

# To Love and to Envy

PT [psychologytoday.com/us/articles/201805/love-and-envy](https://psychologytoday.com/us/articles/201805/love-and-envy)

Everyone feels envious of others at times—it's woven into our nature. But what happens when the emotion flares within the supposedly safe cocoon of a romantic relationship?

By Dana Shavin, published May 1, 2018 - last reviewed on May 14, 2018

**DARYL & DANA** After he seemed to best her at her own game—art—she backed off the story she told herself about failure and helplessness, and learned to appreciate what was working in her life. (Photo by Audra Melton)

Twenty years ago, I started traveling to art festivals around the country to sell my paintings. My boyfriend, Daryl, would drive the van, help set up my booth, hang my work, and provide much-needed emotional support. The weekend shows were grueling but also incredibly rewarding. I befriended artists, gained collectors, and earned a respectable living.

At the time, Daryl was working as a therapist and part-time bookseller, but he was at a juncture in his life and eager to make a change. Inspired by what he saw on the art festival circuit and itching to express his own creativity, he took up photography and was soon exhibiting his work—edgy, Americana-inspired images—alongside mine. At the end of our third festival showing together, we went to an awards dinner in honor of the artists. I had never won an award; my sense was that the winners were an elite group, and I hadn't been around long enough to join their ranks.

Then I heard Daryl's name called from the podium.

Our table—all friends I'd made over years of attendance at these shows—erupted in applause. He bounded up to the stage to receive his award. The local newspaper snapped his picture. He returned to a hero's welcome at our table. That night, I lay in our hotel bathtub and wept. I had seen the future and it looked like loser me, toiling in Daryl's shadow.



Over the next few years, Daryl's photography career blossomed. He went on to secure gallery representation, show his work in prestigious exhibitions, win public art placements, and land major corporate commissions. Meanwhile, my own art career stagnated. I became deeply depressed and resentful of his success. We still loved each other, but our closeness felt strained. There was no longer a sense that we were a unit, fueled by mutual support.

Envy, Aristotle observed, is pain at the good fortune of others. Unlike jealousy, a three-way scenario involving the fear of losing someone or something to a competitor, envy is strictly a two-person proposition—the emotion that arises when we feel that someone possesses an attribute we crave but lack. It's a fundamental part of human nature that stems from the tendency to compare ourselves to others—friends, coworkers, siblings, celebrities, even strangers on the street.

But what happens when the one we compare ourselves to is our own romantic partner—and we come up feeling short? Why does an imbalance in a couple's levels of achievement, whether real or perceived, lead to envy for some? How prevalent is envy within relationships, and what is its cost?

"The incidence of envy between spouses can be hard to measure because people mostly don't admit it, even to themselves," says psychiatrist Gail Saltz, a clinical associate professor at the New York Presbyterian Hospital Weill-Cornell School of Medicine. Psychologist Judith Sills says that in her practice as a couples therapist, she sees clients cloak envy of their partner in other issues. "Let's say that she is outearning him, and it's a problem for him," she explains. "Instead of identifying his feelings as envy, he might say, 'Her job is ruining everything for us—she's so stressed out she can't take care of the kids.' But the truth eventually comes out that he really wants a bigger career."

A higher salary. A heap of accolades. A more impressive-sounding title. There are other areas besides work in which we might covet what our partner has—better friends, family ties, fitness habits, or closeness with our kids. But because of society's emphasis on professional achievement as the primary measure of success in life, it's in this domain that people are most likely to appraise their status compared with their partner's—and agonize over a difference. It can pose particular problems for those who struggle to see themselves as part of an indivisible team. "People who don't fully grasp the concept of 'what's good for one of us is good for both of us' tend to envy a partner's success," Saltz says, "even as it makes life better or easier for both of them."

CHRIS & DEBRA Her higher income, as an orthodontist, often means that more of the childcare duties fall to him, a licensed professional counselor. Resentments can quietly brew. (Photo by Mike McGregor)



## SHADES OF GREEN

---

Not all envy is created equal, nor does it always indicate or provoke problems within a relationship. Envy researchers Richard H. Smith and Sung Hee Kim describe three main types: benign envy, in which we simply wish we had the traits, attributes, or standing of another; emulative envy, where we seek to copy someone's accomplishments; and malicious envy, the most painful and destructive kind, which arises from resentment and is often accompanied by shame. In the latter case, the envious person "perceives the other's superiority as undeserved," says philosopher Aaron Ben-Ze'ev of the University of Haifa in Israel. The hallmark of malicious envy is *schadenfreude*—the satisfaction felt at the troubles or failure of another. Ben-Ze'ev points to a quote by the Austrian sociologist Helmut Schoeck: "The envious man thinks that he will be able to walk better if his neighbor breaks a leg."

It's an understatement to say that rooting against one's partner is not the stuff strong couples are made of. "Strong couples want the best for each other," Sills says. "They don't compete except in play—think running a marathon or playing tennis. Strong partners are thrilled when the other gets 'the goodies,' even if they maybe feel a pang that they themselves didn't. People who root against their partner feel so 'not-good' about themselves that they experience their partner's success as a reflection of their inadequacy." They also, Saltz says, tend to believe that their sense of inadequacy and their partner's superiority is how others perceive them. "Their self-judgment is projected outward," she says.

If a feeling of inequality is a hallmark of envy in relationships, then a feeling of equality is a hallmark of nonenvious relationships. "In healthy romantic relationships, partners feel that they are, overall, equal in status," says Ben-Ze'ev. "This feeling holds true even if there are areas where one is clearly superior to the other." In those cases, partners feel they compensate for their lack of mastery in one domain with mastery in another—for instance, he may earn more

money, while she is the children's go-to for emotional support. In healthy relationships, one partner's success isn't just a neutral factor, but affects the other positively. "The less successful partner feels the pride and admiration that stem from basking in the glory of the other," Ze'ev says.

Even when envy is not malicious in nature, it can present challenges. Chris is a licensed professional counselor; his wife, Debra, is an orthodontist and the higher earner of the two. They have been together for 20 years and have two children. "We share chores equally, but if, for example, the kids get sick, I'm the one who cancels clients and stays home," Chris says. "As the lower earner, I get it logistically." Nevertheless, he admits envying her income. "I don't always feel as though I can freely spend money without her consent. At the same time, I know that without her income, I couldn't have the lifestyle I'm used to."

Lisa Mainiero, a management professor at Fairfield University in Connecticut who has studied the dynamics of working couples for more than 30 years, notes that "it's not unusual for envy to erupt when the balance of power shifts in the relationship as a result of one person's success or the arrival of children. Envy can easily spring up between couples when the partner who is paid less and feels the demands of children more acutely becomes the 'trailing' spouse."

JOHN & KATIE As a lawyer, he gets less attention than she does as a musician touring internationally. To keep their relationship strong, he focuses on how they each excel in different ways. (Photo by Matt Nager)



## SEEDS OF PARTNER ENVY

---

What determines how couples ride the wave of unequal success? Psychologist Peter Fraenkel, an associate professor at City University of New York and the author of *Sync Your Relationship, Save Your Marriage*, says that, like many problems in intimate relationships, a propensity to envy can often be traced to childhood. A lack of praise from parents, or achievements that were met with indifference or criticism, can set the stage for a lifetime of insecurity about one's accomplishments.

"When parents praise kids about specific achievements, it builds realistic confidence and self-appraisal," Fraenkel says. When parents don't offer sufficient praise, however, their kids can fail to develop what he calls an internalized congratulator—a mechanism by which we learn to

champion ourselves. This deficiency can lead to an insatiable need for external approval. "As individuals, we must know our value and the value of our successes or we will bring to our relationships the feeling of already being one down."

Feelings of disappointment and envy can also arise if "one partner is not excited about what he or she is doing while the other is flourishing and getting accolades," Fraenkel says. Such a scenario can be painful, especially if the less fulfilled partner has no clear alternative path to pursue.

Another source of partner envy is cultural. Over the past several generations, as women have advanced in the workplace and achieved levels of success that were previously restricted mostly to men—clear signs of social progress—it's also meant more opportunities for competition and envy within relationships. Family therapist Terry Real, the author of *The New Rules of Marriage*, notes that this can be particularly troubling for men who may fully support their partner's career yet for whom outdated gender stereotypes linger. "A more successful woman can be seen as a threat to a man's masculinity," Real says. "Sometimes the only domain a man is comfortable in is work, so if a woman bests him, where does he get to shine?"

An added layer of complication can arise when a dual-ambition couple work in the same field—a common scenario as so many romantic relationships are initiated in graduate programs or workplaces where people are already grouped by professional discipline. To explain why this can become problematic, social psychologist Gwendolyn Seidman refers to the theory of self-evaluation maintenance, which holds that people sometimes find it threatening to their egos if someone else is more successful than they are in an area that is important to them—especially if that other person is a partner.

"When people feel rivalry with a close other who is besting them at their own game, they may distance themselves from that person," Seidman says. "To avoid doing that, they need to find a way to think about how each person's success and domain of expertise is different from the other's so they are not in direct competition." That might mean narrowing in on ever-specific areas of proficiency: For example, a cardiologist couple might internally distinguish that one of them is superior at performing cardiac ultrasound procedures while the other excels at complex diagnostic tests. Viewed as such, Seidman says, "one partner's success does not imply that that person is better than the other."



BRYAN & JAMIE His salary as a video game designer is double hers as a nonprofit director. Nonetheless, “we fully value each other’s skills, passions, and capacities,” Jamie says, which keeps envy at bay. (Photo by Amber Fouts)



## GET TO EQUAL GROUND

The first step to fixing an envy-tinged relationship, experts say, is to be honest. As difficult as it may be to admit envy of one's partner and the accompanying guilt and shame, it's paramount to addressing the feeling. "Harboring resentments toward your spouse is never a good idea," Saltz says. Recognize that to envy—and be envied—is human and move on to the next step: deciding how you and your partner will deal with the problem.

Couples should directly address the underlying issues driving their envy. In many cases, it originates with envious partners' self-esteem and the story they tell themselves about their real or perceived lack of success. Exploring the validity of that story and reframing it can declaw the emotion. In the case of envious men, it may be a matter of deconstructing their vision of masculinity. "Where did they get the idea that in order to be a real man they could not share power in a marriage?" Real asks. "They must realize that their partner's success is not their shame."

If a partner feels inadequate with regard to his or her own achievements, practical interventions, such as career counseling to help address job dissatisfaction or to explore other vocational avenues, can redirect the envy into something more productive. In this way, an imbalance in professional success can lead to significant personal changes. "I've encountered

couples in which one chose to follow a different career path or went back to get a graduate degree or became an entrepreneur," says Mainiero. What may have begun with unpleasant feelings can lead to positive changes.

Fixing partner envy is not only personal but also relational. "Career success does not exist in a vacuum," Saltz says. "If the home life is a mess and the children and bills and house are in shambles, then it's very hard, if not impossible, to succeed at work. If you have a partner helping to look after those things, you are more likely to succeed. It behooves both the envious and the envied to know this." Ben-Ze'ev underscores the essential need for partners to see that their separate achievements reflect on each other and feed their overall strength as a couple. "Both partners should believe that, despite the greater success of one, their basic equality in status remains intact and both are responsible for the life they have created."

The envied partner, too, has a key role in helping the relationship thrive. Sills offers advice for the envied: "In whatever way you may be holding yourself back or down for your partner, be careful. Someone's having trouble with your shining is not a good reason for you not to shine. Go be big." She adds, however, that while "being big," they should remember to always acknowledge and hold their partner up in the best possible light.

Through a process of painstaking self-examination, I finally let go of my envy of Daryl's success and started to explore what was really important to me. It turned out that it was no longer art—it was writing. I became the editor of a community newspaper. I wrote a book and, at Daryl's urging, hired an editor to help me polish it and found a publisher.

These days, I often travel with Daryl to his art openings and truly enjoy watching him shine. And when I look into the audience at my book readings, I know he's out there with his camera, smiling and cheering me on. Success, I now understand, takes many forms. For us, it looks like each of us working happily toward our separate goals but enjoying our accomplishments—and our life—together.

*Submit your response to this story to [letters@psychologytoday.com](mailto:letters@psychologytoday.com). If you would like us to consider your letter for publication, please include your name, city, and state. Letters may be edited for length and clarity.*

*Pick up a copy of Psychology Today on newsstands now or subscribe to read the the rest of the latest issue.*

**Facebook image: [wavebreakmedia/Shutterstock](#)**