Dear Alice,

What is the criteria for determining if a relationship is abusive? My husband has never struck me in anger or injured me, but he is constantly poking, tickling, flicking me, etc. When I tell him to stop, he usually says, "Why should I?" and continues a little bit more. It's like a kid tormenting a little sister. He gets right in my face and sometimes pokes me in the chest while he's telling me something. There's never any anger until I get mad at him for doing it, and then he tells me he's just playing. The other night when I told him to stop poking me, he said, "I'll do whatever I want." That really bothered me. When he does get angry, he usually just ignores me, but occasionally he'll throw something (but not at me). What do you think? How can I make him understand that his "playing" is upsetting? Is this type of behavior a precursor of actual violence?

Answer

Dear Reader,

First off, congratulations for standing up for yourself. Your husband's behavior is inappropriate and it is not your fault. He seems to think that bullying you is playful and harmless. However, unwanted teasing that causes you to feel angry and tormented can certainly constitute abuse and many would classify his behavior as a form of intimate partner violence. To put an end to your husband's harassment, you can try talking to him about his behavior and seeking professional help. Even if his taunts do not lead to physical violence, you deserve a partner who treats you with respect.

There are many possible explanations for his behavior. Perhaps he feels neglected at home or at work, and this is his "funny" (but very unhealthy) way of gaining attention. Maybe teasing is commonplace in your husband's family and he is unaware that you have different boundaries. Although there is no excuse for your husband's mistreatment, it may be helpful to talk with him about why he ignores your requests to stop "playing."

Obviously, you have made several attempts to talk with your husband about his behavior, but to no avail. Have you tried approaching your husband when he is not teasing and the two of you are more relaxed? It can often be helpful to have a conversation that is not "in the moment" as each person is less likely to be on the defensive. The focus of this type of conversation is to tell him what you notice about his behavior and how it makes you feel.
Hearing from you that his actions are disrespectful and hurtful may persuade your husband to be more considerate. You can also discuss ways to share with your husband that he has crossed the line so that he can develop an understanding of what you consider playful and what is an inappropriate form of intimate partner violence.

If talking does not seem to help or if you are uncomfortable confronting your husband, then consider seeking professional help for yourself, for him, and/or for the two of you as a couple. To encourage his participation in the process, you may want to share your feelings about the relationship (the good and bad) and what you are hoping will be the outcome. For example, if your goal is a continuing marriage but without the inappropriate behavior, it can be helpful for him to know your goal is improving the relationship. The central idea is that connecting with external support resources is about helping you both move forward in a healthier manner.

If he is unwilling to seek help and you want to make a change, then you can contact a counselor, psychologist, or social worker on your own. Consider asking a trusted friend, family member, spiritual advisor, or health care provider for a referral.

It is very difficult to say whether or not this type of behavior is a precursor to physical violence. His behavior is already inappropriate and throwing things, even if not at you, is not a good sign. It seems that emotional abuse already exists in your relationship (even if he doesn't realize it) and getting help now may prevent future violence. In New York, you can check out the services offered by Safe Horizon [2]; outside of New York, the bilingual National Domestic Violence Hotline [3] can provide information and assistance.

Playful teasing can be a normal part of many relationships and may be one way some people show affection and build intimacy. However, it sounds as if your husband’s unwanted taunting goes too far, causing hurt not harmony. Through frank conversations or outside help, hopefully he will realize that "pushing your buttons" is damaging to your feelings and your marriage. Stay strong as this is not your fault. You deserve to be treated with respect! All the best as you find a solution that works for both of you.

Alice!

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Resources

Counseling and Psychological Services (CPS) (Morningside) [12]
Mental Health Service (CUMC) [13]
Sexual Violence Response & Rape Crisis/Anti-Violence Support Center [14]

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