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## **Your partner's too lazy to get a job?**

### **Maybe not**

By SUSAN PINKER

#### **Dear Susan:**

My partner of six years is experiencing a mid-life crisis. For much of our relationship, he hasn't worked. He also doesn't want to go back to his previous career or even apply his skills to similar jobs. He won't go to a career counsellor and is in debt.

I am planning to end this relationship unless he has some income by January. He knows this and still seems frozen. I have been self-employed for 20 years and I hate being responsible for all financial issues. Advice?

Yankee Lady

#### **Dear Yankee Lady:**

Calling this a mid-life crisis is like calling winter a cold snap.

Either your partner has a full-blown depression that has snuffed out his motivation, or there's an ingredient in your relationship that allows for this kind of work-life balance -- the kind where you get to work, he gets to live. Either way, after six years, seeing it as a blip is wishful thinking.

So, unfortunately, is believing in the sway of ultimatums, notwithstanding the psychological deadline of Jan. 1. Before you sweep your partner off your desk in a New Year's blitz, consider giving more thought to his under-employment.

Has he lost interest in work but remains chipper about other things? Or is there a lacklustre veneer to everything he does? If he can't sleep or sleeps too much, if his food tastes like sawdust but he eats it anyway, and if he has trouble concentrating or making decisions, he may be clinically depressed.

If so, telling him to pull up his socks is like telling someone with Parkinson's disease to shape up or ship out. About 540,000 Canadians with a major depression don't know they're depressed, are ashamed to get treatment or have no access to it, according to the Canadian Mental Health Association.

If your partner is among them, taking him to his doctor to get a diagnosis might be a better first step than telling him to get lost.

Other factors to consider are non-monetary contributions to your relationship. Are you getting any goodies in return for providing support?

Forty years ago, most men worked full-time and women stayed home or worked less, but they contributed mightily in other ways, generating a balance that sociologist Arlie Hochschild calls the economy of gratitude. One partner offers more effort at home, while the other provides financial resources. As long as there is mutual gratitude, the system works.

But the tables are turning. Women now earn more than their husbands in about one-quarter of all Canadian marriages, according to Statistics Canada. Women are also earning more university degrees and seeing the dividends in their salaries. In 2003, 150 women graduated from college for every 100 men.

Meanwhile, traditional male jobs in manufacturing, computers and agriculture are evaporating, creating scenarios like yours, where the woman is working but the man is not. Lauded as progress for women in some circles, this imbalance nonetheless creates tension in men whose identities are tied to being providers and in women who, ironically, don't want to be their meal tickets.

Eleven million American women now out-earn their partners, says Harriet Pappenheim, a therapist whose recent book, *Bringing Home the Bacon*, targets advice to these couples, many of them as confounded about it as you are.

"Many men who cannot take care of women financially are very nurturing, and though there can be tremendous shame, they try to take care of the women as much as possible," she says.

As long as your partner is not sick and in need of care himself, you should evaluate what you're getting out of this arrangement.

Many women are thrilled to out-earn their partners as long as they are supported on the home front. One, a CBS executive quoted in *Business Week*, quipped that she should name her dinner-preparing archaeologist husband "a non-profit." And one of my friends, a corporate lawyer whose spouse has kept their household running and children nurtured while she established her own law firm, credits him with "doing so much that listing it all would be ridiculous."

Finally, some women have what they've needed all along -- a wife.

Think about whether you would settle for that. Just don't use the "w" word.

According to my friend -- and she should know -- it's called a partnership.

### **Dear Susan:**

Five months ago I was fired without warning and without reasons given, even though I was a top seller in the company and management repeatedly said I was hired long term.

During my 10 months there, I kept a journal of my boss's unacceptable comments. One entry reads: "You will never have a key to the office because you are such a rich-looking, beautiful, blonde woman that if you were alone here, you could be attacked." By the way, a male sales employee got a key.

Is this sexual harassment?

Blondie

**Dear Blondie:**

There are two issues here, and your hair colour is not one of them.

The first is dismissal. Usually employees have contracts that outline the terms of their employment, and they can't be fired without reasonable notice. You should contact a labour lawyer to see whether the terms of yours were violated.

The second issue is discrimination. If you think that you were fired, or treated differently, because you are female -- references to being a beautiful woman would count -- that is discrimination and possibly sexual harassment, prohibited in all jurisdictions in Canada by human rights legislation.

Since the 1980s, sexual innuendo and vulgar comments can be construed as harassment because they create a "hostile work environment." So sexual harassment is not limited to quid pro quo suggestions of favours exchanged (sleep with me if you want that promotion) but is also when sex is used to erode personal dignity in the workplace. That's why unwelcome comments about your sex appeal are relevant.

In contrast, a withheld office key is a concrete issue, as it limited your ability to come in early or work late, options that were open to your co-workers (whose personal security seemed to be of less concern to your boss). If employee safety was an issue, policies that apply to everyone should have been written and enforced.

Your record-keeping was a good idea, and these notes should be reviewed by a lawyer who could determine whether the comments are discriminatory, says Fred Headon, a labour lawyer with McCarthy Tetrault LLP.

If you decide to pursue this, do it quickly, as there may be a time limit. Add to that long delays for cases to be heard -- as long as three years for human rights tribunals, says Geoffrey England, an employment law expert at the University of Saskatchewan -- and your blonde hair may acquire a few "silver" highlights.

Don't wait for spring. Do it now.

*Susan Pinker is a psychologist and writer.*

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