

I'd be happy if only he'd...

We talk to three couples who struggle with one irritating niggle and ask psychotherapist, Elizabeth Meakins, how they can fix it. Photographs by Chris Floyd

... STOP PUSHING ME OUT

Joanna Martin, 36, and Julian Gordon-Hastings, 39, were a couple as teenagers. They were reunited last summer and plan to marry this year. Joanna, a journalist, spends half the year working abroad, the other living with Julian, an operations manager.

JOANNA SAYS

'It's clothes and toiletries vs TV and stereo'

Julian's flat is a small bachelor pad. It's very cool but there's no space for my things. I am obsessively tidy, but because I have nowhere to put anything, I have to be untidy and that drives us both mad. It's a battle of girl's stuff – clothes and toiletries – vs boy's stuff – the TV and stereo.

I get upset hearing Julian's comments about my things being everywhere. I feel I'm encroaching on his space, that his enthusiasm about us being a couple again isn't matched by enthusiasm about me actually living with him. Recently he got in a mood and I didn't know why. Later, he revealed that my coat, which was on the floor, was blocking his view of the football on the television.

JULIAN SAYS

'She has too much stuff'

I'm over the moon that Joanna is back in my life and that we're getting married. I love sharing my home with her and I was happy when she started nesting, I thought it showed she was comfortable. But when she left her coat on the floor for a day, I wondered if she was just asserting her space. I didn't say anything and I was frustrated that she didn't ask why I was annoyed.

I have made room – I've cleared half my cupboard and half my bathroom – she just has so much stuff. I do feel uncomfortable sometimes when she moves into my personal space, like when I'm cleaning my teeth. I'm used to being on my own, and she doesn't take into consideration how small the flat is. ▶



... SPEND LESS TIME ON HIS COMPUTER

Joanna Roberts, 31, is a journalist and Richard Corral, 32, is a plumber. They live in Nottingham with Joanna's daughter Olivia, ten, and have been together for 18 months.

Elizabeth's analysis

Joanna and Julian have set themselves a hard target: separated for half the year so that natural differences get elbow room, then squashed together for the other half. What rings out loud and clear are two things that rupture many relationships – the 'I'm right and you're wrong' tone, and bottling up emotions.

HELPFUL TIPS

- Take time to review your relationship: how it began, where it's going, what you like about each other.
- Try to put yourself into the other's emotional shoes so you can 'get' where they're coming from.
- Don't store up irritations – try to say what you feel, when you feel it.

Did it work?

JOANNA We had a romantic evening reviewing our relationship, and Julian reassured me that he definitely wanted to share his home with me, and with that I realised that underneath I had been concerned that moving in together might mean losing my independence. We see that if we had a big house most of these arguments wouldn't arise, so, until that's possible we need to be far more tolerant.

JULIAN Joanna calls it 'our flat' now, instead of 'your flat', and that's made us more comfortable. If something gets on my nerves now, I do say so, and laugh about it with Joanna. I don't know why I bottled things up in the past, it made me frustrated and then the slightest thing would blow up out of proportion. Listening to Elizabeth has made us more honest and open with each other. We both know where we stand and as a result there is so much less tension.

JOANNA SAYS

'He makes me feel like I'm his nagging mum'
Sometimes I feel like I'm living with two children, and I'm the nagging mum. Rich switches on the PC as soon as he gets in, and if I talk to him his eyes constantly wander back to the screen. It's like talking to my daughter. Rich is from Nottingham, my hometown, and I'd known him for years. We got together in 2007 when I was living in Canterbury, but we realised we were serious and eight months later I moved in with my daughter, Olivia. At the start, I'd get in from work, we'd cuddle up and chat about our day, make dinner, watch a film, then go to bed. It suited me – I don't like spending a lot of time alone, and what I want from my partner is a best friend and companion. Then Richard borrowed *Football Manager* – the same game that was cited in my divorce as it had such a hold on my ex. I couldn't believe I was competing with it again. I didn't have friends in Nottingham so I had nothing to distract me, and I felt irritated and ignored. Our relationship is good and we have fun together, so I miss him when he's lost in the world of *Football Manager*.

RICHARD SAYS

'I'm used to living alone'
Jo needs to understand that I've lived alone for years and I'm used to doing what I want. I try to be attentive and sensitive, and Jo says I am – I do everything a supportive partner does willingly as part of being in a relationship. I'd looked forward to her and Olivia moving in for ages and it's all I hoped it would be. But sometimes it's nice just to do whatever I feel like. Some men play golf every Saturday, or go to the pub each night – I don't. I agree that I see the game as an escape, but it's like a good book for Jo. I know her history with it but that's not my fault. I'm not necessarily going to play it all night, but I don't want to promise to stop at a certain time either.

Elizabeth's analysis

This couple are knee deep in 'nagging mother vs truculent teenager' syndrome. Every computer game should carry a relationship health warning, but couples' battles are rarely a simple case of who's right or wrong. Richard's emotional absence and refusal to change his addictive behaviour has to be set alongside Jo's emotional dependency and possibly unrealistic expectations.

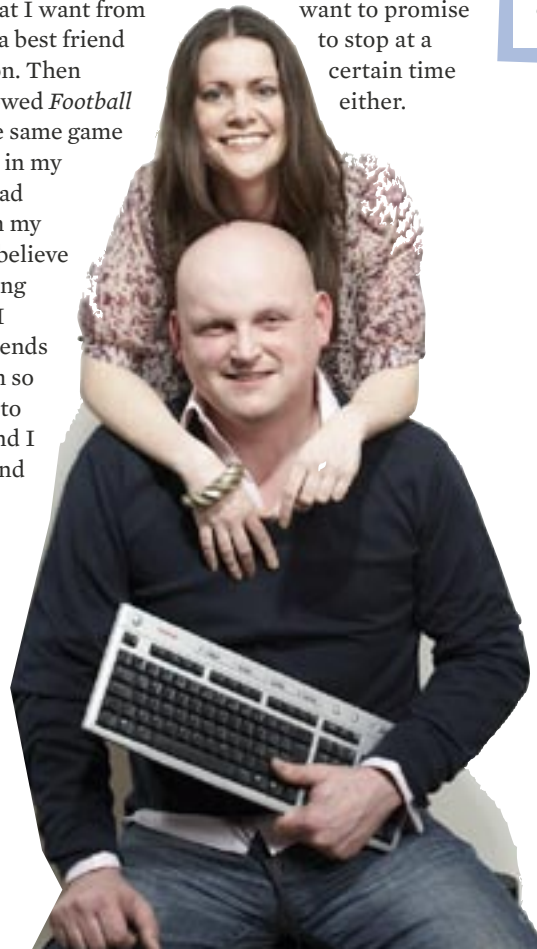
HELPFUL TIPS

- Joanna needs to exit from the 'nagging mother' role.
- She should try to focus on developing other friendships.
- Richard will then have the space to reflect on just how emotionally disengaged his addiction is making him.

Did it work?

JOANNA Talking about this for the first time really did us good. I realised that it is just a game and that I needn't make a big deal out of it. Rich means a lot to me and I don't want to nag him, and guess what – when I stopped nagging, he played the game less. I've also joined a gym to widen my interests and circle of friends.

RICHARD If Jo sees that I'm playing my game she says to me that she's going to do something, perhaps read a book, and suggests we meet in the lounge to watch a film in an hour's time. I really like that she's giving me space and now I always finish the game before the hour is over. I'm glad she's joining the gym. I want her to be happy and settled here. ►



... BE LESS TERRITORIAL AT HOME

Navneeta Addy and David Gough have been together for two years. Navneeta, a solicitor and legal headhunter, lives in north London and David, a senior tax consultant, lives in Milton Keynes. They are both 25.

NAVNEETA SAYS

'The kitchen is off limits when he's cooking'

David and I only see each other at weekends. We have a great relationship – he's very supportive and my best friend. However, we clash over cooking. David loves to make meals for me and would prefer it if I didn't go in the kitchen until his masterpiece is finished. It sounds funny, but actually it's very annoying. If I try to help, he tells me to relax in the lounge. Sometimes I get annoyed and tell him I haven't driven 50 miles to entertain myself, then I go in a huff and find it hard to relax and enjoy what he's made. We like trying new restaurants, then talking about making a dish at home, but I never get to do any of the creating. That gets on my nerves because we've discussed it, shopped for it, then once we're home I'm not longer involved. We only have a short time together, and it would make me happy for us to both be in the kitchen, chatting over a glass of wine as we chop, stir and season. I don't want to be left in the next room watching television.

DAVID SAYS

'I want to look after her and make her happy'

Cooking for me is like therapy, a great stress-relief after a long day at the office, and I love cooking for Navneeta. I want to look after her and make her happy. I confess

that I am a bit of a control freak, though. I plan in my head exactly what I am going to do in terms of timing and preparation, so if she interrupts I get frustrated, she might give me things before I'm ready for them, for example. We don't argue about much else, but in the kitchen I hear myself saying, 'It's fine, I'll do it,' or 'I'm not ready for that,' through gritted teeth. She tries to understand where I am coming from and bought me a top with Chef Gough printed on it. I thought that was very sweet. I try to let her in the kitchen so we can cook together, but it's difficult.

Elizabeth's analysis

Navneeta and David haven't had the everyday rubbing-shoulders method of learning how to deal with the other's habits, and I have the strong sense that they simply need to spend more time together. David's self-confessed control freak tendencies come to the foreground in the kitchen. When he says he wants to make her happy and loves cooking for her, it's a good illustration of

how easy it is to kid ourselves that we are doing something

for the 'other' when we are really just holding on to what makes us feel comfortable.

HELPFUL TIPS

- David must abandon being a control freak at least once during the fortnight, and let Navneeta cook a meal for him, preferably in her own space.
- Navneeta needs to try to change roles, so she's the one calling the shots during cooking.
- They should spend an evening in a neutral space to discuss what that reversal felt like, and how they can be together on a more equal footing.

Did it work?

NAVNEETA Talking through what Elizabeth said made us realise that we want to enjoy all our time together. One day I got up early and made David a hearty cooked breakfast. He really enjoyed me spoiling him for a change. Another time I cooked dinner while he pottered about the kitchen tidying up, and it felt good. When it came to cooking together we divided up the tasks before we started. It's become very much a joint thing now and that makes me happy. He'll now invite me to cook with him or ask me how I would make something, which is great.

DAVID Navneeta cooked for me and we chatted about it, and I did start to see the funny side of how protective I am about my cooking. I appreciate that cooking together makes her really happy, just as happy as when I presented her with a meal I'd made. So now I can enjoy cooking with her and for her. Working through this has brought us closer together. It has shown us how easy it is to resolve issues by talking them through and not dwelling on them. ■

