

Names are changed to honor client confidentiality.

Love Lacks a Ball and Chain

If you really loved me you would

That line drives most people up a wall, and 26-year-old Dane is no exception. He's heard it over and over again from his girlfriend, Gina.

"I feel boxed in a corner whenever she says that, like I don't have a choice," he said in our counseling session.

He's right. If he fails to satisfy her wishes, he's condemned as an uncaring oaf and sentenced to a ghastly tongue-lashing and probably some cold-shouldering. For Dane, these vexing encounters are growing old. So much so that he's starting to question how badly he really wants to stay with Gina. That's not a surprise, because if you force love, you destroy that love. Love and control cannot coexist—one cancels out the other.

When I explained this to Gina, in a separate one-on-one session, she didn't follow the logic.

"I always thought that two people in a relationship should do things for each other," she said.

I answered: "Gina, 'shoulds' don't belong where love's involved. It's okay to want certain things, but love doesn't place demands or expectations on the other."

"I don't agree," she said. "If he really loved me, he would want to make me happy. He would call or text me more often, he would make more time for me, he would give up his nights with his buddies."

Gina's right about one thing: When we love someone, we just naturally want to make the other person happy. But wanting and obligation are polar opposites. The desire to give to someone is obliterated the minute we sense control lurking in the background.

I posed a question: "If Dane were here, do you think he might say: 'If you loved me, you wouldn't place those demands on me?'"

"But they're not demands," she said.

“Do they fall into the category of a loving request?” I asked. “If he wanted you to run to the store for his favorite ice cream, would you be more willing to do so if he voiced his desire in the form of a request instead of a ‘should?’”

Gina nodded. “Yeah, you’re right,” she said.

It was good to see the glimmer of a new way of seeing on her part. It tells me there’s hope on the horizon for these two.

Then I asked another question: “Do you want Dane to be your puppet or do you want him to be spontaneous—coming from his own individuality?”

“Spontaneous, of course!” she said.

“So think about it,” I said, “how can he be spontaneous if you tell him how he should be loving you?”

The question gave her something to think about.

Controlling ploys are unfair, unpleasant and not all that unusual. These devices are described at length in the book [*Emotional Blackmail*](#), by Dr. Susan Forward.

She writes: “Emotional blackmail is a powerful form of manipulation in which people close to us threaten, either directly or indirectly, to punish us if we don’t do what they want. At the heart of any kind of blackmail is one basic threat, which can be expressed in many different ways: If you don’t behave the way I want you to, you will suffer.”

“Punishment” can take on many forms.

Paula, another client, says her husband punishes with guilt.

“If I don’t kiss him, he gets pouty,” she said, “and makes comments like, ‘I guess you have too many more important things to do.’”

He then walks off acting dejected and wounded for several hours.

I asked: “Do you feel relief when he walks off?”

“Not at all! I feel terribly guilty—like I’m doing something awful to him,” she said. “Usually, I just give in to him so I won’t feel rotten about myself.”

But succumbing to emotional blackmail has a price. It’s called resentment and falling out of

love. So in the long run, the blackmailer loses.

Paula's not a cold fish, she likes romance and affection, but she is growing weary from the subtle pressure.

"When he says, 'I love you,' he's just wanting me to say it back to him. I don't sense he's saying it as a gesture of love, but rather as a way to manipulate me."

Like Dane, Paula isn't feeling loved.

Paula's husband and Gina are examples of people who obstruct the love they seek by using forcefulness. So unfortunately, when it comes to love, they're losing. To change the course of this direction, they would replace "If you really loved me you would . . ." with "If I really loved you, I would . . ."

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