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Controlling the Green-Eyed Monster

When I was 16-years-old, I fell in love with the guy who would become my first long-term boyfriend, Mickey. We spent the first several months in the “honeymoon” phase where we exclusively occupied each other’s time. We lived these few months blissfully unaware of each other’s shortcomings. Around the fourth month we began to socialize with friends. We would go to parties or out to dinner and often meet new people. It was then that I noticed a behavior of Mickey’s that would become problematic: he became angry and aggressive toward other men if they talked to me. As I think back about this behavior, I may have inadvertently reinforced it.

As I reconsider the beginning of our relationship perhaps Mickey’s aggression was a way of avoiding my becoming involved with other men. Mickey had a friend who constantly lamented about a girlfriend he had lost to another man and so, perhaps, Mickey was avoiding such a result now. At the beginning of our relationship Mickey’s aggressive tendencies toward other men didn’t bother me as he appeared to be protecting me.

My opinions changed one night when Mickey and I went to the house party of a mutual acquaintance. Mickey left me in the house, talking to a girlfriend, and went outside to look at his buddy’s new car. When he returned, I was talking to a guy from my biology class, Jeff. Jeff was very extroverted, always friendly, and universally liked. Everybody could see that our interaction was strictly platonic but not Mickey. As Mickey returned to my side, I could see from the rigidity of his body that he was angry and when he got this way, almost nothing could pacify him. Mickey began to question Jeff with an insinuating tone but Jeff didn’t respond in

kind and continued to converse with me. Mickey's initial passive-aggressive attempt to get Jeff to leave had failed and Mickey became even angrier.

In past situations Mickey's passive-aggressive actions usually ended confrontations; the other guy would call him an "asshole" (or something to that effect) and the interaction would end. This time was different; Jeff wasn't leaving and Mickey's tone and body language were aggressive. Eventually, Mickey shoved Jeff, causing him to stumble back several feet. The previously calm Jeff now sprung back at Mickey and the two rolled around, punching each other until onlookers broke up the fight. As it turned out, Jeff was very good friends with the guy who owned the house so at the fight's end Mickey was told to leave immediately or stay and get beaten by several large lacrosse players.

He stormed out of the house with me trailing behind, feverishly apologizing to everyone in my path. I was mortified. Fortunately, over the next week, I convinced my peers that alcohol contributed to Mickey's bad behavior but in truth Mickey had behaved aggressively, before, without alcohol.

I realized something would have to change because Mickey's aggression was straining our relationship. Previously I responded to his aggression with attention and affection, thinking that if I physically reassured him of my faithfulness he would eventually stop aggressing. The incident at the party added to an already large amount of proof otherwise. My behavior was reinforcing his aggression.

Initially, I instituted a form of negative punishment. After Mickey acted aggressively toward another man, I withheld attention and affection from him for the next hour or so. I realized almost immediately that this would not work. His aggression persisted and the only change was that now we were fighting.

For our relationship to continue, Mickey had to act more constructively to get other men to stop talking to me when he became concerned about my fidelity. I concluded that I could control Mickey's aggression by producing an outcome that was functionally equivalent to that of his problem behavior. Instead of waiting for Mickey to become aggressive and then punishing that behavior, I showered him with attention and affection before he became angry. If another man started talking to me I would instantly hold Mickey's hand or pull his arm around me, make eye contact with him or smile a lot; basically I affectionately engaged him while simultaneously holding a conversation with another man. This seemed to work. My attention reinforced Mickey's calm, passive behavior; when we touched he didn't behave aggressively. Additionally, my aloof behavior prompted the other man to not converse. My behaviors produced the same outcome as had Mickey's but without aggression.

We dated for about a year after I began the intervention and I consistently implemented reinforcement. Mickey's aggressive behaviors did decrease but in the end, maintaining the intervention was too exhausting for me. I could never be sure how he would act in certain social situations as his aggression fluctuated from person to person. There were too many factors controlling his behavior that I couldn't control. Waiting to attend to his unpredictable behaviors made me feel like his babysitter. More importantly, my behavior (while trying to influence his behavior) had changed and my peers began to avoid me because I appeared so aloof. The time I spent with Mickey wasn't all bad though and provided a valuable learning experience.

Ultimately, I learned two things: First, any relationship that requires that much work in its early stages won't get much easier over time. Second, I only want boyfriends that come pre-socialized.

