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The Men's Corner by Richard Vogel, Ph.D. / Jack Maslow, L.C.S.W.

Marriage is replete with challenges. Differences of opinion and styles of communication, as well as the need to maintain control, contribute to potential conflict in the relationship and require attention if the marriage is to flourish. Divorce is a high price to pay for neglecting seeds of discontent which, over time, could grow into irreconcilable differences. Couples therapy is an ideal setting for partners to accentuate, acknowledge, and reinforce strengths inherent to their relationship.

Janet and Lewis entered couples therapy feuding about Janet's perception of her husband's parenting their newborn. On one occasion Lew, upset by their child's continuous crying, cursed out loud and, in Janet's perception, held their infant too tightly while changing diapers. Janet accused her husband of being insensitive to their infant. She implied that his outburst and manner of handling their child bordered on being abusive. Lew acknowledged that his behavior was out of line, apologized, and promised to refrain from re-enacting such behavior in the future. Janet disregarded her husband's apology. She continued to berate him throughout the days that followed. In the interest of defusing their feud, their therapist interpreted Janet's reaction as exemplary of her maternal instinct to protect their infant. Lew responded positively to this interpretation. He viewed Janet as a compassionate, caring woman, character traits that were influential in his decision to marry her. At the same time he remarked how difficult it had been for him to be repeatedly accused of abusing their child, and that no matter what he did to rectify his error, Janet's rancor did not diminish. Lew contended that this one occasion where he appeared to be losing control was an anomaly. He prided himself on being impeccably attuned to his child's needs. Janet acknowledged Lew's overall sensitivity to their child. Janet surmised that perhaps there might be other factors contributing to her exaggerated response.

Interactions with family members, friends, and acquaintances affect one's relationship. In Janet's case, her sister, who could not have children, had been visiting at the time this

episode took place. Janet felt guilty for being able to conceive while her sister could not. Her sister's lamentation and refrain that Janet had "all the luck" made it even more difficult for Janet to talk about the pleasure she received from her infant. While Janet was aware of censoring her expressions of happiness associated with her child, she remained unaware of the insidious effect on her marriage that her sister's forlorn attitude was creating. Juxtaposed with Janet's good fortune, her sister's unhappiness became the seeds of an inner discontent that would eventually manifest as an overreaction to her husband's relatively benign and remediable error.

The presence of unconscious guilt for surpassing a loved one, or attaining in life what he or she was unable to, often manifests as self-sabotaging behavior on the part of the more fortunate individual. Janet's bickering with her husband was meant to convey to her less fortunate sibling that though she appeared to be happier and the recipient of more good fortune, this was not really the case, as evidenced in her marital conflict.

In his book *Voice Therapy*, Dr. Robert Firestone refers to the deleterious effect of guilt-induced behavior in relation to one's less fortunate family members. "Many patients...regress when they have contact with original family members, particularly if members of their family either actually manipulate them to activate their guilt feelings or indirectly foster guilt in the patient because of the negative quality of the family members' lives."

Janet's cognizance of her guilt, acquired in couples therapy, enabled her to communicate her feelings in a more even-tempered manner. She viewed her husband as an ally in possession of parenting skills conducive to their child's well-being, and was determined to react more reasonably to disagreements that invariably arise in the course of child-rearing.

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