

“Of course I love football, snookums!”

Does being loved up have to mean losing your identity? **Aoife Stuart** discovers how to hold on to you, when ‘I’ becomes ‘we’



My friend Kelly would be the first to admit that she's from the "can't cook, won't cook," school of thought. The poster girl for convenience food, a meal chez Kelly means a Pot Noodle and an Alpen bar, if not delivery from the nearest take-out. At least, that was until six months ago when she met Warren. A veritable foodie, Warren likes nothing better than languishing over a five-course, home-cooked meal. And, before you can say, "Have you defrosted that lasagne, darling?", Kelly had metamorphosed into Nigella Lawson. DVD and pizza nights became DVD and an-assortment-of-seafood-canapés-whipped-up-during-the-trailers nights. A couple of months with Warren, and her kitchen was bursting with truffle oil, scallops ("they are just delish with a little chilli and ginger"), pancetta and artichokes.

Don't get me wrong, I'm not opposed to my friends finding new interests (and her devilled lobster certainly beats a deep pan margherita any day) but I found it suspect that the take-out menus miraculously reappeared when Warren wasn't around. And if you looked past the mountains of fresh veg in the fridge, you might just chance upon a renegade packet of cheese strings. When I questioned her commitment to the culinary cause, she explained it was a case of, "if you can't beat 'em, join 'em".

"Initially I wanted to show an interest in his passion," says Kelly. "But I soon realised I couldn't tear him away from the kitchen, so I figured if I got involved in cooking too, it would be a way for us to spend more time together."

Losing interest

And we've all done it: enthused about his interests so we could spend more time together, to find common ground, or just to show willing. But is there a danger that by concentrating too much on his interests, you'll lose sight of what it is you enjoy?

Tamera Daun, author of *Absolute Bliss: A Woman's Guide to Relationship Happiness*, (Dhs110, Trafford) says: "When you love someone, you want to share in the things that are important to them. This is natural, and it is a process of two people getting to know one another. But the line should be drawn where either of you forget what it is you individually enjoy."

As Katherine Hoiton, 30, experienced: "I had absolutely no interest in football until I met John. He was football-mad and spent his weekends either watching it on TV in the pub,

or playing for a local team. After patiently explaining the offside rule to me in countless restaurants, using salt cellars and ketchup bottles, I finally agreed to come and watch him play. Soon I was spending most Friday mornings standing cheering on the sidelines. I wanted to be supportive, but if I'm being honest, I was bored out of my mind. It was only when we broke up last year that I realised how I had become so involved with his interests that I'd forgotten that I had my own. I used to love shopping, or spending lazy afternoons in a coffee shop, surrounded by magazines, but I'd let those things go to spend more time watching football with John."

“I had become so involved with his interests that I'd forgotten that I had my own”

"When you're developing a future together, it helps to have shared interests so it makes sense to get involved in your partner's hobbies and vice versa, but never force the interest," says Sarah Hedley, editor of UK-based sex and relationships magazine *Scarlet*. "By spending hours watching football when you don't really want to, you will eventually resent wasting the time. When he's watching or playing football, indulge in some precious "me-time", spend the afternoon reading the glossies, or visit friends, then meet up with your partner afterwards when you will both feel happier knowing you aren't compromising yourselves."

The real you

But this is easier said than done, says Kristin Armstrong, the ex-wife of cyclist Lance Armstrong, and author of *Happily Ever After: Walking with Peace and Courage Through a Year of Divorce* (Dhs62, Faithwords), who admits her focus during her marriage was her husband's happiness, not her own. "If you ask me today what I truly love, I can easily tell you I love God, my family, my friends, firework displays, a good red wine, staying up late with a mystery novel, a sweaty run, painting abstract art and laughing until no sound comes out. If you had asked me when I was married what I loved, I would have automatically told you the things I loved about my husband."

"Making him happy became my happy. So I stopped going to church because it was inconvenient with twin infants and a rowdy toddler in tow. I quit reading late into the night because the light was bothersome to a tired athlete who needed sleep. But ultimately the only way to restore meaning to your

relationship is to get back to the real you."

It is, after all, the "real you" he fell for in the first place, says Mira Kirshenbaum, author of *Is He Mr Right? Everything You Need To Know Before You Commit*, (Dhs85, Harmony). "A man falls in love with a woman as a separate human being with her own strengths and interests. They are part of what make you attractive to him. If you submerge yourself in him, you lose your distinctiveness and your attractiveness. Having your own passions and interests makes you enjoy life more, and that means you have more to give to your partner."

"You don't need to turn into tweedledum and tweedledee," says dating expert Tracey Cox. "It's healthy to have solo time with friends to talk about your partner and comment honestly on issues in your life you might not want to discuss with your partner."

A girl thing

So when girls who once thought Formula One was an anti-aging ingredient start telling me about the aerodynamics of their car; and friends who've planned enviable trips to Europe, spend their entire holiday watching World Cup matches in Uruguay, I have to wonder - is this willingness to adapt ourselves to our partners interests solely a female trait?

Tamera Daun believes so: "People make the choice to lose themselves in the pockets of another person. Women especially are 'pocket jumpers', they tend to jump very quickly into oneness to try and please and satisfy their partners. Men don't tend to have the same definition of oneness; they can more easily remain individuals."

"I think many women make the mistake of thinking that doing everything that the guy wants to do, and nothing that they want to do, is good or better for their relationship," says TV relationship expert Dr Michelle Callahan.

“The only way to restore meaning to your relationship is to get back to the real you”

"However, that kind of extremism puts your relationship out of balance and can make you or your partner feel smothered."

On the other hand, blunt refusal to compromise can be equally as detrimental to your relationship.

"If your partner never shows any interest in any of your hobbies, or meeting with your friends, this could

be cause for concern," says Sarah Hedley. "Talk to them about how it makes you feel and give them a chance to make an effort. If there's no change, you could be with a self-centred partner and they don't have much to offer. Think about whether you can live in that relationship before making a commitment."

While it's not advisable that you ask him →

to come along for a double mani/pedi, or for you to run out and sign up to the nearest rugby squad, small change can be positive, as long as you can hang on to your core qualities.

“There can be plenty of difference in tastes and interests in a happy relationship,” explains Mira. “This means that you will always need to compromise. The key is to identify the parts of yourself that are most important to your sense of who you are, hold fast to those, and don’t worry about letting the rest go.”

Positive changes

And surprisingly, you may find that letting go of some parts of yourself is easier than you think. In fact, subconsciously a willingness to change those things could be one of the reasons you entered the relationship in the first place.

“We often choose a partner because we sense deep down that being with this person is an opportunity to change in ways we’ve been longing to change,” says Mira. “As long as you are changing in directions you want to go in, and that make you more alive and happier, then those changes can be very positive.”

Caroline Cush, 31, admits she changed her lifestyle completely when she met her husband Chris. “I was a complete workaholic in my mid-20s. I worked in a thankless high-powered managerial job in Australia and was often working 10 or 12-hour days, and weekends. I was jeopardising my health, my social life and my sanity. I met Chris on a rare night out; he was a scuba instructor and had a completely different attitude to life. He was utterly laid-back, and worked to live, as opposed to me, who couldn’t switch off from work. A year after we met, I packed in my job and we went travelling around south-east Asia together. Now we live in Dubai, and my life couldn’t be more different. I still work hard, but I leave my work at the office, and our weekends are spent diving or snorkelling in Fujairah. Looking back, I can see that I was initially attracted to Chris because I could see in him qualities I knew were lacking in me.”

Junk food addict Kelly can also see she was probably subconsciously craving the changes that Wayne has brought into her life. “With all the fresh food I’ve been eating, I’ve lost weight, my skin is clearer and I feel much healthier,” she says. “I admit Wayne’s love of fresh home-cooked food was probably one of the things that first impressed me about him - though it doesn’t mean I can’t still have the odd McDonald’s!”

Dubai twos

Losing parts of yourself in a relationship is not always voluntary, as Tami Martin*, 24, discovered when she moved to Dubai with her husband Paul. “I felt as though we were sharing one identity. We were living in each other’s

pockets. It didn’t help that we worked for the same firm. Suddenly, I was no longer just Tami - I was “Tami and Paul”. We were eager to make our own friends, but when colleagues invited one of us out, we would both go along, as neither wanted to exclude the other. In the UK, I had my own set of friends, but in Dubai our lives were so overlapped, it felt like we were almost the same person.”

It’s easy to rely solely on each other when you find yourselves in an alien environment. You may not share the same interests, but a night spent enduring the footie, is better than the daunting prospect of putting yourself out there and meeting new friends, right? Wrong, says Mira. Move outside your comfort zone.

“Find people who are interested in what you’re interested in. Join a group, or club and nurture the interests that you enjoyed at home. You’ll meet others with similar interests and you’ll regain some independence.”

For Tami, it took her partner to change jobs before they could finally carve out their own lives. “Paul moved to another company, where he began to make new friends. With Paul not there on every office trip to the pub, I was able to forge more solid friendships with my female co-workers. Now we both have social lives and interests outside our relationship, and we’re both a lot happier. I feel like me again and we look forward to seeing each other at the end of the day.”●

THE CELEBRITY CLONE ZONE

Brad Pitt & Gwyneth Paltrow

Possibly the dodgiest example of celeb morphing was the union of Brad and Gwen. But then Brad does have a history of identity theft. According to Tracey Cox, Brad is an “I am who I’m going out with” person, who adopts their partner’s friends, activities and pastimes. Well at least under Ange’s wing, he’s working with the UN, instead of working bland mid-90s unisex dos.



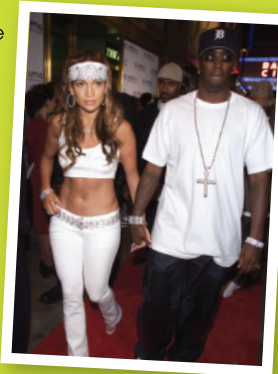
Johnny Depp & Vanessa Paradis

Vanessa went over to the dark side as soon as she hooked up with the Tim Burton-obsessed actor. Gone are the frou frou frills of her *Joe Le Taxi* days, instead it’s gothic eyeliner and co-ordinating black suits. ‘Ness, *The Corpse Bride* is not a good look. Meanwhile Johnny’s been smoking Gauloises and sporting a French tache since moving to her native country. Zut alors!



Jennifer Lopez & P Diddy

Before she was just “Jenny from the block”, J.Lo worked the blingtastic gangsta look, with a little help from her bad boy. On the arm of Sean “Diddy” Combs, La Lopez channelled her inner ghetto princess and, in contrast to the “demure housewife” look she’s been sporting recently, her style was more DRE than PTA - complete with gang member bandana. What would NBF Posh say?



Tom Cruise & Katie Holmes

Q: What’s worse than Tom’s *Oprah* sofa-jumping antics? A: This shocking leather-clad display of coupledom from TomKat, complete with matching jackets, shades and cheesy grins. Since then, their PDAs have only gotten slushier. Tracey warns you shouldn’t hang out with your guy or his friends too much. “They could be trying to control you,” warns Tracey.

