

She nags, he withdraws



Liz Collmann, San Dimas, CA

"I feel abandoned"

"My husband, Lynn, is so withdrawn that he's unreachable," says Liz Collmann. "Sure, we 'talk'...about bills and the day-to-day stuff. But I never know what he's *feeling*. I can tell something is on his mind, yet when I ask him about it, he clams up. Why won't he let me in?"

"Lynn's actions are hard to understand, too. For instance, a while back I asked him to hang some pictures for me. Yet weeks later the frames were still waiting to be hung. When I bugged him about it, he said, 'You've asked and I haven't done it, so don't keep asking.' Every time he ignores my wishes, I feel abandoned."

"Maybe he's cheating on me like my ex-husband did. The other night in bed, I tried to be romantic. Then Lynn announced, 'I'm going to sleep.' And one day last week, I was getting dinner ready and expecting Lynn to return from work at his usual time. I lit candles and opened a bottle of wine. I waited 10...20...30 minutes—and still no Lynn. When he finally waltzed through the door, I lost it. 'Where *were* you?' I shouted. He just sighed and poured himself a glass of wine. I was so mad, I dumped my wine right on his head. He dropped his glass and it shattered on the floor."

"Both Lynn and I have had a lot of heartbreak in our lives. When we met on the local golf course, we were immediately drawn to each other. I consider him my best friend. But if I don't know what he's thinking and feeling, how can we grow as a couple?"

What the counselor had to say

"When Liz and Lynn came to me, they were carrying a lot of baggage from their prior relationships," says marriage counselor Carolyn Bushong, author of *Bring Back the Man You Fell in Love With* (Adams Media). "This baggage was scrambling their communication. We had to get it out on the table."

"Liz talked about how she'd been mistreated by men—especially by her ex-husband, who had been unfaithful. This made her stop trusting men. By the time she met Lynn, Liz had developed a controlling personality—it was her 'insurance policy' against what she perceived as men's shortcomings. Subconsciously, she was trying to protect herself."

"Then Lynn revealed that he'd had a verbally abusive father—he was belittled any time he tried to assert himself. As a result, Lynn became withdrawn. He also noted that his first marriage was highly contentious, which reinforced his passive-aggressive behavior. It became his way of avoiding direct conflict."

"Liz and Lynn's combination of personality types was volatile. When Lynn felt challenged by Liz, he shut down. This made Liz even more determined to control him. And the more dominant

Liz became, the less empowered Lynn felt to voice his feelings.

"To help free them from the past, I had Liz and Lynn write letters to the people in their lives who had let them down. The letters weren't mailed. But by putting their experiences into words, Liz and Lynn created a baseline from which they could move forward."

"Next, to build Liz's trust in her husband, I worked on helping her believe that she wasn't to blame for men letting her down. And to make sure her requests would resonate with Lynn, I taught her to phrase them in logical terms. For example, if she didn't like the way Lynn folded towels, she learned to say, 'You'll fit more in the closet if you fold them *this way*,' instead of, 'Those towels are a mess.'"

"To help Lynn open up, I had him practice voicing his opinion on *positive* matters. For example, he started praising Liz's day-to-day efforts like cooking dinner. This helped give him the confidence to speak to her with more emotion, even when the topics were difficult." ❁



"She's always playing the victim"

"Liz is a capable, independent woman, but for some reason, she doesn't act like one with me," says Lynn. "When I came into her life, Liz had been single for 12 years. As far as I could tell, she had no trouble taking care of herself. So it really gets to me when I come home from a 12-hour workday and she immediately pounces on me: 'Where were you?' 'Hang these pictures!' 'Why aren't you saying anything?' Give me a chance to get my bearings!"

"When Liz nags me to share my deeper feelings or help around the house, I want to do the exact opposite. She has me caught in a trap: Either I cave in and follow her commands like a child, or I put up with her constant nit-picking. What guy would want to be intimate under those circumstances?"

"And the wine incident...okay, maybe I should have called Liz and told her that I would be working late that night. But on my drive home, I thought, *So what if those picture frames collect dust for a few more minutes?* I admit that I overreacted by breaking the wine glass. I guess I just wanted the whole confrontation to be over. I hate fighting with her."

"I know that Liz wants me to open up. But to be honest, I don't see the point. I went down this road with my first wife—whenever I spoke my mind, I was accused of being selfish. Better to just keep my mouth shut."

"Believe me, I don't want the same thing to happen with Liz. She's my soul mate—I can't imagine myself with anyone else. I just hope she still feels the same way about me."



Lynn Collmann

Update

Today, seven years later, Liz and Lynn couldn't be happier. "Once we peeled away the nagging and stonewalling, everything changed," reports Liz. "There was a great marriage underneath—and now we never want to be without each other." Recently, while the couple was on a beach watching the sunset, a passerby told them, "You guys are an inspiration—you're so in love!" Lynn cherished that compliment. "Liz and I definitely feel it," he says. "It's great that other people see it, too!"



Photos: Denise Crew. Hair and makeup: Evy Power. Text: Lisa Maxbauer.