

SALLY

MY UNEMPLOYED BOYFRIEND HAS BECOME LAZY AND ANGRY

I have been with my boyfriend for four years, and we generally get on very well, have fun and share a lot. He lost his job a few months ago and has slipped easily into a life of leisure — waking at midday, going to bed at 3am — and, sadly, is not a model househusband in terms of helping out. Whenever I approach the topic with, hopefully, useful suggestions of how he might find work, he puts up a wall of anger. I have been particularly careful to couch any encouragement as gently as possible, but it makes little difference. He seems to use the anger as a barricade behind which he can protect his lifestyle of leisure (or pride?). He'll sometimes say really offensive things to me (for instance: I have serious issues, that I "don't get it"), which makes me furious, too, and indicates there's no possibility of having a sensible discussion. One alternative is not having the conversation and just leave him to sort things out, but I'm starting to feel resentful about paying for everything as well as doing all the cleaning, cooking and washing. How best to negotiate the wall of anger?

This is a tricky one, because it combines so many complex emotions, ranging from wounded pride to guilt, feelings of inadequacy and, possibly, mild depression. And that's just your boyfriend. On your side are frustration, resentment, disappointment and impotence, in as much as nothing you do or say seems able to shake him out of his situation. Any wall is a defence, but a wall of anger is a particularly effective barricade. It doesn't simply stand firm, it bristles with arrows that are directed at those around it. As you say, he will sometimes say really offensive things to you. Offence is a great defence. It drives people away.

What I would really like to know is whether he had issues with anger before, or if this is new behaviour. I'm assuming it is unusual, because you say you had fun and shared a lot — until the past few months, since he lost his job. The feelings around that loss are not to be underestimated. Men, in particular, hang a great deal of their identity on their work, so it may be that his anger is about feeling redundant — in every sense.

Being made to feel unwanted can also lead to feelings of hopelessness and inadequacy, as well as lack of confidence, which can leak into every area of life. That might morph into depression and inertia: "Oh, what's the point?" In that form of depression (actually, in every form), it becomes difficult to find

the energy to get out of bed, get out into the world to find work, or care about your appearance and surroundings.

That's not to say it makes the situation any easier for you, and I fully understand your resentment, but thinking about the reasons behind his anger and feeling some compassion for him might help you to break through the wall. When he says you "don't get it", I suspect what he means are all his emotions of frustration and hopelessness. In one sense, you don't get it. Your resentment and irritation are overwhelmingly clear when you describe him protecting his "life of leisure". There's an element of contempt in those words that he will be sensitive to.

As instinctive as it is to feel irritable and impatient, particularly when you are tired and return home to be faced with a messy house and a slovenly, apathetic man, meeting anger with anger never works. It will drive you apart, and the further apart you become, the more difficult it will be to have a sensible discussion.

On top of that, he knows you're right. Of course he should be doing the lion's share of the housework when you are out working. It's only fair, but the fact that, day after day, he can't summon the energy to face yet another empty day — let alone washing the dishes — will make him feel yet more hopeless and guilty, and one of the ways we defend our guilt is to lash out. I know you've tried to talk to him as gently as possible and make helpful suggestions about finding work, but it's possible that he feels he is being patronised — which will further add to his anger. As for what you should do, I don't think there's any harm in soliciting some compassion from him by telling him how difficult you are finding it to cope. Not in a martyr-like way, but in the sense of letting him know how vulnerable you feel — and, perhaps, how worried you are about his anger affecting your relationship.

It might be easier to do that off home territory, perhaps go out for a drink and re-establish the fun and communication you used to share, and then discuss how to face the situation together. He may initially respond badly, but do try and react with sympathy rather than meeting anger with anger. If he feels that you understand how difficult things have been for him lately (and for you, too) and that you would like to work things out together, as a team, he may let you past that wall of anger, so you can reconnect and face this one out together. ●

DOES SOMETHING WORRY YOU, A SITUATION IN YOUR LIFE YOU CAN'T RESOLVE? THEN EMAIL SALLY.BRAMPTON@SUNDAYTIMES.CO.UK

A BEAUTIFUL MIND TAKE A MOMENT...

...TO BREAK BAD RELATIONSHIP PATTERNS

You keep dating commitmentphobes. Or every lover turns jealous. Or, perhaps, you go from being crazy in love to despising your new beau in months. Why do we repeat the same toxic patterns? "Our subconscious pursues the familiar," says the relationship coach Michael Myerscough. "It continually asks if a situation is dangerous, and deems the familiar 'safe' — however dysfunctional or unhappy that may be."

Attraction templates are created early. "Girls with absent fathers tend to re-create that dynamic with boyfriends,"

he says. "And people from fiery homes seek high-drama relationships. We kid ourselves, too. A woman with an alcoholic will say, 'No more drinkers,' and then date a workaholic. They seem different, but both men are unavailable."

Myerscough prescribes this exercise. List your five most significant partners. For each, list everything you loved and everything you disliked. Edit this down to five positives and five negatives for each partner. Draw a big circle. Inside, list all the positives. Outside, list the negatives. There will be overlaps. Words

inside the circle indicate your true needs; those outside are red flags, things you must avoid. "Looking at that, you can see what didn't work and try something new," he says. "It's just a shift — simple as taking tea without sugar. After a while you don't want sugar."

Michael Myerscough is owner and head coach of therelationshipgym.com

Francesca Hornak

