that our partners will receive and respond to unclear messages, results can be iffy at best (which accounts for the fact that, for a very long time, I was the only person in our home who knew where the vacuum cleaner hung out). Moreover, backdoor negotiating augurs well for resentment on the part of our partners, who may feel, with some justification, that they are constantly being snookered with innocent-sounding ploys into negotiating issues they are not prepared to discuss. For these reasons, even though straightforwardness goes against the core of my being, I've concluded that it's best to enter the negotiating process by the front door, with a clear statement of one's intentions.

Choosing Appropriate Forums

Just as Reagan and Gorbachev chose Washington, D.C., for their most recent summit, so the rest of us have to select likely and serviceable times and places in which to negotiate. Choosing to bring up vital issues at inappropriate moments—such as the moment coffee and dessert are being served at somebody else's dinner party—is a way of guaranteeing failure. Nobody likes being ambushed, and that is exactly how one's partner is likely to feel if he is waylaid at an innocent turn of the evening's conversation.

"I always felt apprehensive bringing up a problem with David," says my friend Sue of her negotiations with her husband. "I never wanted to rock the boat. So, instead of deliberately choosing a time when we could talk things over, I'd wait for an opportunity to arise, for the subject to come up. And if it came up at the wrong time—like during a visit to my mother's house or in the middle of a movie—I'd just plunge ahead." But David wasn't receptive to negotiating a serious issue while in the middle of watching *Back to the Future*. So the results of Sue's efforts were pretty dismal.

Finally David asked, "Why don't you ever pick a reasonable time to talk about things like this?"

Why, indeed? Sue began to realize that when it comes to negotiating, as with most other serious endeavors, waiting for opportunity to knock is a foolish attitude. Now she reports that she has begun creating her own opportunities to negotiate with David, although she admits her attempts are not always elegant. "I just tap him on the shoulder when we're alone and say, 'There's something we've got to talk about, Buster.'"

Identifying the Real Issues

Unless we define precisely what the issues to be negotiated are, we waste time and energy on side issues and wind up not taking care of what really needs attention. This is what my friend Janet found she was doing. "I thought I was angry at the amount of time Richard spent watching television," she tells me, "especially during the football and baseball seasons. I would sulk when he turned on the set and try to get him to forgo watching, but he felt I wasn't being fair in attempting to deprive him of something that gave him a lot of pleasure."

It took Janet some time to figure out that her partner's television-watching wasn't the real issue. What really bothered her was that they didn't spend enough time doing things together. Once she understood this, she says, she was able to negotiate the real issue: more joint activities. They decided to take up skiing on the weekends and to go out to the movies or to a restaurant at least once a week. "Now when he turns on those games," she says, "instead of gritting my teeth, I can smile."

Recognizing Nonnegotiable Issues

All of us have issues that are nonnegotiable, issues that constitute our bottom line

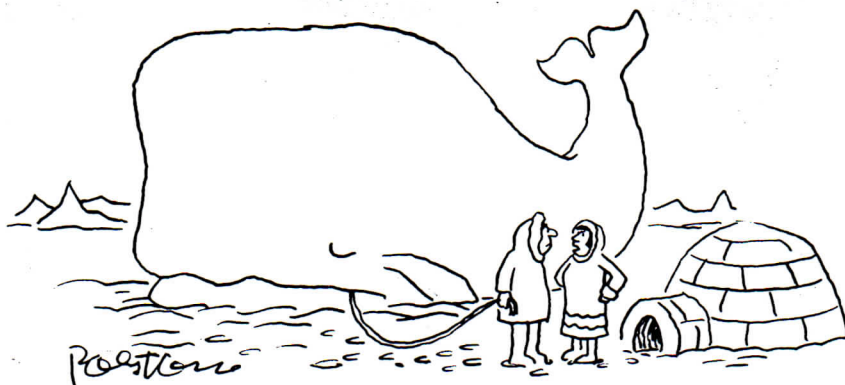
in the relationship, and if we try to negotiate those, we doom ourselves to failure. Negotiating implies compromise, but if we can't compromise on a particular question—on the question of our partner's fidelity, say—then trying to find a middle ground will be an exercise in futility, one that is bound to engender mutual animosity.

"Before we got married," says a friend of mine who has been married for the last six years, "I tried to compromise with Michael on the gambling weekends he likes to take with his pals." But the compromises they negotiated never seemed satisfactory to my friend, who believed that gambling was a very risky, even frightening activity and who felt that spending every third or fourth weekend on her own was not the way she wanted to live.

"Every time we worked out a compromise—that he would go with his friends only once a month, for example—I wound up unhappy with it. I finally understood that no compromise would be okay as far as I was concerned. We had negotiated a lot of our differences, and we still do, but I realized that the gambling issue wasn't something on which I could compromise. Once I understood this, I made it plain to Michael that he had to give up the weekends and the gambling if we were to go on together. He did, and we did."

That this woman and her husband are together today is a direct result of her ability to define her own bottom line, to negotiate what is negotiable, and to refuse to compromise where compromise is intolerable. That's something we all have to do to the very best of our abilities. If we don't, we risk cheating ourselves, our partners, and, ultimately, the relationships we share. □

Bette-Jane Raphael often writes about male-female relationships.



"You caught it—you clean it."