

How to Navigate Difficult Personalities in a Marriage Relationship

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Understanding the Role of Personality in Marriage

We all know them: couples who seem like a “match made in heaven,” with personalities so compatible that you start to believe soulmates might be real after all. We adoringly follow the lives of these celebrity “power couples” – Blake Lively and Ryan Reynolds, Emily Blunt and John Krasinski, Zendaya and Tom Holland . . .

Okay, now for a reality check. As fun as it is to swoon over the supposed “perfect” compatibility of these cultural icons, the reality is that relationships are *complicated*. A large factor of our success within relationships is personality: the combination of characteristics that make us who we are. Our personality has its roots in both our biology and our social environment, and it is not likely to change much throughout life (although we can learn how to manage its outward manifestations over time). It is something we take with us wherever we go, and it can have a huge impact on our success in many areas of life, including our marriages.

Why Celebrity Couples Don't Tell the Whole Story

You see the shiny parts of celebrity relationships and wonder how two people so compatible ever found each other. But the truth is, personality differences are normal and pretty much inevitable in marriage. Many of the issues that marriage partners face stem from difficult personality traits in one or both partners. So, how do we navigate these challenges? And what do we do to lessen the impact of our not-so-great qualities?

The Big Five Personality Traits and Their Impact on Marriage

To understand how to address the impact of negative personality traits on your marriage, you must first know what personality traits can offset their impact and benefit your marriage. Personality psychologists have determined 5 main traits that make up personality (dubbed the “Big Five”). Of these 5 traits, 4 of them have been found to be beneficial in relationships: agreeableness, openness, extraversion and conscientiousness. If you want to read more about what these traits are and how they can strengthen your relationships, head over to [this blog](#).

How Neuroticism Affects Marital Relationships

Now let's talk about the 5th personality trait, one that can be a bit of a problem-causer in relationships: neuroticism. If you are a highly neurotic person, you have an inclination to experience unpleasant emotions like anxiety and sadness, among others. To be neurotic means that you are highly threat-sensitive, meaning you are hypervigilant in making sure that your physical and emotional circumstances are completely safe. At the slightest inkling of relational danger (whether perceived or actual), you can be flooded with negative emotions that can lead you to relationship-damaging actions or words. Your brain filters for the negative as a self-defense mechanism, which can lead to you noticing your partner's flaws more than their virtues and being overly critical of them. Naturally, this can lead to increased negative interactions with your spouse that can do real harm to your marriage.

Individuals higher in neuroticism also tend to perceive themselves negatively, which can lead to low self-esteem. This is not only bad news for the neurotic individual, but also for their partner. Since partners of insecure individuals exert an often exhausting amount of effort to protect the insecure [partner's feelings](#), their own happiness in the relationship may [decrease](#) over time. Basically, neuroticism can be a real drag in marriage.

The Evolutionary Roots of Threat Sensitivity in Neurotic Individuals

If you're feeling doomed to a bad marriage after reading all that, stay with us. Your anxious tendencies don't have to ruin your relationships—if you can understand where they're coming from, you'll learn how to better manage them. Your threat sensitivity is actually an evolutionary advantage. When our ancestors roamed the earth at the dawn of time, their hyper-awareness of surrounding threats is what kept them alive. So, if you're reading about neurotic tendencies and thinking, "Ugh, this so describes me!" remind yourself – and maybe your partner – that you would have THRIVED during hunter-gatherer times. You would've seen that mountain lion coming from a mile away.

The only problem is, the kind of threats you are biologically programmed to anticipate aren't super relevant nowadays (thank goodness). While your threat sensitivity would have protected you from physical threats back in prehistoric times, in modern times it manifests itself as seriously questioning your partner's love for you because they didn't respond with overwhelming enthusiasm to your suggestion of Taco Bell for dinner.

Practical Resources for Navigating Personality Differences

So . . . how can you manage your evolutionary advantage so that it's not a modern relationship disadvantage? Research has found that consistent and clear communication between partners can reduce the impact of negative personality traits and protect both partner's satisfaction in the marriage. If you want to learn how to do this in your own relationship, the Utah Marriage Commission website (StrongerMarriage.org) provides an abundance of up-to-date and scientifically sound resources, such as the online *ePREP* program, which has lessons on understanding personality differences and communicating more effectively.

There is also much to be said about the malleability of the human brain and how thought processes can impact the outward manifestation of our personality. If you were born with a naturally negative personality, science has shown how consciously and consistently noticing and challenging your negative thoughts can permanently rewire your brain to be more positive. For more information about this, as well as a practical guide to developing a positive mindset, we recommend reading "[The Happiness Advantage](#)," by Shawn Achor.

Bailey Bissegger is the primary author of this blog.

Related Resources:

https://extension.usu.edu/strongermarriage/podcast/episodes/036taking_your_marriage_from_goodtogreat