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"You Know I'm Right!"

How to deal with a certainty freak (even when it's you!)

By Michelle Stacey

I try biting my tongue. Too late; it doesn't work. "See, we should have taken that exit for the Jamestown Bridge," I can't help pointing out. If gnashing teeth can actually make a sound, that's what I'm hearing from my husband in the driver's seat.

And then he can't bite his tongue, either. "You always have to be right, don't you?" *No,* I protest inwardly, *I don't*!

We've had this conversation countless times, and over the years I've dismissed his recurring accusation as springing from what I would politely call...frustration over the fact that, too often, he has been so very wrong. I've been like the woman in that old shampoo commercial who obnoxiously crowed, "Don't hate me because I'm beautiful," only the script in my head runs, "Don't hate me because I'm smart/right/one step ahead of you." I'm still the first →

grader with her hand eagerly, perpetually in the air.

My husband-of-quite-a-few-years and I really do enjoy each other's company most of the time. Every couple, however, has its own mythology of perpetually recycled sins, and my certainty has been part of ours. But this day on the road, when I hear the "have to be right" line, I stop and reassess the whole concept. *Do* I always "have to be right"?

Perhaps my soul-searching is prompted by a bit of wisdom my husband has been quoting lately from a much-wed friend of his: "The secret to a happy marriage is to just keep repeating, 'You were right, dear.'" While I detest thinking of myself as an overbearing diva demanding constant victory, I have to admit that beyond the condescension, there could be some truth in that advice.

Maybe admitting a partner's rightness and your own wrongness, or at least being capable of give-and-take, is some kind of marriage glue. Heck, maybe it's relationship glue in general—not just with spouses but with friends, parents, children, bosses.

Then why is it so important to so many people (including me) to feel, or be acknowledged to be, right? And is there a way of dealing with this need that is big-hearted and forgiving rather than corrosive?

Admitting a partner's rightness (or at least having give-and-take) may be marriage glue

Medical Center at Mount Zion and the author of *On Being Certain,* a book about the biology of belief.

If you stimulate someone's brain physically in a particular way, Dr. Burton says, you can create a "feeling of knowing" without any actual thought behind it, suggesting that we have a receptor system that predisposes us to hanker after "rightness"—a spot just waiting to get turned on by experience. "The brain needs to have a sense that it has completed a line of thinking," Dr. Burton says, and it's not comfortable until it does. Also, he notes, certainty feels good, engendering a sense of contentment and satisfaction, and dispelling anxiety.

Another thing hardwired into our brains, besides pleasure in feeling right: displeasure at encountering cognitive dissonance. That's the bad feeling we get when a belief we hold is contradicted by evidence we don't want to hear, explains social psychologist Carol Tavris, Ph.D., coauthor of *Mistakes Were Made (But Not by Me).* One logical response to the discomfort of cognitive dissonance is insisting that you're not wrong—that, in fact, you're incredibly right.

But clearly some people are able to live with ambiguity; they can agree to disagree, or entertain the notion that there's no "right" in a situation, that both sides have some validity, or

happiness, anxiety, and neatness." And neither sex is more likely to be insistent than the other, he notes. It isn't about the know-it-all man or the self-righteous woman, experts agree. "There may be a difference of style," Dr. Burton says, "but not of degree."

SELF-ESTEEM AND CONTROL

Biology is only part of the story. Being certain we know what we know involves feelings, fears, insecurities, jealousies—in short, psychology. And here's where getting honest with myself becomes more challenging.

"When you can't give ground, even on small things, it suggests that you don't feel good about yourself," says Janice Kiecolt-Glaser, Ph.D., professor of psychiatry and psychology at the Ohio State University College of Medicine. How much we need to defend our "rightness," she feels, boils down to two factors: self-esteem, and a sense of control over one's life.

Now we're talking. I had to cop to my need for control a long time ago. In fact, that's another accusation my husband has been known to fling: "You're so controlling." Blame it on the family dysfunction of my childhood (Were my parents going to split up? Would we have enough money to live on? Did my frazzled, battling parents really love my sister and me enough?), but I've always felt compelled to know exactly what's going on in any given situation, and to try to somehow direct the outcome.

These compulsions can get even

in a greater need to feel 'in control' by insisting you're right about something. You can feel like, 'At least this I know for sure.'"

Take the new job I started not long ago. Naturally, anybody in this situation wants to impress, to please, to prove his or her worth, and feels a bit on edge. All of which may help explain how I found myself failing to give ground in a meeting with my boss (not the way to please the powers that be—but on this particular issue I was so sure she was overlooking the true benefits of seeing it my way, and if I could just elaborate a little more...).

Luckily, mid-explanation, I was stopped by a blinding insight: It's better to be happily employed than to be always right. Similarly, it's better to be happily married than to be always right. And that realization—even though I'll probably have to experience it over and over again—was my first baby step toward loosening the bonds of my rightness compulsion.

You don't have to be stuck forever as either the know-it-all or the frustrated patsy

There are many great reasons for shedding the need to be always right. Doing so can improve not only the health of our relationships, but also the health of our bodies. Kiecolt-Glaser has conducted clinical studies of the interpersonal conflict that arises in situations involving nastiness and hostility, which can certainly occur when one person in a relationship insists on being right. Such tension affects immune response; it's connected to an increase in stress hormones, slower healing of wounds, and higher levels of inflammation (linked to age-related ailments like cardiovascular disease, diabetes, and osteoporosis). Women show a greater physiological response to hostile situations than men do.

THE EMOTIONAL TOLL

And that's just the physical story. The emotional hit you take every time your partner or friend demands that you bow to his or her "correct-

ness"—or the damage done every time you issue the same demand—becomes a wedge. "The effects on a relationship of an intense need to be right are miserable," says Tavris, "with the one who gives in, reluctantly, usually coming to feel bitter and annoyed by the bully. Eventually the bully's target withdraws, stops speaking up, and stops being honest—not good for a close relationship." To put it mildly.

Take my best college friend, whom I'll call Lesley. We were truly close and still are, despite the fact that at some point during our undergraduate years she'd designated herself my surrogate older sister. She issued endless advice and commentary about everything from the character flaws of the guys I dated to the caliber of classes I was taking, and there was no use arguing—she'd even throw in some psychoanalytic backup for good measure, since she was studying to be a therapist (which she has since become).

Our relationship somehow survived this onslaught, but not without some anger on my part—fruitless anger, since I felt that to challenge her conclusions was to jump into a bog of pressure and conflict.

I saw her again recently, after years of geographical and emotional distance, and at the end of the evening she said, "There's something I've been meaning to tell you." *Oh, God,* I thought. *Here it comes. Decades ago I committed some kind of crime and now I get to hear all about my sins.* Instead, she said, "When I accused you of not 'being there' for me when I broke up with Jack senior year? That really wasn't right, or fair. I had my own issues going on that led to my saying that, but I was wrong. And I know it was hurtful to you."

Our friendship started again that night. I was absolutely floored—relieved by and grateful for her generosity in being willing to admit having been wrong. Even better, it gave me faith that this "right/wrong" dysfunction is far from intractable, that people can actually change and mature. You don't have to be stuck forever being either the know-it-all or the frustrated patsy. →

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GETTING OVER IT

The fix begins with dredging all of this interior action—insecurity, need for control, the brain's inherent urge to be certain—up to a conscious level. Difficult though that seems at times, it's possible. "Cognitive dissonance is hardwired, but that doesn't mean we can't learn to reduce it, live with it, learn to admit we're wrong," notes Tavris. "We're hardwired to be hungry, too, but we override that."

Dr. Burton suggests starting with the realization that our first response to any situation is "primarily reflexive, created by preexisting beliefs and biases"—in other words, our thoughts spring from spontaneous, subjective, and often prejudiced feelings. So stop right there: Pause and question whether your "rightness" is reasonable or knee-jerk, biased, and defensive. The best thing, says Dr. Burton, is to go even further: "Momentarily assume that the opposing view might actually be correct, consider the alternative, imagine that there may be possible solutions that neither of you has thought about."

Who could possibly be so wise? Well, you and I could, unless we want to live as slaves to our own impulses. Here's the thing, says Dr. Burton: We know from brain wave testing that our brains are constantly making decisions—way before we become conscious of them. But what humans have is veto power over those processes. "That veto power is the main thing that separates us from ani-

you're right, or in admitting you might have been mistaken—even decades later, as with Lesley and me.

"Why do we feel so reluctant to say those little words of apology?" muses Tavris. "I've always felt that the second sweetest three-word phrase in the English language is 'I was wrong,' followed by 'you are right.' Also, 'I don't know.' These are conciliatory, generous things to say. And people feel immediately grateful when they hear them; their anger is defused."

And if you're caught on the other side—if, as I was in college, you feel trapped by another person's relentless insistence upon "rightness"—there are conscious ways to respond to that. Rather than firing back with every weapon at hand, or retreating resentfully as I did with Lesley, you can try to open a better dialogue by gently redirecting the conversation.

"When you feel someone is wrong but unlikely to easily admit it," advises Kiecolt-Glaser, "try saying something like, 'I am confused about this,' or 'I don't understand what you meant by...' or 'I think we may be talking past each other; what I was thinking about was...' Those kinds of statements are less likely to arouse a person's reflexive defensiveness."

Then, if the other person does convince you of her rightness, you can have the pleasure of saying, truthfully, "Yes, you're right!" Or you can decide that you're both right. Who knows? Maybe someday we'll all be so highly evolved that instead

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