Listening to Jealousy

If you can resist the urge to smash the china, feeling jealous can actually bring couples closer together. After all, there's nothing like a rival, even an imagined one, to make your own partner look more appealing. By Sara Eckel Photographs by Dylan Coulter
KATIE DIDN'T SEE HERSELF as the jealous type. Why should she be? The New York City writer was smart and attractive, and she was dating Sandy, a man 23 years her senior. "He saw me as this young pretty thing," she says. "I felt very confident in our roles."

But as their intimacy deepened, Katie grew more anxious. She didn't understand why Sandy still had pictures of his ex-girlfriend on his hard drive. She became worried if he went out with his friends without her.

After a lot of fighting—and a broken engagement—the couple decided to have an open relationship. That only accelerated the drama, with both partners acting on their feelings of jealousy. Sandy broke into Katie's apartment and stole her laptop while she was on a date. She retaliated by sneaking into his apartment and, seeing his computer displaying a dating site and messages with several women, proceeded to break a few bowls and ransack his closet. But as she hurled dress shirts and slacks onto the floor, Katie had a moment of clarity: Her jealousy had turned her into someone she didn't know.

The Purpose of Jealousy

JEALOUSY IS USUALLY defined as the emotional reaction to a threat to one's relationship from a real or imagined romantic rival. It differs from envy in that it always involves a third party. "Envy is 'I want what you have.' Jealousy is 'I want you, that I think you're coming after,'" says Erica Slotter, a professor of psychology at Villanova University.

One reason it's painful to admit to feeling jealousy is that it could indicate a power imbalance in a relationship, says David Buss, a professor of psychology at the University of Texas at Austin and the author of Dangerous Passion: Why Jealousy Is as Necessary as Love and Sex. "It's a signal that your partner is higher in mate value or that you are generally threatened or fearful that your partner might leave," he says, "so people intentionally try to suppress the expression of jealousy."

In its most extreme form, Buss says, jealousy can be exceedingly damaging—it's the leading driver of homicide of romantic partners, particularly of wives, girlfriends, and exes. It can also compel people to attempt to control their partners in unhealthy ways—incessantly monitoring their whereabouts, cutting them off from friends and family, or trying to undermine their self-esteem and convince them that no one else would have them.

But jealousy also has a purpose: Evolutionary psychologists see it as a mechanism that helps people ward off mate-poaching. "When there is a threat and people become jealous, that jealousy motivates them to engage in behaviors that interfere with the partner going somewhere else," says Edward Lemay, a professor of psychology at the University of Maryland.

Such actions—putting your arm around a spouse at a party, befriending a partner's cute coworker—are called mate-retention behaviors, and a recent study by Lemay and Angela Neal, a professor of psychology at the University of South Carolina, Lancaster, indicates that such gestures can be quite effective in reeling partners back in. In the study, heterosexual couples kept daily diaries reporting whether they had felt tempted by another potential romantic or sexual partner, whether they thought their partner had felt tempted, and how committed they felt to their relationship. The researchers found that participants detected partners' tempta-
tion quite accurately: "You aren't getting away with checking people out and your partner not noticing," Neal says.

Not surprisingly, the team found that people were more likely to engage in mate-guarding on days they thought their partners' eyes were roving. But they also found that participants reported greater levels of commitment to their relationship after a partner took mate-guarding actions.

The findings, Neal believes, indicate that a little jealousy can benefit a relationship. "Too much can potentially have bad implications. But in some respects, jealousy is a positive thing," she says. "If your relationship is without jealousy, that might be an indication that your partner doesn't care about you very much."

It can be annoying to have a partner glance at your phone to see whom you've been texting—but it can also be reassuring and even a little exciting to know that he's worried, especially if your relationship is relatively new. It might even compel you to put the phone down and tell him how nice he looks.

A Wake-Up Call

Neal and Lemay's study mostly involved younger couples in new relationships—situations where jealousy is most likely to occur, as partners suss out their levels of commitment. In long-term relationships, jealousy tends to die down over time, but when it arises, it would be wise for any couple to view it as a wake-up call—not a fire, but a flare.

"It can be a sign that something is not quite right," says Michele Scheinkman, a couples therapist in New York City. "A couple may be together for many years when suddenly something happens that needs attention."

Longtime couples, Scheinkman suggests, can begin sleepwalking through a relationship, having routine sex or maybe none at all. Then one day—boom! The wife starts working out with a buff personal trainer. The husband hits it off with a cute divorced mom at school pickup. And their spouses remember: Oh, yeah. Other people think my partner is hot. I think my partner is hot, too. I'd better start showing it.

"It's very interesting how many people pay no attention to their partner until someone else comes along," Perel says.

If jealousy is healthy or even beneficial, why does it wreak havoc in so many relationships? The problem is not the feeling but how we act on it. Neal and Lemay's study didn't distinguish between mate-retaining behaviors, but Lemay says they are far from equal: Steps like excessive snooping, manipulation, and controlling undermine satisfaction.

Katie, for example, dealt with her jealousy by trying to make Sandy jealous. She dated other men, sexted exes, and kept pictures of them on her phone—the very behavior she had condemned him for. "It wasn't, 'I'm going to show him.' It was more self-protective: 'I will reach out to my exes and occupy my time and put an imaginary distance between us, because that way I won't feel as vulnerable,'" she says.

But this only made her more paranoid. "I felt like an idiot. I thought, 'I'm
Jealousy was a threatening emotion not even the jealous type, and I'm so relax into that vulnerability and recognize that is love, she treated Sandy as an adversary. "I always thought jealousy was a threatening emotion that would lead someone to hurt me," she says. "It felt like a bad thing that I should be ashamed of, that would drive someone away."

It's a sentiment Perel is familiar with from hearing spouses complain about partners flirting with attractive neighbors or messaging exes on Facebook. "People pride themselves on being above this weak emotion," Perel says. When clients insist that they're angry, annoyed, traumatized—anything but jealous—Perel finally tells them, "I'm listening to you, and there's one thing you are not telling me: You're jealous. If you tell me you're jealous, then I actually get to see a sexual woman or a sexual man who is missing their partner. Then we are in the right story."

Katie and Sandy are working their way back to exclusivity, and she says that owning up to her jealousy was the first step toward closing their rift. "He told me, 'I feel like you love me when you say that. I didn't think you cared for so long, because you never got jealous.'"

When you smash a plate or steal a phone after a run-in with your partner's ex, he or she will probably be able to put two and two together. But more common, Lemay says, are positive moves whose source a partner may not be able to trace. Some people try to make themselves more attractive or commit to spending more quality time with a partner when they begin to experience jealousy. "Your partner might not know that your motivation for wanting to do things with them is to keep them from someone else," says Lemay.

**If You Can Join Them, You Can Beat Them**

Surprisingly, jealousy can motivate you not to attack perceived romantic rivals but to become more like them. In a study Slotter conducted, participants read a list of attributes—artistic, athletic—and indicated which described themselves and which did not. Later, they returned to the lab and listened to or imagined a scenario in which their partner either flirted with or rebuffed a romantic rival. Each participant then viewed a personality profile of the fictitious rival, which had been drafted to include the specific characteristics he or she had previously said were not true of him or herself.

After being exposed to the flirting scenario, participants were more likely to change their self-identification to match the rival's. For example, a man who did not identify as athletic in the initial session would be more likely to do so after hearing the scenario in which his partner had flirted with a romantic rival who was a jock. But those exposed to the rebuffing scenario did not make such a switch, leading Slotter to conclude that partner behavior drove the change in self-perception.

Slotter says it's unclear whether the impulse to change one's self-perception to please a mate is positive or negative, though it appears to work, at least to a point. "Being athletic isn't necessarily a bad thing. It could be functional insofar as keeping the partner's attention on you, and perhaps promoting new, positive characteristics within yourself."

But there is probably a line one should not cross. "If you are chronically feeling so insecure that you are changing yourself a lot," Slotter adds, "it could make you confused about what your actual identity is. Beyond that, any relationship in which you are experiencing a high frequency of jealousy is probably a relationship that has other issues."

A partner's personality type is one crucial underlying issue. A study conducted by Robert Rydell, a psychology professor at Indiana University, explored the roots of "suspicious jealousy"—jealousy that has no apparent trigger, other than, say, seeing a Keira Knightley film—and found that people who displayed suspicious jealousy had higher levels of insecurity and anxiety, and lower self-esteem. An early traumatic experience can also predispose a person to hypervigilance in their later relationships, Buss says.

**Taming the Beast**

When one partner begins to feel jealousy, it can launch a cycle of accusation and defense. Breaking free requires both partners to shed blame and shame so they can move from defensiveness to vulnerability, couples therapist Michele Scheinkman says.

It starts with admitting to feeling jealous, and then articulating the emotions underpinning it—your love for your partner, your fear of losing him or her. This approach is far more productive than hurling accusations or forbidding a partner from ever seeing an opposite-sex childhood friend. "Saying 'I'm so jealous' is very different from 'You're an ass,'" Scheinkman says. "The feeling is the same, but when you can speak from a position of vulnerability, you have a much better chance of working through it."

It's also important for couples to assess what may be missing from their relationship—and what may be causing their eyes to rove. Therapist Esther Perel often suggests that clients write a note to their partner explaining that they "miss" the person, and that perhaps they haven't been present enough in the relationship themselves. "Then you begin to say, 'I'm jealous because I see how other people are drawn to you,' or 'I see the effect you have on others and how much charm you have, and how little effort you put out when you are with me. I want you to talk to me the way you talk to your business partner or your client.'"
Patrice Crocevera was constantly jealous whenever her fiancé looked at a picture of a model or got a call from a female friend. If he chatted with an attractive cashier or waitress, she'd subject him to an inquisition: “Were you flirting with her?” “Do you like her?” “Any kind of female presence that wasn’t family was always threatening to me,” she says.

Crocevera realized she was driving her fiancé to distraction, and in her more rational moments, she knew the problem probably wasn’t his wandering eye; she had behaved the same way in her previous three relationships. As it happens, when she was 17, her first boyfriend cheated on her, and she hadn’t let her guard down since.

Ten heterosexual couples participated in an exercise in the virtual-reality platform Second Life. The couples were physically separated into different cubicles but were together in a virtual coffee shop. After about two minutes, an avatar controlled by a member of the research team started speaking only with the opposite-sex partner, while totally ignoring the same-sex partner, and did so for six minutes. Though the confederate didn’t overtly flirt, the exercise often evoked strong expressions of jealousy—and higher cortisol levels—in the non-targeted partners, “more so than we expected, honestly,” says Mary-Frances O’Connor, the professor of psychology who oversaw the study.

Once she identified the true source of her anxiety, Crocevera and her fiancé were able to work together. He agreed to be more sensitive—for example, by refraining from commenting on the attractiveness of film stars—and she committed to trying to relax.

“I always thought he was being defensive, but in hindsight it seems more like he was hurt,” Crocevera says. “He truly didn’t understand why I was reacting the way I did.”

Virtual Reality, Real Jealousy

LEARNING TO HANDLE jealousy can be especially beneficial because it’s so easy for a partner, intentionally or not, to induce the feeling in us. Just how easy? A virtual-reality experiment conducted at the University of Arizona offers some insights.

Through their avatars, many participants employed the same mate-guarding behaviors seen in real life, such as physically standing between the partner and the rival, and challenging the interloper: “She’s with me, pal, and I’m standing right here,” one said.

“There was some swearing,” O’Connor says.

The responses embodied “reactive jealousy,” a feeling stimulated by an actual event, like discovering a string of flirty texts between your wife and her college boyfriend. “Reactive jealousy says, ‘I’m going to prevent this. I’m going to intervene when I see early signs,’” says research psychologist Mark Attridge, a consultant on workplace mental health.

In the real world, the challenge is determining whether your feelings of jealousy are suspicious or reactive. In other words, are you paranoid or perceptive?

Red Alert! Red Alert!

ASA LEVEAUX WAS seized with feelings of jealousy whenever he saw his then-wife hanging out with her “work husband” at family picnics and other outings. But she denied that anything romantic was happening between the two of them. “If I brought it up, she’d say, ‘You don’t need to be like that. You’re making things up,’” he says.

“I was jealous all the time, but I didn’t have the language to talk about it.”

Leveaux was wrong about that coworker; it was a purely platonic relationship. But he was right that his wife was cheating—it was just with someone else. “My attention was toward the person I could see,” he says, “but there was something behind all the closed doors and curtains that I hadn’t considered.”

While his marriage was damaged beyond repair, Leveaux, who is currently unattached, says the experience taught him to respect his jealousy rather than suppress it. Now, if seeing a friend or a date flirting with someone else causes him pangs, he will recognize that he may be falling for that person—and let her know. “I use jealousy as an emotional buzzer, a red alert: ‘You may be ready for something more,’” he says.

He has also learned to respect jealousy in his partners. Leveaux, who runs a training and development agency in Oklahoma City, often speaks in public, and he recalls a time a girlfriend became upset with the way he bantered with audience members. A long, open conversation followed in which he listened to her concerns and explained that he was just receiving well-wishers. She accepted this, but he also agreed to dial it back. “I didn’t change who I was essentially as a person,” he says, “but I didn’t squeeze every person with the intensity that I had before. I just created a boundary.”

Although research indicates that men and women experience jealousy with roughly equal frequency and intensity, Buss says, there are important distinctions. Male jealousy can be significantly more dangerous: In Western countries, 50 to 70 percent of adult
women who are murdered are killed by a husband, boyfriend, or ex, while only 3 percent of murdered men die at the hands of a female partner or ex.

Men and women also tend to be provoked by different triggers. For men, the prospect of physical betrayal is usually more upsetting, while women are more likely to be disturbed by emotional infidelity. Evolutionary psychologists attribute this to the distinct relationship insecurities men and women face. Men worry more about sexual betrayal because it might lead to devoting care and resources to children who aren't theirs, while women have an interest in ensuring that their mate is emotionally invested enough to stick around and help raise their children.

Buss stresses that these are generalities: “Some people say women don’t care about sexual infidelity, and men don’t care about emotional infidelity. It’s just not true. Both sexes are extremely upset by both forms, but men tend to key in more heavily on the sexual aspects and women on the emotional aspects.”

Jealousy, the Aphrodisiac

At Their First Gay Pride weekend together, Brian was appalled by Jeremy’s booty shorts and tight T-shirt. Jeremy was equally horrified by Brian’s polo shirt and cargo pants. And when Brian saw the open stares Jeremy was getting from other men, he demanded that his partner change his outfit. “I said, ‘Why?’” Jeremy recalls. “He said, ‘All these guys are looking at you!’ and I said, ‘That’s kind of the point.’”

For Jeremy, flirting is an unalloyed good. Growing up, he was an overweight gay kid with acne. Now, with a fit body and clear skin, he basks in attention. “It really does spring from a childhood where no one paid attention to me. Now that I have that ability, it’s like, ‘Take my shirt off and dance on a box? Okay!’ Just to be flirting and to be the object of desire is a new experience.” Now married to Brian, Jeremy has no problem when men flirt with his husband—in fact, he likes it.

“When I see someone flirting with Brian, he’s validating the fact that I made a good choice. He’s a great guy and of course you want him, but guess what, he’s mine. It can be kind of a turn-on realizing, ‘Yeah, that guy wants us, but he’s not going to get us,’” says Jeremy, an engineer in Phoenix.

Brian hasn’t always seen it that way. He has often felt hurt when Jeremy smiled encouragingly as another man hit on him. But over time, Jeremy has helped Brian appreciate the added charge of a little harmless flirting. “I told him, ‘Think about all those guys thinking, ‘I want to take that guy home,’” and you are the one who gets to do it. These guys want what you have. You are the one who captured my heart.’”

Reaching a Balance

Jealousy can be an electric force in a relationship, either productive or destructive. To benefit from the signals embedded in the feeling, Scheinkman says, it’s important to set some boundaries, and the specifics don’t matter as long as both parties are comfortable with them. “I’d want to help a couple find a balance of security and freedom, commitment and independence,” she says.

Brian, for example, tries to give Jeremy more leeway when they’re out, while Jeremy has agreed to tone it down. “On the dance floor, the shirts will come off and he’ll say, ‘I think you need to calm it down a little bit’ and... okay, fine,” Jeremy says. And if some-