



Baggage handlers

The ex effect

Don't let the past damage your present relationship

Your baggage

YOUR EX'S UNFAITHFUL WAYS HAVE MADE YOU SUPER PARANOID

Put down his phone bill, and step away from the binoculars. Recognise when your trust-related anxiety is leading to overly demanding or withdrawing behaviour, says psychologist Dr Alice Boyes. "These tendencies get in the way of relationship closeness and lead to feeling more anxious." It might not be easy, but avoid the temptation to attach additional meaning to events – chances are there's a rational explanation. For example, when your partner doesn't invite you to a work function, he may be embarrassed about his last relationship having ended. Invest energy in trusting him until you're given a real reason not to.

His baggage

REFERENCES TO HIS EX ARE TESTING YOUR PATIENCE

There will be occasions where it's quite reasonable for him to mention her name (in the middle of rocking the casbah is definitely not one of them) but your partner needs to know when to hold his tongue. "Explain to him that you're interested in creating some new memories together and feel you can't do that while he's still bringing up his ex-life," says Jacqui Manning, psychologist and co-director of the Mind Advantage Centre for Positive Change. Focus on aspects that are going to reaffirm your relationship. For example, come up with "your" song, or have sex in a new and exciting place. Once you start making your own memories, she'll disappear from his vocab.

Your baggage

YOU'RE STILL FRIENDS WITH YOUR EX

Research from California State University, US, found one in three adults would reunite with their first love if they could, which could explain your partner's apprehension when you buddy up with your ex. "Attend to the anxiety that's underlying their concern," says Dr Boyes. Ask what their specific worry is. Is it that you'll get back with your ex? If so, explain why this won't happen. But as Dr Boyes cautions, maintaining relationships with ex-partners can sometimes make it more difficult to move on. "Part of moving on is learning to meet your emotional needs in new ways, rather than continuing to seek out your ex for fulfilling your emotional needs." If you do meet, invite your new partner along.

His baggage

HE HAS KIDS FROM A PREVIOUS RELATIONSHIP

It's important your relationship is in his children's best interests, as well as yours and his, so be honest with yourself whether you're comfortable with a step-parent role. If the answer is yes, be patient and accept that you will have to share him with his kids (and most likely his ex). "Ask him to always communicate his family commitments so you know what you have to plan around," says Manning. "You need to cherish the ways you can care about each other just as a couple, too. So get creative." It's fine (and wise) to ask directly if he's open to having more children, if you know this is something you want. For more step-parenting advice, check out the helpful site stepfamily.org.au.



Happy couples

with Dr Traci Coventry

Q+A

I'm in a relationship with my boss. We're platonic at work, but I think the extra pressure is affecting my work and relationship. What should I do? *MS, Indooroopilly, Qld*

There is a reason workplace romances often get a bad rap. If you cohabit, maintaining work-life balance and boundaries can be almost impossible. The fact he is your boss means you have started off with a power differential in his favour – which can generate problems when you try to put things on an equal footing at home. I'm assuming your relationship is not public knowledge, which adds to the excitement. As such, you may find leaving negatively affects the attractiveness of the relationship for you both. Your stress is telling you something – listen to your emotions, decide what you need for your own wellbeing, and change the situation to meet those needs. If your relationship is real it will survive and thrive with the change, if it's just a workplace romance, leaving will clarify its nature and free you to move on.

Dr Traci Coventry is a clinical psychologist who counsels couples and singles with relationship and sexuality issues. To ask her a question, go to yahoo7.com.au/womenshealth. Include initials, suburb and state.

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