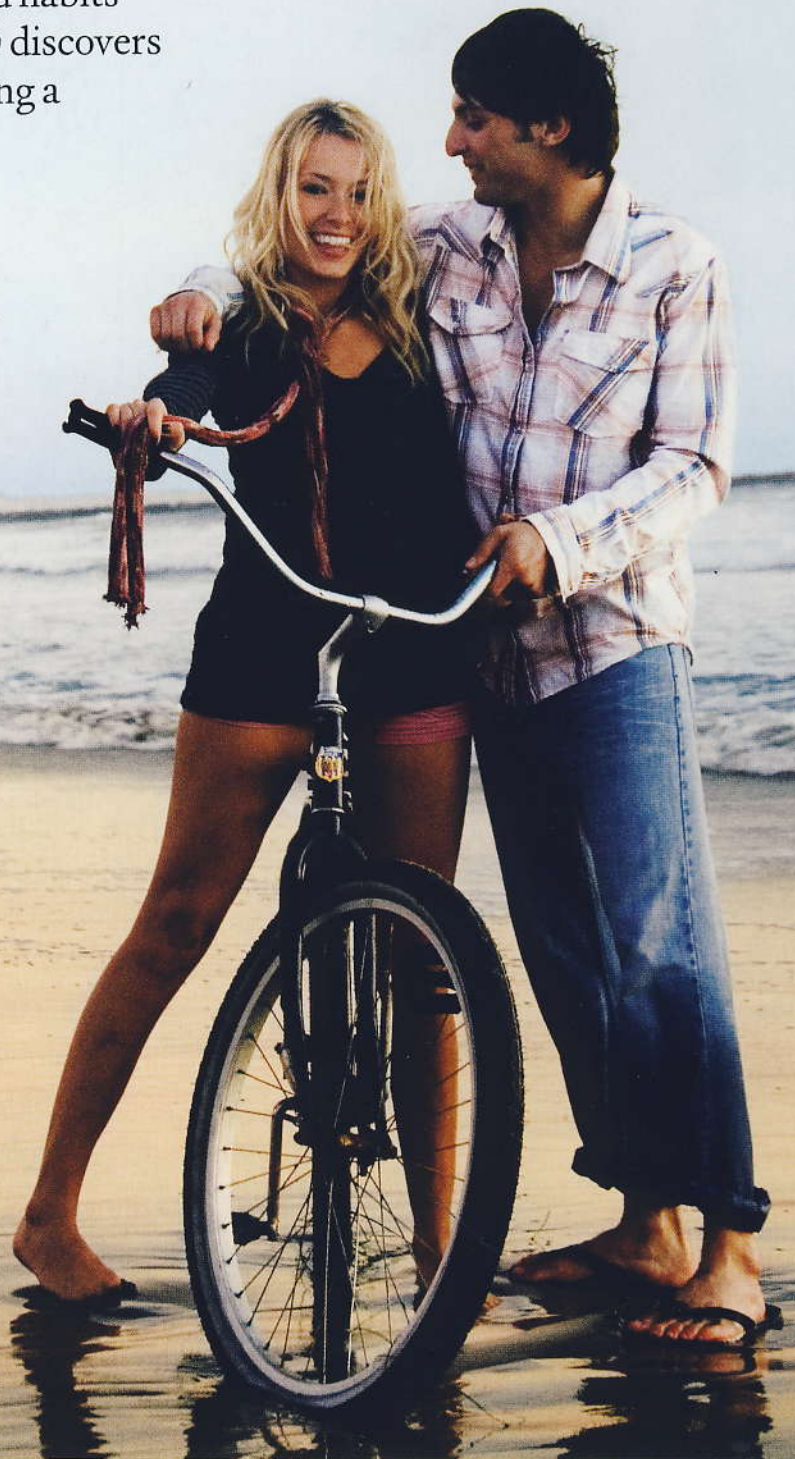


# 'I love you, but...'

Living with someone's quirks and habits can be a challenge. *Rebecca Smith* discovers how to stop little things sabotaging a good relationship



A recent poll of the *Psychologies* office on our partners' most irritating habits revealed we have little reticence in naming and shaming the worst offenders. In our (mostly female) editorial team, lively debate ensued on the relative demerits of sniffing, sighing, complaining in restaurants and road rage.

Some of the top irritants were quite predictable (snoring, not listening, messiness), others less so (number two was buying expensive equipment for a new hobby, then swiftly moving on to a new one), and some were very funny ('He finds it relaxing to go to sleep listening to the sound of someone being dismembered in *Saw III*; I do not').

### Exploding point

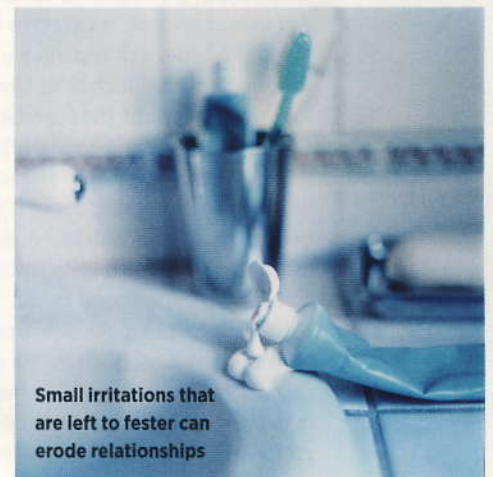
Yet the abundance of answers proves that living with another person, however much we love them, can be tricky. Typically, we think of relationship deal breakers as the big dramas – infidelity, addiction and disagreements over big decisions such as whether or not to have children – rather than loud chewing or being ignored in favour of *Cops With Cameras*. But, according to Michael Cunningham, a psychologist at the University of Louisville, irritating behaviours that are left to fester can erode or break down relationships.

'In our study, we found that minor irritations can, over time, build up to exploding point and result in one person walking out of the relationship,' he says.

Most of us start off in a relationship oblivious to, or even fond of, our partners' quirks, and it is only when the honeymoon haze lifts and we settle into everyday life that these things start to grate.

'I used to find it cute that Jake enthusiastically wolfed his food down in about three seconds flat,' says Heather, 36. 'But three years later, I'm increasingly bothered by it and find it a bit revolting.' Cunningham puts it down to the transition from 'front-stage behaviour', when we're still trying to make a good impression, to 'back-stage behaviour', when we relax and show our true selves.

It is often difficult to eliminate these annoyances, so the challenge is working out how to live with them. 'Often relationships fail not because we don't love each other enough,' says therapist Trevor Silvester ([questinstitute.co.uk](http://questinstitute.co.uk)), 'but because we don't know how to live together.' You may not be able to change your partner's behaviour, but you can change your perspective and your reactions. Overleaf we show you how. ◀



Small irritations that are left to fester can erode relationships

'You may not be able to change your partner's behaviour, but you can change your perspective'



It's easy to leap to conclusions

## 1 Think about what lies beneath

'In some ways there are no small things in relationships,' says Andrew G Marshall, marital therapist and author of *I Love You But I'm Not In Love With You* (Bloomsbury). 'Things that really irritate you are often doing so for a reason. The small things may be standing in for much bigger things.' So irritation over a sock left on the floor may be code for deeper issues. 'I get out-of-proportion furious about any clearing up after my partner,' says Sally, 42. 'I suspect this is linked to a terror of turning into my mother, who is a slave to my father. I know really that picking up the odd pair of pants doesn't make me a drudge but I still get so angry.'

We can also be quick to draw conclusions, so the sock on the floor ends up being evidence of selfishness and lack of respect. 'It becomes less about the behaviour and more about the meaning we attach to it,' says Janet Reibstein, author of *The Best Kept Secret* (Bloomsbury). It's important to think about whether a reaction could be a clue to something deeper (are you getting your needs met and feeling loved enough?), while being aware that it is easy to leap to conclusions. 'We can go straight to quite catastrophic thinking,' she says, 'such as "He doesn't care about me" or even "He's the wrong man for me".' Big, fearful thoughts can attach to seemingly trivial irritations.

## 2

### Join the same team

'Everybody has to live with irritations,' says Susanna Abse, director of the Tavistock Centre For Couple Relationships ([tccr.org.uk](http://tccr.org.uk)). 'It's the way these things are approached that is the indicator of a healthy relationship. Take one partner snoring as an example. Successful couples avoid talking about it in an attacking way or in a way that implies it's just one person's issue, and instead see it as a problem they will manage together.'

Similarly, with annoyances over competing interests – who does the chores, whose parents you spend the weekend with – the couples who manage best, says Abse, are those who have the strongest notion of joint endeavour. 'They don't obsess about where the dividing line falls, but think of themselves as a company, if you like, in which they are both shareholders. They are working together with a joint purpose,' she says.

## 3

### Aim for friendly intervention

Raising difficult issues can feel precarious, as we can get stuck in a cycle of hammering out the same issues, with each confrontation becoming more toxic. For this reason, psychologist Jacqui Marson and her colleague Val Sampson came up with the BARE model: breathe, accept, respect and eulogise.

'Before you raise anything that is causing you anxiety or annoyance,' says Marson, 'you need to soothe yourself. You will be visibly holding tension in your face and body, so

take some deep breaths. Then start from a position of acceptance and compassion, and speak respectfully in a way that does not blame or shame, taking responsibility for your own feelings and avoiding any statements that begin "You always" or "You never". And lastly, find something genuine to compliment your partner on to soften the complaint. For example, "I felt really close to you when we went for dinner last week". A lot of my clients find using this approach transforming.'





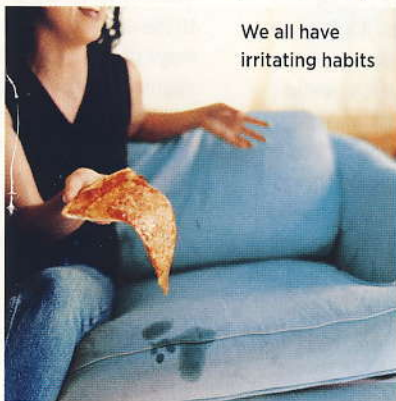
Accept the fact that  
no one is perfect

Jane, 39, has a recurring row with her husband, Ben, whenever they go out with her friends. 'I always come home feeling really irritated that he hasn't made enough effort,' she says, 'and accuse him of not showing enough interest in them or not asking enough questions. One day it occurred to me that my social style is to frantically try to put people at ease and chat too much, so his apparent lack of effort is quite unnerving. Perhaps I'm a bit envious. I would like to feel comfortable with taking more of a back seat.'

'If we search for the tolerance and acceptance in ourselves, we will naturally extend this towards our partners,' says Marson.

In the spirit of acceptance, remember, too, that every one of us will have a habit that is irritating to others, even if we're not aware of it. We do many things mindlessly that simply won't even register. If a partner is annoying you, but not pulling you up on something, realise that it won't be because you're perfect, but that they are displaying generosity and compassion that you could return. ➔

## 4 Work out what you are projecting



We all have  
irritating habits

Think carefully as to what your partner does that irritates and bothers you the most, says Marson, as it might say more about you than it does about them. 'Often the things that annoy us most intensely in our partners are the things that we struggle to accept or come to terms with in ourselves,' she says. 'Look to yourself and ask, am I projecting onto my partner the parts of myself that I am really intolerant of or that I find unacceptable?'

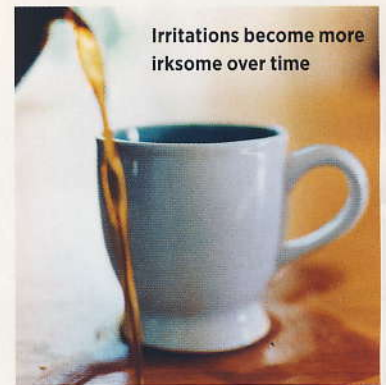


# 5

## Express annoyances early on

Although it can be hard to change behaviours, studies show that the earlier in our relationship we can express what really bugs us, the better. According to psychologist Michael Cunningham, who studied relationship annoyances in 160 couples, irritations become more irksome over time.

He saw the resulting irritants as 'social allergens', and the increased sensitivity to these over time explains why those in long-term relationships can suddenly erupt over what seems like a tiny infraction, such as crumbs left in the butter. The first time it happens it's slightly annoying, the hundredth can feel unbearable.



Irritations become more irksome over time

## Top five irritants

*Psychologies'* poll of our partners' most irritating habits

### HIS

- 1 Snoring
- 2 Developing a new hobby, buying all the equipment, and then moving on to something else
- 3 Not listening
- 4 Untidiness
- 5 Spending too much time on computers/watching sport

### HERS

- 1 Being too critical
- 2 Sulking
- 3 Nagging
- 4 Spending too long in the bathroom/getting ready
- 5 Bossiness

# 6

## Acknowledge your different drives

Many irritations derive from basic differences in personality. Couples therapist John Gottman estimates this is the cause of 69 per cent of relationship problems. It's easy to take the things that annoy you as personal affronts, but it's useful to remember that your partner's motivations may just be different from your own. 'People do things for their own reasons,' says therapist Trevor Silvester. 'They are just not yours. For example, extroverts are energised from being with people and introverts lose energy from being sociable. One couple I saw recently were endlessly irritated by each other

as in the evenings and at weekends she wanted to socialise, whereas he wanted to be quiet at home with a glass of wine. By understanding that these were simply their different ways of relaxing and not personal slights, they became more tolerant of each other and argued less.'

Most behaviours never really change, says Gottman, so rather than getting stuck in endless, futile battles, take stock and think about where your partner's motivations lie. It may be that simply having greater understanding and acceptance of your differences could be enough to diffuse the irritation. ■