

## 5.4 Annoying Habits

When was the last time your spouse did something that annoyed you? Last week? Yesterday? An hour ago? Maybe your spouse is humming that irritating tune this very minute!

One of the most annoying things about annoying habits is that they don't seem all that important -- but they still drives you crazy! It's not abuse or abandonment, just annoyance. You should be able to shrug it off, but you can't. It's like the steady drip-drip of water torture. Annoying habits will nickel and dime your Love Bank into bankruptcy.

When we're annoyed, we usually consider others inconsiderate, particularly when we've explained to them that their behavior bothers us and yet they continue to do it. It's not just the behavior itself, but the thought behind it -- the idea that they just don't seem to care.

But when our behavior annoys others, we soft sell the whole problem. It's just a little thing, we argue, so why make a federal case out of it? Why can't other people adjust?

As a counselor, I try to help couples become more empathetic, to see through each other's eyes. Of course, no one can fully imagine what someone else feels, and that's a great part of the problem. I often wish I could switch a couple's minds-Joe becomes Jane for a day and Jane becomes Joe. If they could only know what it felt like to experience their own insensitive behavior, they would change their ways in a hurry.

I've found it helpful to divide insensitive behavior into two categories. If behavior is repeated without much thought, I call it an **annoying habit**. If it's usually scheduled and requires thought to complete, I call it **independent behavior**. Annoying habits include personal mannerisms such as the way you eat, the way you clean up after yourself (or don't!), and the way you talk. Independent behavior, which we will be discussing next, may include sporting events you attend, your choice of church, or your personal exercise program.

Taken together, your habits and activities define your entire lifestyle. And those habits and activities can be either enjoyable for both of you, or enjoyable for only one of you (those that are unpleasant for both of you are usually quickly relegated to the trash bin). They are like bricks of a house, where each one is either strong or weak. The strong bricks are habits and activities that make both of you happy, while the weak bricks make one happy at the other's expense. The entire house is your lifestyle, and if it's made up of weak bricks, it is likely to collapse.

A house made up of strong bricks will make each day enjoyable for both you and your spouse, and that, in turn, will help build your Love Bank accounts. But every annoying habit or independent behavior drives a wedge between you and your spouse, creating and sustaining incompatibility. If you find yourselves incompatible, it's probably because there are far too many weak bricks in your marriage. Replace them as soon as possible by making an effort to eliminate insensitive behavior.

But how should you go about changing your habits so that they are no longer annoying? It begins with the realization that whenever you do something that bothers your spouse, you are

withdrawing love units. Tell each other that eliminating annoying habits is a high priority for both of you. And then ask each other what it is that annoys you the most, write it down, and go to work with a plan to eliminate whatever you find.

None of us likes criticism, so I encourage both of you to avoid pointing out each other's annoying habits unless you are both prepared to do something about it. It's an enemy of good conversation to blind-side each other with criticism, ruining your time together by talking about how much you annoy each other. Many couples spend so much of their time together being critical of each other that each experience is a nightmare. How long can that last? I want your time together to be as enjoyable as possible, and criticism will have you both running for cover. If one of you does something that annoys the other, it's okay to mention it. But then drop the subject until you are able to deal with the problem effectively.

Your approach to annoying habits should be organized with an agreed upon plan to eliminate whatever it is. Unless you have such a plan, all you will accomplish with your criticism is a loss of love units whenever you bring up the subject.

My last four Basic Concepts address this very sensitive issue of eliminating annoying habits and independent behavior, so I will leave this subject now and come back to it again later. But I want you to be aware of this fact -- unless you and your spouse change your habits and activities so that they make you both happy, instead of making only one of you happy, you will eventually find that you cannot live with each other.