

JEALOUSY: A DANGEROUS EMOTION

By Ginger E. Blume, Ph.D.

Popular songs proclaim that being in love means you'll do anything for love. For instance, I've met with many clients in my clinical practice who say they suffer daily due to a relationship with a highly jealous boy/girlfriend or spouse. Why do people tolerate their best friend's false and ugly accusations? This article will explore the destructive dynamics set in motion by involvement with an overly suspicious and chronically jealous partner.

Fallacies of Jealousy

Jealous individuals are constantly on the lookout for some indiscretion by their partner. They compulsively check up on their partner, even when there is no objective data to suggest another lover is remotely in the picture. Jealous individuals unconsciously live a life of secrecy themselves. They frequently invade the loved one's privacy, checking in purses, coat or pants pockets, computer files, phone records, etc. This sneaky behavior is consciously justified by their suspicion that their partner could be interested in another person. After all, they reason, don't they have a right to protect themselves from possible shame and humiliation that might be caused by being made a fool of by their partner!

When such irrational reasoning is out of proportion to reality (i.e. there is no indiscretion), the jealous individual's ability to trust another human being is highly impaired. Their fantasies of possible betrayal are more about their own life insecurities than about the untrustworthiness of their partner.

The Façade of Jealousy

Oftentimes, jealous individuals may appear self-confident and attractive, yet beneath their façade, they are anything but secure. Insecurity is usually rooted in early childhood experiences of poor maternal attachments, early loss and/or feelings of abandonment, and other forms of trauma. After all, the ability for humans to trust is usually formed during the first few years of life. With some people, jealousy may be a symptom of an enduring personality disorder and represent an attempt to control for the joy of controlling others.

Regardless of origin, jealousy undermines trust in any long-term relationship and sets into motion a destructive dynamic between two people. Jealousy is like cold water on the flames of love. No matter how physically attractive the individual, jealousy can transform that person into a two-headed monster. Jealousy is unbecoming. The jealous person may mistakenly believe that his/her jealousy is a true sign of deep love. They may reason, "Doesn't my partner see how much I love them when I get jealous?"

Fear of Loss

It is not uncommon for the jealous individual to actually create the very thing s/he fears the most: the eventual loss of a loved one. Let's look at how this happens. Given the jealous person's constantly questioning their partner's motives, actions, and intentions, the concerned partner may initially respond with attempts at reassurance. Reassurance, after all, seems like the natural way to respond to an upset partner who you'd like to calm down. But, when jealousy is compulsive and out of control, reassurance only works for a

short while. Eventually, as trust erodes, the accused partner realizes that reassurances never resolve the problem. Reassurance is merely a temporary band aide.

In many ways, this process is like a chemical addiction, where the drug (i.e. reassurance) only helps for so long, then another hit is needed to calm the nerves. The cycle is unending and destructive. Most addictive relationships have some element of pathological jealousy.

After repeated and unsuccessful episodes of accusations and reassurances, the relationship cycle becomes increasingly deadly, killing any love that was initially present. Regardless of their exemplary past behavior, the accused eventually knows that s/he will always be “under suspicion.” Hence, sometimes the partner will begin to move psychologically further and further away from their jealous partner, since it doesn’t feel good to be seen in such a negative light by a loved one.

In effect, the suspicious partner has pushed the loved one away by holding onto them too tightly and with unrelenting, negative accusations. This can lead to a self-fulfilling prophecy, in which the very thing that is feared, is actually caused: the loved one can’t take it any longer and leaves. The jealous individual thinks, “I knew it. S/he never loved me the way I loved him/her. I’ll never trust again.” In reality, the jealous person has no idea how to create a trusting relationship and has never trusted anyone.

Devotion Can’t Cure

In many cases, the accused partner puts up with the accusations for many years, hoping their display of pure fidelity will eventually solve their partner’s insecurity. Unfortunately, their devotion doesn’t remedy a more deeply seated problem. The partner’s jealousy is largely independent of the other, since doubts reside inside the jealous person’s psyche. Unfortunately, popular music’s universal proclamation, “love cures all,” is mere wishful thinking. Instead, relationships that operate under mistrust and fear fail to thrive. These relationships often die a long, drawn out and painful death.

Control issues become excessive as the fearful partner attempts to avoid the possible loss of a loved one. As this occurs, a balance of power becomes lopsided in the relationship. Love only works between two people of equal power, contributing and receiving roughly equivalent benefits from the relationships. We cannot complete our loved one’s missing pieces of self. A wonderful, elegant, and simple book by Shel Silverstein, The Missing Piece, provides a powerful, visual portrayal of how people inappropriately attempt to complete each other’s holes. It can be read in about fifteen minutes. It is a wonderful reminder of the truth about relationships.

© Copyright 2004, Ginger E. Blume, Ph.D.