

Advice from the Trenches: The Buck Stops Here



Dear C;

I am a graphic designer for a small agency. It is my job to handle the computer files and graphics on all of the jobs that come through. There are also several other professionals that need to be called in, such as printers and copy writers.

I have never screwed up a job with my own end of the work, but for some reason I am always blamed when a deadline is missed or there is a typo in the brochures after printing. Nearly all of the time, the delay was due to the printers being late or someone else missing the typo. I am not the printer and it isn't part of my job description to check the copy for mistakes (the client is supposed to do this since they know all the information), but who does everyone yell at? Moi.

The problem is, I feel guilty every time this happens, even though I know it's not my fault. And it doesn't matter what I say, it always plays out the same way — I get to be the whipping boy. How can I live with this crap?

Bill Me

Dear Bill,

My question to you would be: Why ARE you living with this crap?

A psychiatrist I once worked with often said, "Don't agree to things you don't agree with." It's obvious that you agreed to this arrangement at some point, and it was assumed that you would continue to do so. I'm guessing that any attempts on your part to address the issue or say NO were hesitant at best and that you probably gave up after a few half-hearted tries. People who feel guilty are not the best self-advocates. I don't mean to be harsh, but you have really done this to yourself.

And only you can undo it.

You seem to have become a professional victim. The mistake you all make is to blame others for every injustice that is done. The problem there is that if someone else is to blame, they are in the

position of power. Only they have the ability to change the situation. How can you do anything? You're just an innocent bystander who has no control.

News flash: Until you accept responsibility for your own part in this, you can't change anything.

So stop feeling guilty, and stand up for yourself. I have had experience with co-workers who have tried the same trick on me. The Blame Game is an old one. It has definable rules. One of them is: "If you don't hold your hand out, they can't slap it." I've long since learned to keep my hands in my pockets. You should too. Don't accept the guilt when they come around to dish it out.

A word of warning: It would be nice if, when we decided to finally assert ourselves, everyone would go along and applaud our incentive. But here is what is probably going to happen: everyone else will stomp their feet and try to bully you back in your box. Be careful. Don't make the mistake of thinking self assertion means yelling louder or acting self-righteous. That just makes you look like a kid yelling, "Did not!" while the other guys yell, "Did too!" You could all go back and forth all day like idiots if that gets started. Here's what I suggest that you try instead: a preemptive strike. The best way to ward off your fellow players in the Blame Game is to document and list exactly who is expected to do what, and when. They have traffic managers in ad agencies for just this purpose. Make everyone aware of, and agree to, the schedule before you begin the project. Then when someone screws up and they try to blame you, just point to the list. There's not much they can say after that. It's tough to argue with your own agreement.

Advice from the Trenches: Beating the Odds



Dear C,

I caught my partner masturbating in the middle of the night when I got up to use the bathroom. HE says he read online that it was good for his health and "keeps him young" if he does it daily. I am not sure how I feel about it. I certainly don't want to have sex with him every day! In fact, once a week is really more than enough now that I'm working full time.

I can't help wondering — is it true that it is good for his health? Or is there something wrong here?

Concerned

Dear Concerned,

First, let me reassure you. Married men masturbate. Men are capable of having more orgasms than you can ever imagine. It is not unknown for men to feel the need three times a day ... and the rate at which teen boys can get it up is somewhat awe inspiring.

However, let's consider the "daily dose" idea. Yup, there is strong evidence that an orgasm a day supports prostate health. Orgasm has also been shown to help alleviate depression and anxiety, and improve overall immune functioning. But exactly how many orgasms are we talking about?

The jury is out on whether a lot of orgasms are good for you. I sense that it is a highly subjective, and age-related, matter. The fact is, many men reported having more energy overall when they reduced their weekly ration of Os. The head of the national soccer team in Brazil routinely bans sex before the World Cup competitions. In fact, it has been routine practice to caution athletes from engaging in sexual intimacy before events since the first Olympics back in 444 BC. But is such an extreme measure either advantageous or necessary? Some scientists suggest that abstinence could help some athletes concentrate better. However, scientists also dismiss the idea that sex the night before competition has a tiring effect on an athlete or weakens muscles. The punch line? I'd say that it's pretty much up to the individual to decide which scientists' theories they like better. After all, science has been known to change its mind about many things, including the idea that the earth is flat.

A better question here is why does your partner feel the need to hide his extracurricular activities from you? Do the two of you come from a religious background that prohibits masturbation or threatens followers with dire predictions of premature blindness? Do you have a dim view of masturbation yourself? The practice is far more admitted to these days, but there are still quite a few women who are squeamish about it.

I think it's good that this issue is out in the open. It might be the right time for you and your partner to see if you can take your sex life to a more adventurous level. Few relationships include daily sex, but having an appreciation of each other's masturbation preferences can open up possibilities that can be quite intriguing. One of the reasons that lesbians have better female O technique is that they are so familiar with it themselves. How much does your partner really know about what takes you to the limit? And what do you know about him?

Quite honestly, my only concern here is the timing. There's nothing abnormal about pumping iron at night, but if it is going on at 3 in the morning, I gotta wonder what else is keeping the guy up (no pun intended). It wouldn't hurt to ask.

In summary: the list of benefits that orgasm can produce is pretty impressive. In addition to the stuff already mentioned, orgasms improve circulation, increase fertility in women, promote healthy hormone levels and spike DHEA levels to improve brain function and promote clear skin. They can even help cure migraines. And here's an encouraging thought: If your partner is masturbating at home, he's probably not having an affair. If you can't imagine having sex more than once a week, I would not mess with the guy's current methods.

Advice from the Trenches: Out of Time



Dear C;

I work days, from about 8:30 in the morning until 6 at night. My boyfriend doesn't have to get to his job until mid afternoon so he gets up late and then doesn't get home until after 10pm. It's really becoming a problem because we hardly ever see each other. We got a cat a month ago and the cat gets more time with each of us than we do with each other!

I have been staying up way later than I'd like to, just so I can hang out with him for at least a little while. But I'm getting sleep deprived and starting to feel exhausted. I think things could get off track between us if we don't figure something out. Got any ideas?

BTW — a lack of time seems to be the biggest problem we have; other than that, we get along great.

Frazzled

Dear Frazzled;

Problems are the litmus test of every relationship. Most couples get along great when everything is fine and the living is easy. But when a problem comes along, you really start to see what you, and that other person, is made of. Can the two of you work together to find a solution? Or does dealing with a conflict just push you apart? If this is a serious relationship and you have plans for the future, this is a good opportunity to test the waters; in life, you will always have problems.

Lack of time can just plain wear out the best of us. My son told me that when he was in law school, every student he knew who was in a relationship ended up getting divorced or breaking up, mostly because they couldn't pay any attention to their partners; university gave them too much work. And just imagine what the addition of a baby, a major illness or financial catastrophe could do! This is good practice.

Now for some practical pointers. The number one rule of solving problems in any partnership is this: Don't approach it from an emotional angle. The person who whines the most and can act the neediest does not deserve to win. If more couples ran their relationships like they'd run a business, there'd be far fewer divorces. You need to use both common sense and consideration. First, make sure you are on the same page. Do you both agree as to what the problem is? Do you both want to solve it? Good. Now start negotiating.

First question: Is this time crunch situation temporary? Or is it for the long haul? Sometimes, jobs are negotiable and can be changed without sacrificing goals. A time crunch might simply be a rough patch you are both passing through on your way to your real careers. But if this situation is permanent, ask yourself if you really want live with it. Many doctor's partners don't see their significant others for years on end because that's the kind of time such a career demands. Same for truckers who drive long distance for a living. If you want a relationship with more sharing and togetherness, this question really matters.

Next, some practical considerations. Do the math, same as if you were an administrator planning office schedules. Who has the most flexibility? Are you both willing to negotiate? And do you want to do the same things in your down time or do you want to sit and watch a movie while he wants to go out dancing? It's important to plan stuff you both enjoy in those moments of togetherness.

Let's face it: Having everything you want, whenever you want it, is NOT the best way to learn and grow in a relationship. Dealing with difficulty teaches you a lot more. Real life throws a lot of crap at couples; if you are not of the same mind about where you want this relationship to go, it will become apparent. Sometimes one partner starts to realize that the person in the bed next to them is going to get cranky and selfish whenever a situation calls for compromise. And sometimes two partners realize they will both do anything they can to work out problems and stay together. The thing is, you never know what is going to happen until you start trying.

Do you two have what it takes for the long run?

I think you are about to find out.

Advice from the Trenches: Winning

Dear C;

My roommate Josey is driving me nuts. Josey is funny and can also very generous and kind hearted, but she sometimes has these totally irrational responses to little goof-ups or unexpected accidents that can make her really unpleasant to be around.

An example: A couple of weeks ago, we were in the kitchen and she accidentally knocked over a bottle of oil. The cap wasn't on all the way, so some oil spread out on the counter. No big deal, right? Set it back, wipe the oil up, get on with your life, right? Nope. First Josey had to find someone else to BLAME. Of course, that person was me. She yelled at me and told me I should have tightened the cap properly. I protested and pointed out that she was the one who knocked the bottle over, not me. This was entirely beside the point to Josey. "If the cap had been properly tightened, it wouldn't have spilled!!" she shouted. The more I objected to being blamed for something I didn't do, the angrier and nastier she got. When I asked her, in a deliberately calm voice, to please try to use a neutral tone of voice so we could have a reasonable discussion, she said I was being nasty and controlling in my own way. I didn't indulge my own anger and kept speaking with deliberate calm, but Josey just shouted, "We're done here!" and

tried to walk off. It was obvious that this was hardly a resolved situation, so I kept trying to reason with her, but all she'd say was "I'm done, you just keep it going, that's what you're good at: nagging."

I got so mad at her that I vowed to get her out of the apartment, ASAP. After a day of ignoring each other, she eased back into being so reasonable and considerate that I feel like maybe she just couldn't admit it but she did realize she was wrong. We had a couple of weeks where we hung out and dealt with everyday stuff together. We helped each other with favors and I realized what a great roommate she could be.

Then yesterday, out of the blue, we had the same kind of stupid, blaming fight all over again. How can I make her see reason and work this problem out?

BFFled

Dear BFFled;

You can't, until you realize you are part of the problem.

My reaction to your anger and persistence in defending yourself is pretty much the same as your reaction to Josey and the spilled oil. What's the big deal? Let it go, get on with your life. Sure, Josey jumping on you and getting nasty wasn't right, but she's right about one thing — if the cap had been tightened all the way, the oil wouldn't have spilled. If you had just shrugged your shoulders and said, "Yeah, maybe. Here, you want a cloth?" and helped her clean it up while she sputtered a little, the situation wouldn't have gotten ugly. It would be just another little goof-up. No big deal.

It takes two people to work out a problem and it also takes two people to keep it going. Right now, you and Josey are playing a game called "You're Wrong, I'm Right." She wants to win, and you want to win ... but this is not the kind of game that anyone can win. Not having the fight would be the real victory.

Look, in real life, sometimes people have tough days and get short tempered, and we aren't always angels. I suspect you are not consistently Mother Teresa yourself. If all of us gave each other a little slack instead of trying to PROVE OUR POINT, there'd be a lot less fighting in the world.

The next time something like this happens, ask yourself a question: Do you really want to solve the problem, or do you just want to be right? If keeping an otherwise great roommate is more important than being right, I think you can figure this out.

Advice from the Trenches: I'm Confused!



Dear C,

I am confused. Every time I watch a news show or read the paper, there's another headline about what science has discovered is good, or bad, for you. I remember when coffee was the great evil — now they say it's okay. Then fat was bad for you, and fat free foods were all the rage. Now I hear that it's dangerous to take fats out of my diet and that fat-free foods are loaded with sugar.

I don't feel like I can trust any of it.

What The?

Dear What,

You are right to have a healthy distrust. Making decisions on personal health based on headlines and news segments is like writing a review of a movie based on the promotional trailers. What you get is a synopsis of the most sensational elements, without context or storyline.

When it comes to your body, context and storyline are what matters. The context is your own body, the storyline is the long-term effect of every treatment or indulgence. The general information that is thrown out in the media should be a starting point for understanding, not a conclusion. If you want to know how this information applies to YOU, you have to do some research.

Let's remember that the media is not just there to inform — it is also there to bolster the big business that finances its operations. Yes, some very important medical facts that are relevant to all of us DO get some airplay. But if a subject on health is getting prime time hype on national networks, someone, somewhere, probably stands to make a great deal of money if you buy into it.

Another reason to question information is that science often finds that a drug initially hailed as a miracle cure can have long-term effects that are more deadly than the original problem. Tamoxifen is a great example. For many years, doctors regarded it as a breast cancer survivor's best chance to stay in remission. Later on it was discovered that long-term use could cause an even more deadly type of cervical cancer. There's a long list of drugs that had to be recalled. I was prescribed Zomax for a chronic condition. At first it seemed like the answer to my prayers. Later, it was taken off the market because it had killed a dozen people and was found to cause cancer. So much for FDA-approved pharmaceutical trials.

We are all different machines. Each one of us has different genetics, different environmental factors that affect our reactions, even entirely different bacterial cultures living in our guts. When it comes to our health, one size does not fit all. Some people practically explode with jitters if they drink a single cup of coffee. For others, coffee can stave off depression or lower their risk of Type II Diabetes. Which

brings me to ...

Pay attention to the messages from your body. Far more accurately than the news, your own body will tell you just about everything you need to know if you are willing to listen. I was at a party the other week listening to a woman who had been tentatively diagnosed with “suspected IBD” (inflammatory bowel disease). She was lamenting about her condition and hoping they’d find some pills that worked because she’d always loved fast food burgers, but every time she ate them now, she got sick. She wanted the doctors to fix it so she could eat whatever she wanted. When I gently suggested that her body might be trying to give her a message that she shouldn’t be eating that stuff, she was affronted. “What do I pay the doctor for?” was her immediate retort. I know better than to try to give advice to people who don’t want it, so I shut up. Later, I watched her down three burgers in a row, then run for the bathroom and retch her guts out. Sigh.

We would all like to believe that there is a magic bullet or miracle cure that will solve our problems. The truth can be a lot less glamorous. Take those sensational organ transplants that we all regard now as life saving “cures.” In reality, the immunosuppressive medications that transplant recipients take to keep them from rejecting their new organs can make them more susceptible to later stage cancers that are harder to cure. Transplant recipients are four times more likely to be diagnosed with regional stage melanoma, and far more often die of it. And that’s just ONE of the complications.

So, yeah. Be suspicious. Ask questions. And trust your own body. It’s smarter than you think.

Advice from the Trenches: Why Do I Get Attached?



Dear C:

I want to know why every time I sleep with a guy, I get attached. Men just don't seem to do this. I hear a lot of my female friends say the same thing, but men seem to want to jump out of bed and run out the door. Is it an emotional thing? A gender thing? A cultural thing?

What the Hell

Dear Ms. Hell:

Everyone has a theory on this, but women aren't the only ones who get attached. Men can, too. It really depends on the person. It also depends in part on a human hormone called oxytocin.

Oxytocin was coined as "the bonding hormone" when the media discovered it back around 2010. It had been known for years that oxytocin was intrinsic in developing mother/baby bonding, but what really fascinated the news mongers was oxy's connection with sex. During arousal, oxytocin multiplies rapidly, exploding in a burst at orgasm. In fact, in women, the strength of orgasm is directly related to the amount of oxytocin they release. For a while it was thought that men and women were affected in a similar way by the hormone. For instance, when it came to bonding with kids, both genders were far more attached and attentive to their children when dosed with Oxytocin. But as science is now discovering, there is often a striking disparity in how body chemicals affect different people. In 2014, new headlines came out: "Oxytocin makes women friendlier, makes men more competitive!"

In those studies, a group of 62 men and women ranging in age from 20 to 37 were videotaped in social interactions over several weeks. Half of the participants received doses of oxytocin and half got a placebo. All of them were asked to interpret and identify the qualities of friendship, intimacy and competition in others. Oxytocin seemed to improve everyone's ability to interpret social interactions. But depending on gender, they focused on very different things. The women were better able to identify friendship and intimacy ... the men were better able to identify competitive behavior.

The really interesting thing about this chemical is that it has different effects depending not only on gender, but also on personality type and social context. For instance, men in committed relationships avoided being too close to attractive women after getting a spray of oxytocin, while single men showed no change in behavior at all. Oxytocin seems to exaggerate decisions and personality traits already in place. In some healthy young adults, too much oxytocin can result in an oversensitivity to the emotions of others that borders on neurotic. Others just get more combative.

Here's one thing we do know: A lack of oxytocin, while not life-threatening, can produce an emotional indifference that bodes well for no relationship. In fact, animals that are lacking in oxytocin are far more likely to eat their young. Our hormones affect us in very profound ways that we are only just beginning to understand.

So, in answer to your question, that emotional attachment you feel after sex may not be so emotional after all. It could just be a reflexive female response to a rush of oxy during intimacy. You are also under the influence of human society and its expectations; nothing is as personal as we think.

Unfortunately, the media and merchandisers have nothing to gain from such an unromantic truth, so we all grow up receiving messages that every thought and emotion in our head is a personal directive we need to follow in order to find our true destiny. Far too many women make the mistake of thinking that their exaggerated attraction to a guy after sex is a sign that he is "the one." That's how it happens in movies and on TV, right? We never stop to think that it's really just some hormone, along with cultural

brainwashing, that is screwing with our common sense. I also doubt many women realize that when men run out the door, it's not really personal either. Very few of us stop to think about other possible reasons for anyone's behavior. We take it all very personally, and react, react, react.

The next time you get an urge to plan your wedding and choose colleges for your future children with some guy you've only known for a couple days, don't get carried away. Stop and think. Does this really have anything to do with your purpose and future? Or could it just be Oxytocin mixed in with the last commercial you saw for a dating site?

Gone Fishin'

With summer quickly approaching, I imagine there are some readers who would like to learn to fish — that age-old skill and pastime. I have learned a lot in the last eight years or so, mostly through trial and error. I have taken suggestions of conventional wisdom that didn't work, and tried oddball tactics that did. You never know what might bring you the catch of a lifetime. Luck certainly plays a part, but for most anglers, the strategies and tactics evolve as much as the environment does. To be successful at catching fish, you need to be in tune with Mother Nature, or just have a little luck. Here are some of the helpful tips that I've picked up over the years that improved my luck. And since we are the Ocean State, I will focus on saltwater fishing.

Our coastlines are ripe with the potential of the catch of a lifetime. A monster striper, or cow, as they are often called, could be fighting at the end of your line upon your next cast. It is mostly just a matter of using the right tackle at the right time.

Saltwater fishing is heavily reliant on the tide. Arrive at your spot about an hour before high tide, or any time up to about an hour after it goes back out. Otherwise, you'll be casting in vain because there will be few or no fish in the area. It is not like a freshwater pond where the fish remain there all day.

I find that medium-sized lures made of soft or hard plastic produce most often with stripers. I have the most success with a white or light green presentation. If bluefish are running through, they will strike just about anything. They have sharp teeth and tear soft plastic lures to shreds. If your rubber lures are coming back torn up, either switch to hard plastics, or keep using the soft ones because they are attracting fish. Just know that the soft plastic lures you bought will probably get destroyed. They are, however, relatively inexpensive, so I usually just keep ripping through them.

Cast your lure out as far as you can and reel it back in over and over again. When you get bored, try a few more casts. You've probably heard that fishing requires patience, and it does. Just slow down and get into it. Try to reel the lure in at varying speeds and depths, never letting the line slack. Be careful not to get stuck on the ocean floor. If you do, you may have to cut your line and tie on a new lure. Work the middle/top of the water column until you are comfortable enough to let it sink lower.

A piece of conventional wisdom that I have found to be true is that darker colored lures work better in darker water, and lighter colored lures work better in clearer, lighter water. If you have worked a section of water for a while with no results, move on to another spot, or try a different lure. Maybe the one you are using is too big or not bright enough, or maybe there are no fish in the area.

I usually stop at the bait shop before I go saltwater fishing. I bring two poles — one to cast lure and one to throw out bait. When I get tired of one tactic, I switch to the other. Sandworms almost always produce results for me, and they attract a wide variety of species. Most often I catch scup, flounder and sea robbers with these ugly little creatures, but stripers and blues go for them as well. Just remember:

They have pinchers on their front end that you'll want to cut off. Your hands will get bloody and slimy; fishing with bait gets pretty messy, but the results can't be beat. Tie a two-ounce weight about a foot and a half above a medium sized hook, then feed the length of the hook through the sandworm. Cast it out, let it sink to the bottom, then lightly reel until there is tension on the line from the sinker. Hold the rod in a manner that keeps the tension so you can feel if there are any tugs. Now you're in business. Wait for something to take the bait; you will know when it does. Resist the temptation to set the hook right away because you will likely just pull it right out of the fish's mouth. You will usually feel some tugs, but wait until there is a consistent pull before you set the hook. If you manage to get a fish on, reel it in at a pretty consistent pace and do not let any slack form in the line. That is when the fish usually frees itself from the hook.

The Charlestown Breachway, Beavertail State Park, The West Wall at East Matunuck and India Point Park are some popular spots to fish. You may, however, want to do a little research and get off the beaten path. You will share space with fewer fishermen that way.

You will need to get a saltwater fishing licence, which can be done online for a nominal fee.

Check dem.ri.gov for regulations, keeper sizes and bag limits. I recommend asking for advice from the clerk at the baitshop. They know where the action is and should be happy to advise you on what to use.

You can also check ristripedbass.blogspot.com for updated news on where it is popping off. Good luck.

Advice from the Trenches: Screening

Dear C,

My brother Kenny and I are having a disagreement. He's been having digestive problems off and on, but refuses to get checked out. He is of the opinion that if you don't look for trouble, you won't find it. He reels out story after story of people he knew who were okay until they went to the doctor. Then as soon as they were diagnosed with a problem, things went downhill.

I'd like to think I'm worrying for nothing, and I gotta admit he has a point — our father had low grade symptoms for years, but it didn't keep him from working ... or fishing. Then, my mom forced him to go to the doctor and they said he had colon cancer. Almost immediately after, his health went south and before we knew it, he was gone. Kenny says he would have lived a lot longer if they'd just left him alone.

Some people do seem to be okay until a doctor tells them they are sick. Then suddenly, they are SICK. Is it better to just wait and see?

Worry Wart

Dear Worry,

Normally, I might agree with you, but not in this case. Your brother is an idiot, and you are an idiot if you don't get him to a GI specialist, NOW. But let me tell you why.

The statistics are in — the number of Americans dying of colon cancer has decreased by 30% in recent years. Is this because fewer people are at risk for colon cancer? No. It is because there has been an

increase in screening for colon cancer. The industry standard is a colonoscopy and during these admittedly invasive exams not only is it possible to detect the polyps that are the forerunner to colon cancer, but doctors can also get rid of the buggers right then and there. Those polyps would almost certainly develop into cancer if they were left untreated. Because of timely screening, they are nipped in the bud.

If colon cancer runs in your family, there is a much greater chance that your brother will develop it at some point in his life. Before this happens, there are often low grade, easily ignorable symptoms, but sometimes there are no symptoms at all. Let's say Kenny's lucky and there's nothing amiss, just random cramps and bloating. In that case, the colonoscopy will do nothing but give him peace of mind. But if those symptoms are from polyps, a colonoscopy could save him a boatload of pain, agony and regret later on. I'm not one for invasive medical tests, but this is one screening that I think everyone with a family history of cancer should have.

I've heard a lot of people trot that out that "if you don't look, it isn't there" rationalization because they were afraid to go to the doctor. If you're looking for excuses, this is a good one, because it really can seem like that's what happens. Someone is going along in their daily routine, having occasional symptoms that can easily be explained away. They don't feel great, but they aren't sick enough to slow down. Often they start self-medicating with one socially accepted vice or another, and the symptoms ease. "It's all in my mind!" they say, and crack open another beer. After all, it's the rare person who feels great all the time.

But in those cases where everything seems okay until the fateful doctor's exam, here's what has actually happened: The person in question let their symptoms go on for too long and by the time they are diagnosed, their condition has progressed from low-grade to final stage; and sometimes there sometimes isn't much that anyone can do for them at this point. This is especially true in the case of colon cancer.

Your mom probably let your father cow her into silence until his symptoms became so pronounced even he couldn't ignore them. If you care about your brother, don't back down like mom did. I've had three friends die before their time with colon cancer. They had symptoms, but they were stubborn, just like your brother, and wouldn't listen to anyone, so I backed off. If I'd known then what I know now, I would have held a gun to their freakin' heads if I had to, all the way to the hospital.

Scare the crap out of Kenny if you have to, but get him in there. This is not a decision that either of you will regret.

Advice from the Trenches: e-Cigarettes



Dear C:

I have tried to quit many times, but I still smoke. Don't give me a lecture, I know all about the dangers, but I have too much pressure in my life right now to add more by going cold turkey and neither the patch nor nicotine gum worked for me. Then I discovered e-cigarettes. I tried them and I gotta say — it's not really smoking, but I can live with it.

Now I hear that e-cigarettes are just as bad for you and encourage people to smoke who wouldn't otherwise. All I know is if I quit them, I'll just go back to smoking.

Do you know anything about this?

Smokey Joe

Dear Smokey,

If you'd asked me this question a few months ago, I would have handed you a list of reasons that you are just kidding yourself. Now I am not so sure. Should people smoke? With all of the known risks, including the dangers of second hand smoke, the answer is, of course, "No!" But can everyone stop smoking? Realistically? No.

Public Health England (PHE), an agency of England's Department of Health, has taken a stance that has raised eyebrows: They regard it a responsibility toward public health to "encourage smokers to switch to e-cigarettes." This attitude is diametrically opposed to that in the US, where we focus primarily on abstinence.

First, the big question: Is nicotine, in its pure form, really bad for you? The answer is a resounding "maybe." Nicotine is undeniably addictive, and people smoke mostly because of nicotine. However, nicotine users die mostly because of the tar and additives in cigarette smoke. Take those away and what dangers are left?

The negatives: Nicotine's greatest risks are to the unborn. Used during pregnancy, nicotine makes children more susceptible to birth defects and, later in life, for type 2 diabetes, obesity, hypertension, neurobehavioral defects, respiratory problems and infertility. In vitro studies also show an increased risk for cancer.

What about adults? In patients with coronary artery disease, nicotine may cause coronary artery vasoconstriction. At high enough doses, nicotine is lethal. However, although cigarette smoking is conclusively linked to cancer, carcinogenicity has not been conclusively proven for nicotine itself. Nicotine is actually used medically to help patients quit smoking.

Are there any medical benefits? I was a hard-sell on this because I am an adamant non-smoker myself. I watched the habit slowly erode my own mother's health; cigarettes would eventually kill her. But if I put emotions aside, I have to admit that there is some evidence that nicotine, NOT cigarettes, has certain

benefits.

Nicotine enhances performance, alertness and focus. Double-blind studies concluded that nicotine had a positive effects on fine motor abilities and memory. GI studies show that nicotine therapy provides some protection against colitis. Nicotine is also suspected as the reason for the lower incidence of Parkinson's Disease among smokers.

Psychologically, for many people, nicotine decreases stress and anxiety, and reduces panic. Those suffering from some mental illnesses experience great relief from nicotine, which is probably why so many psychiatric patients smoke.

The Center For Disease Control in the US sees e-cigarettes as having a "gateway effect" and that encourages non-smokers to start. But in 2014, the antitobacco organization Action on Smoking and Health (ASH) reviewed the evidence and concluded that e-cigarettes were being used largely by current or former cigarette smokers. ASH also found scant evidence that bystanders could be harmed by the vapor from e-cigarettes. Since their primary goal is harm reduction, ASH considered this good news for assisting smokers who could not or would not give up cigarettes.

So, what is the answer? It really depends on you. Do you honestly think you can't quit? E-cigarettes do not pose nearly as many health risks as cigarettes and the vapor isn't a second-hand danger to those around you. But the medical goal of nicotine is NOT to switch from one drug delivery system to another, The goal is to set you free. E-cigarettes cost even more than regular cigarettes. However you ingest it, nicotine is costly and addictive. That monkey on your back may weigh a little less, but in the long run, it's still a monkey.

Photo credit: vaping360.com/what-is-vaping

Advice from the Trenches: My Clothes Are Ugly and I'm a Terrible Cook

Dear C,



I'm engaged to a really great guy. He was born in Taipei but learned English when he was very young and came to the US for college. His parents came for a visit to meet me last week. After eating at several good restaurants around town, we invited them to our apartment for dinner.

I thought the dinner went really well — my future in-laws paid me many compliments on the decorating, the cooking and on my appearance. I was smiling and thanking them, all aglow in what I thought was profound approval. Wow, was I in for a surprise.

The next day, my fiancé told me that it was going to take a lot of work to repair the impression I'd made on my in-laws. I thought that perhaps they disapproved that we were living together before marriage, but apparently many people do that in Taiwan and no one thinks anything of it. The problem is that my in-laws now think that I am a spoiled, vain woman and they told my fiancé that he might think twice before marrying me — I would make a preening and difficult wife.

What the hell is going on? My fiancé just shakes his head when I try to get him to explain. He usually doesn't clam up like this, it's making me really nervous.

In The Dark

Dear IDT,

Ah, you are experiencing a culture shock. I am laughing because I had a similar experience when I traveled to Taiwan for the first time to attend my son's wedding to a Taiwanese woman.

I was given many compliments by friends and relatives at the reception, so many that it embarrassed me. I didn't know what to do but laugh and give profuse thanks for the nice things they were saying. The next day, my son told me I was behaving like a self-centered air head and I should learn better manners before mortifying him again. He was off on his honeymoon before I could ask him to explain. His friend, Dr. Ian Clarke, a great guy from New Zealand who is a university professor of sociology here, clued me in on the egregious faux pas I had made. Here's the deal:

It is the cultural standard of many Eastern countries for people to act modestly in an outward manner. You could hear an Olympic gold medalist given a compliment after breaking the world speed record, and the reaction would be, "Oh, no, I am so slow! I was terrible." Now, this does not mean that people from such cultures do not have any ego. It simply means that they know that they are seen in a better light if they deny all praise and say how awful they are. Privately, these people brag as much as anyone. This seems really odd to Americans who have the likes of Kanye West and his accompanying horde of simpering Kardashians who take every opportunity to exploit their abilities, scant or otherwise, and who even attempt to steal the spotlight from others every chance they get. In Taiwan, Kim and Kanye would be seen as disgusting people with swelled heads and enormously large butts, although no one would

ever say it to their faces and they may even want their pictures taken to show proximity to such famous fools.

Dr. Clarke explained to me that this outwardly humble lack of ego on the part of Easterners works within the operations of their particular society, but in places such as the Mideast, such behavior might get you slaughtered. There, if you do NOT assert yourself strongly, and as brazenly as possible, you might be annihilated by those around you. This is a cultural norm and no one sees an aggressive male as a preening braggart who thinks he is better than everyone else. That is how all men are.

So, back to your fatal dinner. Here is how you hung yourself: When you thanked your in-laws for their compliments and reveled in the praise, essentially, you were crowing, "Oh, yes, I know how wonderful and beautiful I am, I am such a special, entitled woman! You are so perceptive to notice!"

The next time you see your in-laws and they compliment you (for they will surely try again, to test you) just respond with, "Oh, no, my apartment looks awful! No, no, my clothes suck and I am a very unattractive person who just doesn't know how to cook!" They will approve of your modesty and perhaps refrain from interfering with your wedding plans.

It is always a good idea to check on cultural habits when becoming part of an extended foreign family or traveling to other countries. Americans often take it for granted that their dollars and their presence entitles them to act however they wish when they roam the world. Let us hope that our cocky American teens abroad learn the folly of this behavior before trying any silly pranks that we would laugh at here. In North Korea, no one has such a sense of humor.