

Overcome the Curse of Your Spouse's Perfectionism

Sometimes your spouse's perfectionist quarks can drive you up the wall. Here are a few ways to accept them as a positive.

BY DR. NOELLE NELSON
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Living with a perfectionist can be a positive or a negative depending on how you look at it.

You and your spouse wait for your mom to finish getting ready so you can go to lunch together. As you do, your other half absentmindedly straightens pictures on the wall, lines up magazines on the coffee table and puts the coasters back in a neat stack. You stand it as long as you can before you blurt out, "Honey, you don't have to be a perfectionist in other people's houses! Please, can't you just leave things alone?" Caught and embarrassed, your husband laughs a little. Your mom appears and off the three of you go.

Waiting for the cashier on the way out, you notice your husband straightening the cards on the cashier's counter and replacing a menu stuck out of order. You want to scream. It's also what he does at home, and it drives you nuts. He straightens the towels in the linen closet, just so. He aligns the silverware precisely—every meal; even for hot dog night. And it makes you feel like a slob, which you're not, at least not when you compare yourself to how most people live. However, next to him? Yikes! And along with irritating you, you find your self-esteem suffering. He's set a higher standard for neatness that's impossible to live up to.

But here's the thing. He's him and you're you. He's a package deal, as you are. His perfectionism is part of what makes him, him. This actually gives you a big clue as to how to not just stiff-upper-lip his perfectionism, but come to appreciate and value its positive contribution to your life.

Recently I was reading, "Your Man Is Wonderful," (Free Press 2009) and found a good example of this. Here's how one gal, Laurie, worked it out:

One of the things I just love about Jeff is his attention to detail. I really believe that for most of us our greatest strength is potentially our greatest weakness. He has that first-born perfectionism, which I've grown to adore because of what it means—that he's always looking at all the details. When we were first married, well, it took me a while to realize that this is wonderful. But as we've grown together, I've realized I adore this man. He pays attention to all the details, which I've learned protects me in so many different ways.

For example, one day his car broke down on the freeway on the way to work, and he was stuck there. Fortunately, a co-worker was driving by, saw who it was and stopped to give him a ride so Jeff wasn't late to work. He called me when he got to work, told me what had happened and said, 'Honey, you're going to need to go to the car. It will be towed, so please take my golf clubs out of the back, but please don't park behind my car. Be sure to park in front of

it.'

Well that doesn't make sense, I thought. Isn't it easier to get the stuff transferred from his trunk to mine if I'm behind him? So I said, 'Ok, but why?' to which he replied, 'You're going to need to pick up speed to get back onto the freeway, and you can't do that if you're parked behind my car.'

It's little things, details, that let me know he's always thinking about me, taking care of me, protecting me. Take the long view. Write a list of all the things your husband takes care of in an average week. Perhaps he balances the checkbook or makes sure the car is serviced in a timely fashion. Maybe he's the coupon-clipper, or internet bargain-hunter, saving every dollar he can.

Then, step back and take an even longer view, say over the past year or more. How has his perfectionism served him at work? Has it made his job more secure, earned him a promotion, gotten him a raise? Did his insistence on equipping every room with a fire extinguisher make you feel safer when you read about a similar instance in which a whole family was killed when the fire department couldn't handle three fires at once? Has his attention to saving money meant your family had a financial cushion even when you had to take a pay cut to keep your job?

Perfectionism, as aggravating as it may be, has surprising benefits when you stop to look for the positives rather than dwelling on the negatives. Keep a list of the long-view advantages to your sweetheart's perfectionism. The next time you feel like screaming, review it and remind yourself that he's a package! And I sure like a lot of this package.

Noelle C. Nelson, Ph.D., is a relationship expert, popular speaker in the U.S. and abroad, and author of nine best-selling books, including her most recent, "Your Man is Wonderful" (www.yourmaniswonderful.com) and "Dangerous Relationships." Dr. Nelson focuses on how we can all enjoy happy, fulfilling lives while accomplishing great things in love, at home and at work, as we appreciate ourselves and others. Visit www.wonderfulmanwonderfullyou.com for more.