

# Nagging Spouse? You May Have An Excuse For Not Responding

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New research findings now appearing online in the *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* began with a professor's desire to understand why her husband often seemed to ignore her requests for help around the house.

"My husband, while very charming in many ways, has an annoying tendency of doing exactly the opposite of what I would like him to do in many situations," said Tanya L. Chartrand, an associate professor of marketing and psychology at Duke University's Fuqua School of Business.

When Chartrand envisioned a formal academic study of people's resistance to the wishes of their partners, parents or bosses, her husband, Gavan Fitzsimons, became not only her inspiration, but also her collaborator. Fitzsimons is a professor of marketing and psychology at Duke who, like Chartrand, is an expert in the field of consumer psychology.

Working with Duke Ph.D. student Amy Dalton, Chartrand and Fitzsimons have demonstrated that some people will act in ways that are not to their own benefit simply because they wish to avoid doing what other people want them to. Psychologists call this reactance: a person's tendency to resist social influences that they perceive as threats to their autonomy.

The team found that people do not necessarily oppose others' wishes

intentionally. Instead, even the slightest nonconscious exposure to the name of a significant person in their life is enough to bring about reactance and cause them to rebel against that person's wishes.

"Psychologists have known for some time that reactance can cause a person to work in opposition to another person's desires," Chartrand said. "We wanted to know whether reactance could occur even when exposure to a significant other, and their associated wishes for us, takes place at a nonconscious level."

The researchers undertook a set of experiments to determine whether reactance might occur unintentionally, completely outside of the reactant individual's conscious awareness.

In the first experiment, participants were asked to name a significant person in their lives whom they perceived to be controlling and who wanted them to work hard, and another significant and controlling person who wanted them to have fun. Participants then performed a computer-based activity during which the name of one or the other of these people was repeatedly, but subliminally, flashed on the screen. The name appeared too quickly for the participants to consciously realize they had seen it, but just long enough for the significant other to be activated in their nonconscious minds. The participants were then given a series of anagrams to solve, creating words from jumbled letters.

People who were exposed to the name of a person who wanted them to work hard performed significantly worse on the anagram task than did participants who were exposed to the name of a person who wanted them to have fun.

"Our participants were not even aware that they had been exposed to someone else's name, yet that nonconscious exposure was enough to cause them to act in defiance of what their significant other would want

them to do," Fitzsimons said.

A second experiment used a similar approach and added an assessment of each participant's level of reactance. People who were more reactant responded more strongly to the subliminal cues and showed greater variation in their performance than people who were less reactant.

"The main finding of this research is that people with a tendency toward reactance may nonconsciously and quite unintentionally act in a counterproductive manner simply because they are trying to resist someone else's encroachment on their freedom," Chartrand said.

The researchers suggest that people who tend to experience reactance when their freedoms are threatened should try to be aware of situations and people who draw out their reactant tendencies. That way, they can be more mindful of their behaviors and avoid situations where they might adopt detrimental behaviors out of a sense of rebellion.

Not surprisingly perhaps, Chartrand and Fitzsimons, as wife and husband, also take home some slightly differing messages from their experiments.

Chartrand believes her husband "should now be better equipped to suppress his reactant tendencies." Fitzsimons, however, believes the results "suggest that reactance to significant others is so automatic that I can't possibly be expected to control it if I don't even know it's happening."

Source: Duke University, By Laura Brinn

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