

Florida Poly Retreat 2006

Practical Jealousy Management

Part 1: On the Nature of Jealousy

Jealousy is an unusual emotion in that it is an emotion rooted in other emotions. Often, the root of jealousy lies in insecurity, the idea that your relationship with your partner is not stable; it can also be rooted in such things as fear of loss, fear of being replaced, and so on.

For that reason, effective resolution of jealousy relies on tracking down the root of the jealousy, and identifying the emotional responses the jealousy is rooted in. This is arguably the most important step to resolving issues of jealousy and insecurity, and is one of the most difficult, because it relies on an unflinching, completely honest self-assessment and a willingness to explore and understand unpleasant, uncomfortable emotions.

Toolkit for Understanding Jealousy

- First, identify the things that trigger a feeling of jealousy or insecurity. Keep in mind that the *triggers* which lead to a jealous emotional response are not the same thing as the *cause* of the jealous response! The triggers are the events or situations which bring up a feeling of jealousy; the cause is buried deeper, in other emotions.
- Fill in the blank: “I do not like my partner to do X because if my partner does X, then _____.” Be honest! Identify the fears or doubts that the behavior which triggers the feelings of jealousy or insecurity may cause. What’s the worst-case scenario? What bad things do you believe may happen if your partner does whatever it is that causes the jealous response? (This may take some time. It might be helpful to write down your response; if you feel conflicted or a mix of emotions, write down each one, and try to pin down exactly what you feel when your partner does whatever triggers a jealous response.) Often, simply putting a name to your fears, however unfounded you know them to be rationally, goes a long way toward reducing them.
- Further down the rabbit hole: *Why* do you think these things may happen? Are those fears valid? How does your partner feel about these things? Talk to your partner about what you believe may happen if your partner does whatever it is that triggers the insecurities or jealousies.

Potential Pitfalls

- Fears, jealousies, insecurities, and similar emotions will seek to justify themselves and convince you that they are valid; and the emotional reality they create will color and influence your worldview. They always feel valid, even when they’re not. Don’t assume that your feelings always tell the truth. Look at them critically, in the light of day.

When you examine the things you think may happen if your partner does whatever triggers your jealousy, most often what you find is that the things you're afraid of aren't actually true. Knowing that intellectually does not make the feelings go away, but it does give you information about what the feelings are rooted in.

Now, not all jealousies are irrational, and not all jealousies are unfounded. If your partner has a history of cheating on you or betraying your confidence, for example, then it is perfectly reasonable and appropriate to feel that your partner might not be honest with you, or might not do what he or she says. Useful jealousy—jealousy that is a valid warning sign of a problem in a relationship—is a very different animal from irrational jealousy.

It's not always easy to tell them apart, though, because emotional responses seek to justify themselves, and can influence the way you perceive the world. It's possible to find evidence to support almost any feeling, if you look hard enough.

Part 2: Deconstructing Jealousy, Fear, and Insecurity

When you've looked at jealousy through a lens of critical evaluation, often you'll find a great deal of insight into the things that underlie those feelings. Now it's time to start working on the root of the problem.

One way to do this is to go back to the sentence, "I do not like my partner to do X because if my partner does X, then _____." Look at the way you fill in the blank. What does it reveal about your assumptions? Does it suggest anything about the way you see your relationship with your partner. The things that it reveals about your assumptions and your ideas about your relationship—especially the tacit, unspoken ideas that you may not consciously be aware of—will speak volumes about how to go about solving the issues at the root of jealousy.

Toolkit for Deconstructing an Insecurity

- Make a list of hidden assumptions. These are the ideas that underlie your fears.

Let's say, for example, that you realize "I do not like when my partner kisses someone else in front of me, because if my partner kisses someone else, that person might kiss better than I do. If that person kisses better than I do, maybe that person is better in bed too. If that person is better in bed than I am, maybe my partner will prefer that person to me. If my partner prefers that person to me, maybe my partner will leave me."

This example shows a number of assumptions, some of which are buried very deeply, about the nature of this hypothetical person's beliefs about relationships. Are these assumptions true? What are they? In this case, a list of hidden assumptions might be:

- My partner is with me because of the way I please my partner in bed.
- My partner values the things that someone does in bed.
- If someone else is better than I am in bed, my partner may wish to stop having sex with me.

- The way I am in bed is fixed and unchangeable; someone who is better than I am in bed will always be better than I am in bed; and there is nothing I can do about that.
- If my partner finds someone more pleasing than I am in bed, my partner will no longer need me.

- Examine these assumptions. Are they valid? Are they true? Do they have merit? Do you really believe them? What does your partner say about them?

Now, when you do this, you might find that one or more of these ideas is actually true. There are people in the world who, for example, base their relationships on sex; there are people in the world who will choose the person who is the most fun in bed, and dump the other one.

Sidebar: Fear of being alone

The fear of being alone is arguably one of the most difficult things to deal with in a relationship. Often, it comes from an idea that the partner you have now is someone you must be with; if you lose this relationship, for whatever reason, you can never find another again. This fear can make it very difficult for you to ask for what you need in a relationship (for fear that your partner will leave if you ask for too much), and can add an edge of desperation to any other fear or insecurity you may feel (because if you fail to make this relationship work, you'll never have another opportunity for happiness).

Conquering a fear of being alone is a necessary step in the quest for security; if you can not feel confident in your ability to be happy without your current relationship, it becomes much more difficult to be secure in your current relationship.

But if these assumptions are true, and they have validity, then the question that brings up is: Do you actually want this relationship? If your partner is only with you for sex, then what value does that relationship have? Is that what you want, or are you simply in the relationship out of fear of being alone?

Most of the time, when you drag the assumptions underlying a jealousy out into the light and look at them, you'll find that they actually have no merit at all. In this hypothetical example, there are a lot of assumptions which likely are not true: first, that this person is "better" in bed with you (in reality, even the same sexual act with two different partners is two completely different experiences; there is no direct way to compare yourself to another person); second, that the only reason your partner is with you is because of the sexual services you provide; third, that it is impossible for you to control how pleasing you are to your partner; and fourth, that your partner is going to choose to leave you over something like this.

Keep in mind that this is a hypothetical example; your own experiences with your own emotional responses will be different. But the same process can be applied to your experiences; are the unspoken assumptions beneath your fears valid? Can you deconstruct your fears, and look at what they're made of? Do these fears make sense? Do they tell the truth?

Part 3: Constructing a replacement

Once you've come this far, you're very nearly done. Understanding the things that a jealous response is rooted in, and taking apart those roots, gives you tremendous power over that jealousy. The next step in conquering that jealousy is to construct new ideas that you can reach for whenever you begin to feel the jealous response.

The way you do this is to find counters to the things underlying the jealousies. These are things which you can use to tell your fears, “No, the things I am afraid of are not true, and here’s why.” They are concrete, grounded ideas you can reach for whenever the jealousies or insecurities arise.

Toolkit for Replacing Fears and Insecurities

- Return to the list of the assumptions and ideas your fears are grounded in. For that list of assumptions and ideas, make another list of things that demonstrate why the fears and insecurities are unfounded.

Sidebar: Personal value

One easy trap you may fall into if you are examining your emotions and constructing replacements for your fears and insecurities is in believing that your partner values and loves you for *what you do*, not for *who you are*. The danger in making this assumption is that it can lead to the thought that if someone else does the things you do better than you do them, your partner can replace you with that person.

In truth, people are not interchangeable. Even if someone else shares all your interests, does all the things you do, and behaves the same way you do in your relationship, you still stand alone. The things that give you value are unique to you; the same experience with two different people has two different and unique flavors. You can not be replaced, not even by someone who does all the same things you do—because it is who you are as a person that makes you special.

Don’t look to things outside yourself for specialness; don’t assume “I am special because I am the only one that my partner does thus-and-such with” or “I am special because I am the only person who knows thus-and-such about my partner.” An idea of specialness that depends on things outside yourself can easily lead to insecurity, because if someone else does those things, then you won’t feel special any more. On the other hand, an idea of specialness that comes from within can never be taken away.

In the example talked about earlier, it might look something like this:

- **Assumption:** My partner is with me because of the way I please my partner in bed.

- **Fact:**

My partner is not with me because I please my partner in bed. My partner is with me because I add value to his or her life. My partner is with me because I have qualities that he or she likes and admires. My partner is with me because my partner loves me. I can trust that love, and I can trust the reality that my partner wants to be with me because of who I am, not because of the way I kiss or the way I am in bed.

- **Assumption:** - My partner values the things that someone does in bed.

- **Fact:**

My partner may value the things someone else does in bed, but that has nothing to do with me. My partner *also* values me. My value does not depend on anything outside of myself. My value does not depend on my being the best in bed. My partner may have fun spending time with someone else, but this is not a reflection in any way of the value my partner gets from me.

And so on. If necessary, sit down with your partner and go through your list of fears and assumptions with him or her. As goofy as it might seem, you may even find it’s helpful to write down all these things that challenge and reject your fears and in a way you can keep with you in your pocket.

Building a list of things which challenge your fears and your assumptions is a powerful tool because your jealousies are not going to disappear overnight; like living animals, they will seek to protect themselves. When you are feeling an emotional response that you don’t like and don’t want, it is helpful sometimes to be able to point to a concrete list of reasons why that response is unwarranted.

Part 4: Building new habits

By and large, emotional responses are learned things; and like all learned things, we become good at them through practice. Jealousy and insecurity are no different. In a very real way, a person becomes good at being jealous or insecure by practicing being jealous or insecure, and becomes good at being confident and self-assured by practicing being confident and self-assured.

The last step to building a more secure and less jealous approach to relationships is to practice being secure. The more you behave like a person who is secure and self-confident, the more you become a person who is secure and self-confident. It almost sounds too easy, but it is an extremely powerful technique. Mental attitudes are learned just as a skill like playing the piano is learned.

All new skills feel awkward, uncomfortable, and unnatural at first. It makes little difference what kind of skill we're talking about; the first time you try to ride a bicycle or play a piano, it feels extremely uncomfortable.

The same is true for learning new mental and emotional attitudes. If you are accustomed to thinking of yourself as a jealous person, if you describe yourself as being a jealous person, then you are practicing being jealous; it feels natural and right because you've practiced it to the point where it's become natural. Similarly, each time you welcome thoughts or feelings that say you aren't good enough, or that your partner doesn't really want to be with you, you're practicing that insecurity.

Practicing security and self-confidence leads to being secure and self-confident.

Toolkit for Practicing Security

- Start by examining the mental habits you have already developed. When you see your partner with someone else, do you naturally think “Oh, that person is much more attractive than I am, of course my partner prefers that person?” That's a habit that reinforces insecurity.
- Next, look at the behaviors those habits result in. One of the most common ways for people to try to deal with jealousy is by controlling the behavior of their partners, in order to try to skirt around the things that trigger the jealousy. But a trigger is not a cause; if the root cause of the jealousy has not been resolved, then the jealousy still exists, it's merely dormant. Getting rid of the jealousy means letting go of the idea that the way to prevent it is to control your partner's behavior so that you do not see whatever triggers it.

This requires a lot of courage. It requires deliberately exposing yourself to the very thing that makes you feel jealous; and when you're up to your ass in alligators, as the saying goes, it can be mighty difficult to remember that your objective was to drain the swamp! Jealousy feels awful, and it makes you want to do anything you can to make the feeling stop, *right now*. Getting through it once and for all means challenging it, and that means not taking the easy way out.

Another common way that people try to resolve jealousy is the “structural remedy”—controlling jealousy by controlling the form of the relationship, in hopes that if the relationship has the right shape, the jealousy will simply never arise.

The three most common structural approaches to dealing with jealousy are prescriptive primary/secondary (“I will not feel jealous if I know I am top dog, #1, the ‘real’ relationship, the person who can keep all other people subordinate”), the Hot Bi Babe approach (“I will not feel jealous if we both date the same person, because if my partner is having sex with someone, then there’s no need to feel left out or insecure if I am having sex with that person too!”), and controlling the sex of a partner’s other partners (which can take two forms; either “A person of the opposite sex as me can offer my partner something that I am not able to offer my partner, so it is OK if my partner has lovers who are the same sex as I am because they can’t do anything I can’t do, but my partner is forbidden to have lovers who are not the same sex as I am because they can give my partner things I can’t” and “A person of the opposite sex as me is not a threat to me, because the experiences my partner gets from that person can’t replace the experiences my partner gets from me; therefore, it is OK if my partner has loves who are the opposite sex of me because they can’t replace me, but my partner is forbidden to have lovers who are the same sex as me because they can threaten me.”)

All three structural approaches may feel right to some people, but they rest on flawed assumptions: that jealousy is logical and works rationally, and that people are more or less interchangeable.

The more difficult, less comfortable, more courageous approach goes something like this: “If my partner does whatever it is that triggers my jealousy, then I feel jealous or threatened or insecure, but I know these feelings are not true. I have a choice to make. I can try to avoid the jealousy, or I can act like a person who is secure and self-confident even though I do not yet feel secure and self-confident, and trust that my partner will take care of me.”

Making the decision to act secure and self-confident even when you don’t feel secure and self-confident is one of the most difficult things you’ll ever do—at least the first time you do it.

How do you do this?

Find the thing that triggers your jealousy, and then *let your partner do that thing*.

Returning to the previous hypothetical example, suppose you feel jealous when your partner kisses someone in front of you; you’ve understood that the jealousy is rooted, ultimately, in a fear of being replaced; and you’ve constructed a list of reasons why you will not actually be replaced. All well and good, but that by itself is not the end. The end is in making the choices of a secure and self-confident person, a person who does not feel these jealousies. And that means telling your partner “It is OK if you kiss your other partner in front of me.”

The first time you do this, your jealousy will scream at you, trying to convince you that the world is about to end. Do it anyway. Reach for those things that you know invalidate your fears, and trust your partner.

When you do this, something magical happens. Your fears and jealousies begin looking a lot smaller and a lot sillier. The second time you do it, it will be easier; the third time, you may start to wonder what all the fuss was about.

Ultimately, in the end, you have a choice.

Your jealousies and insecurities are things you can understand; and more importantly, you can choose how you behave, no matter what you feel. You are responsible for your own actions and for the consequences of those actions; no matter how strongly you may feel threatened or insecure, you still have a choice. Choices which give in to the insecurities strengthen them; choices that take a stand against your insecurities weaken them.

I am a firm believer in the power of affirmative choice. Choosing to behave in the ways that a secure and self-confident person behaves takes you closer to being secure and self-confident. There are many tools that can help make those choices, but in the end those tools can't do the work for you; at some point, it becomes necessary to make those choices and stand by them.

Choosing to behave as if you are secure and self-confident in the face of jealousy is difficult and uncomfortable. It's a choice that's worth it, however.