

Power-proof your RELATIONSHIP

Career success put you ahead of him in earning potential? A new circle of friends dominating your social life? When the power shifts, make sure your relationship doesn't suffer, says Anna Pursglove

IT'S A WIDELY HELD BELIEF that when women gain power, men get twitchy – and relationships suffer. Salary bigger than his? He'll feel emasculated. Got some new friends? He'll assume you're sleeping with one of them.

And yet my own experience – and that of the women I canvassed on the subject of relationship power shifts – runs completely contrary to this 'wisdom'. As I write, in fact, my husband is preparing to hand me the bread-winning baton, as he takes time out from his job in TV to write a film script. I want him to have a go at something he's always dreamed of – he doesn't mind in the slightest if I pay the gas bill while he's doing it.

In the past year, I've fallen in love with running and do half marathons regularly. He's thrilled for me (and not complaining about my sculpted thighs, either). He's also embraced my new diet. Instead of muttering about ridiculous eating patterns, he's become my co-conspirator in the quest to find interesting ways to eat virtually nothing.

Far from driving a wedge between you and your partner, a bid for growth – in any sphere – may, in fact, bring you closer together, as you discover new areas of common ground and uncover previously hidden strengths in one another.

The financial shift

Contemplating a shift in the earning-base of my relationship, I consult finance guru Sarah

Pennells, who specialises in helping women with money matters through her website, savvywoman.co.uk. Is a relationship crisis inevitable when a woman gains financial power?

'I come across this myth time and time again,' sighs Pennells. 'It's largely born of the misconception that (outside managing a household budget) women neither know how to nor have any interest in doing anything creative with money.'

In fact, says Pennells, couples where the female is financially dominant usually benefit in several ways. 'There's an idea that women are financially risk averse,' she says. 'This isn't true: research in the US has shown share investments clubs [people who join together to invest in the stock market] dominated by women tend to outperform those dominated by men. Women don't dive in and out of investment, like men do. They take a considered course and then stick with it.'

Women, say Pennells, often have a keener eye than men for the ethical implications of their investments. 'Women are better at seeing where money is coming from and going to,' she says. 'That has an impact on the products they invest in, and also means they don't miss crucial details. Women are far better than men at asking for clarification when they don't understand a financial point. It's surprising how much money you can waste just because you were too afraid to ask.'

So, should you start out-earning your partner and should he begin beating his chest about his male >>



FROM TOP LEFT: William's heir to the throne, but Kate's the nation's sweetheart; who comes top at the box office, Mr or Mrs Craig?; Beyoncé and Jay-Z – the ultimate power couple?

CLOCKWISE, FROM ABOVE: The double powerhouse of brand Beckham; it's Hillary – not Bill – Clinton who has political power now; Catherine Zeta-Jones has got her own Oscar to rival Michael Douglas'

It's often the woman who makes the lifestyle change first, then inspires her partner to do the same'

pride, you can just point out that this is an opportunity for growth. 'I'd say most men could deal with a bit of wounded pride when they see their partners making their money go further,' says Pennells.

The social shift

When 35-year-old recruitment consultant Lily returned to work this year, after five years out to bring up her son, Noah, she suddenly found herself with a new circle of work friends. 'Socialising and networking is a massive part of my job,' says Lily. 'I was worried that would damage my relationship with my partner, David. Since Noah was born we've pretty much relied on each other for friendship – suddenly I'm fulfilling that need elsewhere.'

But far from thwarting their relationship, Lily was pleasantly surprised to find her new friends enriched it. 'David commented almost immediately on how our conversations were less humdrum,' she says. 'I guess we'd fallen into that trap of endlessly discussing the mundane and some of the spark had vanished. Going outside our relationship for social stimulation has brought something new to it.'

'When a couple thinks about how a change in circumstances may help them, that's a very healthy thing,' confirms Susanna Abse, director of the Tavistock Centre for Couple Relationships. 'Supporting growth and change in your partner is empowering.'

On the flip side, says Abse, you should be prepared that a power shift might precipitate the end of your relationship – but know that that's

not necessarily a bad thing. 'If a particular relationship has a very rigid model that doesn't allow for change in either partner, then it's unlikely to last. I see couples every week where one partner has changed and the other can't accommodate that. Sad as it is, in those cases it's often better the relationship finishes so that both people can move on.'

The fitness shift

When I lost weight after having children, I spent a lot of time thinking about (and, indeed, wrote for this magazine about) how it would change my life. What I didn't anticipate was how it would change my husband's life. He took stock of my toned body and newfound love of running and decided to make some changes of his own. Although knee problems mean he can't run half marathons with me, he's always there with the kids cheering me on (in addition to serving up the mother of all roasts when we get home).

He's also uncovered his own fitness addiction in the form of cycling, and taken up the healthy-eating habits that helped me lose weight. Though I say it myself, we're both looking hotter approaching 40 than we did at 30.

'This is a common story,' says James Duigan, founder of the world-famous Bodyism gym and personal trainer to Elle Macpherson and Rosie Huntington-Whiteley among others. 'It is often the woman who makes the lifestyle change first, then inspires her partner to do the same. I'd say it's because women are better than men at reaching out for help.'

Psychologist and counsellor Amanda Hills, who runs a London practice specialising in body image, says women can often coax a partner to change his behaviour, without doing it in a threatening way. In a world where fit is the new rich, adds Hills, there is status in being a healthy-looking couple. 'An alpha man might reflect that looking better will make them seem a more powerful unit,' she says. 'That's often a strong motivator for him to mirror the changes she has made.'

The career shift

When 35-year-old Maggie, an assistant producer, was offered a managerial role at a TV production company, she almost didn't take the job because she worried her long-term boyfriend, Joe (who also works in TV, but further down the scale) wouldn't cope with the shift.

'We both started our careers in TV as runners; we both got promoted, but then I leap-frogged Joe. I had visions of him storming off in a cloud of wounded male pride,' she admits.

However, Maggie found that, instead of being resentful, Joe was genuinely pleased for her, and started asking for her advice on how he could get promoted.

Executive coach Averil Leimon says that, culturally, it's becoming easier for men to accept women in positions of power, and to begin to look at what they can learn from their style. In particular, she says, men are realising traditional male behaviour doesn't always land the job and are therefore starting to watch how women do things. 'For example,' she explains, 'men can learn a lot from the emotional intelligence that women bring to management roles. Women are excellent at looking at the way a team does – or doesn't – work and also at nurturing talent.'

Susanna Abse agrees, saying that, increasingly, men are happy for their partner to climb the ladder in front of them. 'There has been this embedded cultural norm that men need authority and autonomy,' she says. 'Actually, men need the same varying array of things that women need.'

Both Abse and Leimon also stress that career shifts – and, in fact, shifts of all kinds – need to be viewed as dynamic situations, not life sentences. 'Whatever it is, it's unlikely to be forever,' counsels Abse. 'That might sound obvious, but it can mean the difference between letting change come between you or using it for growth.' ■