

## The Dynamics of Power

*The measure of a man is what he does with power.*

—Pittacus

- ◆ How controlling were your parents, in general?
- ◆ Could you express your upset or angry feelings appropriately to them? Were you allowed to disagree with them?
- ◆ Can you express your upset or angry feelings to other adults now?
- ◆ Do you find yourself concerned with issues of control and vulnerability when it comes to sexual relationships?

### Parental Authority

The way in which your family handled power is key in your experience of love and your expression of sexuality. If authority was handled well by your parents, and they were empathic caretakers, you have grown up associating being in a relationship with love, comfort, and getting your needs met. The issue of dominance probably causes few major conflicts or stumbling blocks for you in your sexual and intimate relationships.

If, on the other hand, your parents greatly abused their authority over you, you have learned to link emotional intimacy with power struggle. If this has been your experience, you may find you have trouble integrating love and sexuality. An enormous variety of sexual dysfunctions and

problems—including sexual aversion, low sexual desire, difficulty relaxing during sex, difficulty becoming excited or coming to orgasm, and sexual compulsions and addictions—can be related to a lack of parental empathy combined with authoritarian dominance.

If your parents were quite controlling but also loving and not abusive, you may fall somewhere between these two extremes: it is quite possible that your sexual relationships will be marked by some ambivalence or by power struggles.

*All of my issues of power come out in my relationship with Jeremy, even though he is the most loving person I know. But I just fight him whenever he wants his own way, and that happens in sex, too.*

*This therapy is exhausting. I'm in a state of grief. I don't want to admit this stuff we're talking about. Mom and Dad's crazy rules. My resistance. I don't want to replay the scenes of fear, listening to them talking about me through the vents of the house, hearing my father's steps on the stairs . . . my terror of getting beaten. Getting a black eye for something as dumb as taking my brother's baseball cap.*

—Shelley, 36

Parents of infants, while they may be overwhelmed by the many tasks at hand, are quite clearly in charge: infants are tiny, not yet articulate verbally, and their only desires are to have their physical and emotional needs met. A power struggle at this age is futile and highly unnecessary.

But soon the child becomes a toddler, and begins to say, "No!" to what the parents want and makes demands herself. She ambles about, carrying things, and the soap winds up in the fishtank, the spoon in the toilet, and the house becomes a shambles. This stage (also known as "The Terrible Twos") is where the control battle begins between parent and child.

*Mother to two-and-a-half year old:* "Sally, Don't climb up that high chair. It will fall over on top of you and hurt you."

*Two-and-a-half-year-old to mother in response:* "No. Shut up. I hate you!"

By the time children are four, they are making it clear that they have their own personalities and their own wishes. Parents do more or less well with their childrens' increasing independence. A father who used to flirt

and call his little girl “my little kitten,” suddenly may withdraw love and approval as that little girl tells him she doesn’t want to bring him his slippers when he comes home from work. Another parent may take pleasure in watching what appeared to be a very docile child become intent on leading his or her own pursuits.

Of course, at this age, the parents are still in control. Consider the small child who is throwing a tantrum and refusing to leave the swimming pool on a very hot day. He can be hoisted up, simply and easily, by the adult and be carried to the car, all the while screaming his head off, arms flailing.

If the parents are kind and loving, and wield their power justly, there is no problem for the child’s developing sexuality. But some parents are not well equipped psychologically for the task of parenting. They are depleted by all of the child’s demands, and they are much more prone to use control and violence than they are to give love and tenderness. If the parents are not empathic and loving, and they act sadistically, the issue of power and control can impact the child’s general personality and sexuality in a very destructive way.

In order to comprehend how the issue of power and control can be woven into a child’s personality and sexuality, you must be willing to think of the parents as the object of the child’s greatest love. In actuality, the parents are both the child’s dearest love and the source of the child’s worst frustration. Besides their advantage of physical strength and size, they have the emotional power to say no or to gratify the child’s desires.

If parents are kind, empathic and giving, the house is run like a kind of benevolent kingdom, where the parents rule but are humanitarian heads of state who try to do what is best for the populace and take their subjects’ wishes into consideration. If the parents are dominating, the household feels like a cruel dictatorship.

Of course, the parental-child power dynamic changes as children grow up. As children reach about eight years of age, they become more independent, more adept at expressing their thoughts and wishes, and more able to use their behavior to rebel against what they feel are unjust rules. They can run away, they can talk back, they can refuse to comply by flaunting family rules. By adolescence, children are large enough physically, and independent enough, to mutiny against parents who wield their power without justice or love. In general, though, children who grow up in cruel and authoritarian families express their feelings of rebellion by self-injurious behavior—depression, not doing well in school, withdrawing from social contact. As will be described in the chapter on adolescence (chapter 10), teenagers are even more adept at self-harm, including using

drugs, sex, fighting, or driving too fast as distractions and / or to express rebellion and independence.

What was the control pattern in your family of origin? If you could express frustration overtly to your parents, within reasonable limits, that was healthy. Many parents are sophisticated enough to know that it is normal for their child to tell them they are the meanest mother, or father, in the world.

But a little boy who hears his small girlfriend call her mother a “witch” with no punishment may go home and try it out in his family and may get a slap, or his mouth washed out with soap. If you came from that kind of family, and you were tyrannized by your parents, your sexuality may have been inhibited or associated subconsciously with aggression or control.

Greg grew up the oldest child in a loving but controlling home. His mother, a psychiatrist, was vibrant and fun, but also quite intrusive and demanding. His father, an orthopedic surgeon, had high hopes for his son. Greg was given a lot of financial advantages, including being able to ski in Europe several times a year, private day school, and the financial backing to take many kinds of private lessons.

Since childhood, Greg had always dreamed of being an artist; however, from about the age of eight on, his mother and father made it absolutely clear to Greg that they expected him to be a lawyer or a physician. Ironically, his family was so well off that the financial instabilities of a career in the fine arts really would not have been a problem.

Because Greg was so bright in English, science, and math, his parents assumed he liked these subjects and could not understand why he couldn’t just go to law school or medical school. He fought them through his teens, but eventually Greg capitulated and went to law school. He became a reluctant, unhappy lawyer.

Greg met Harry when they were in their early thirties. They were extremely attracted to each other and formed a monogamous relationship after about a year. They had a lot in common, and in most areas they did not argue or compete. However, Greg’s issues with power came out in their sexual relationship.

Harry’s sexual drive was much higher than Greg’s was and the discrepancy set off all of Greg’s feelings about submission. He simply was not going to do what he had had to before—give in! He wouldn’t consider negotiating, or taking turns about whose sexual preferences should win out. He out-and-out refused to discuss

their desire discrepancy, let alone go see a sex therapist. Eventually, Harry felt so hurt and so discounted that he left. Greg's old feelings of losing the power battle with his parents made him so unable to negotiate that he eventually lost an important love relationship.

## Linking Love and Sexuality

### Children Are Innately Sexual

While most of us don't think of youngsters as being sexual in any way, they are indeed. They just aren't sexual in exactly the same way that adults are sexual.

Children can have wonderful, romantic feelings toward their parents, particularly the parent of the opposite sex. And of course, children experience great sensual pleasure in their bodies, from being hugged, rubbed, or getting their back scratched. So children with empathic and responsible parents, particularly parents who touch them lovingly and appropriately, develop a sense that people they love can be a source of deep emotional and sensual pleasure.

And as anyone who has caught a small child masturbating knows, children's bodies can have sexual sensations of buzzing and throbbing the same way that adult bodies do. But unless a child is in a sexually abusive environment, exposed to inappropriate information and experiences (where an adult is using the child to fulfill adult sexual needs), children's "sexual" fantasies have nothing to do with explicitly adult activities like sexual kissing, petting, oral sex, or intercourse.

### Early Fantasies: Sex and Control

Children's sexual fantasies are much more vague. Often, they can be fantasies of control. Many children have enjoyed playing eroticized games of control with each other.

One little boy ran around, at age five, rubbing his penis on little girls, and scaring them, "because it feels good, and it's fun"? Girls may be lacking penises, but they have their own sexualized control fantasies.

Sarah remembers playing a game of "Mean Queen" with her two sisters when they were about five or six. The person who was the Mean Queen got to give out orders. One order which appeared fre-

quently in the games was the Mean Queen telling her commoners to wipe her rear end!

## Masturbation in Childhood and Adolescence

Children and adolescents often use their newfound sexual pleasure derived from masturbation as part of their control fantasies as well. As power struggles may be going on between parent and child, the child definitely has control over his fantasies, and, in masturbation, control over his own body.

According to sexual expert Leonore Tiefer, Ph.D., in all cultures studied, more boys than girls masturbate. This probably has to do with boys' access to the penis, or maybe with the experience that boys have in touching their penis as they learn to urinate. (Interestingly, boy monkeys masturbate more than girl monkeys, and they don't touch their penis to urinate, so the gender differences in rates of masturbation must have to do with more than just physical access to the genitals.)

Masturbation may also be used as a means of self-comfort and escapism. For more about masturbation and adolescence, read chapters 9 and 10.

Depending on the family environment in which you were raised—how you were taught about power and control, whether or not you were allowed to question authority—early patterns of control fantasies (involving masturbation or not) can set the tone of your adult sexual life.

Tom came into sex therapy with his wife, Jackie. She complained that she hated their sexual relationship, that he was unable to be loving or tender, and that he treated her like a sex object. He didn't touch her body tenderly—he just grabbed for her breasts. In addition, he was very attached to having Jackie go along with certain staged scripts in order for them to have sex, which alienated her. Jackie wanted their lovemaking to be full of tender moments. Tom said he just wasn't put together that way. Tenderness just didn't turn him on.

Tom loved his wife a lot and could not understand what was upsetting her. He knew that he had always had a high sex drive, that he was very attracted to Jackie, and that he wanted her to be available sexually. She complained that sex didn't occur in an atmosphere of romance, but that instead it had a pornographic, controlling tone to it. Tom just couldn't see what the problem was.

He grew up in a family with a loving mother but a physically and emotionally abusive father. Tom's father hit him, called him names, and made him feel worthless. Tom knew his mother loved him, but she didn't protect him.

As a young boy, Tom discovered the pleasures of masturbation. He learned that when his dad made him feel rotten, he could lose himself in the pleasures of masturbation. He began a pattern of masturbating to a script where sexy girls made him aroused. The excitement and orgasm temporarily distracted him and took his emotional pain away. He continued to masturbate for pleasure and escape from his youth until the present.

Because of his loving relationship with his mother, he was able to love his wife and children, and to be a good husband and father in many ways—but his rigid sexual pattern created a major problem in his love relationship with his wife, who felt hurt at the lack of tenderness. With much work, he was able, eventually, to be soft and sexual occasionally, but his primary route to arousal continued to be highly scripted, pornographic fantasies of *Playboy*-type women.

In unsympathetic and controlling families, the child can grow into adulthood associating relationships with nothing but control: fearing any kind of closeness to another person; sensitive to control themes everywhere; or concerned about the submission implied in a sexual relationship.

*It's funny, in my dreams, I am doing a lot of screaming at my mother, and it reminds me of how antagonistic we were to each other. I guess it started when I hit puberty. I just couldn't stand being around her or hearing that commanding tone in her voice and I would fight with her and argue and yell about being asked to do even simple things, like clear the table or do the dishes, or take my feet off the sofa. Anything.*

*It was this battle for control, and I felt like she was trying to control me and I would have rather died than do anything she asked, no matter how small. There were even a couple of times when she tried to physically make me do stuff, but I was strong enough to make that impossible for her to do.*

*Later on in college I had a roommate. She was very similar to my mother in the sense that I found out very quickly that she had certain ideas about what her roommate should be like, and I did not fit her idea . . . She couldn't leave me alone. She kept saying things and doing things to try to get me to be what she wanted. I couldn't get along with her at all. I grew to hate her. I can't stand being around people who are controlling. Feeling*

*accepted for who I am has really become a very important thing to me in life.*

—Jenny, 40

## Discipline

### Dominance and Submission

Playing with issues of dominance and submission in the context of adult, sexual relationships can be fun, as long as each of the partners has a choice about whether or not to engage in the activities. Unfortunately, children of controlling parents—to whatever degree—do not have a choice. The end result being that they can't have fun in relationships, because they are too afraid. They can't role-play with issues of power and control. They can't let power issues be fluid, shifting back and forth. Children of domineering parents are locked into a single role, so frightened by power that as adults they feel they must *always* be in control—or must *always* submit.

Rob, an only child, grew up with a rather cold mother and no father. His mother may have meant well; she certainly meant no ill. However, she lacked empathy, and wasn't affectionate. She had very high standards for a child, insisting that Rob do well in school and also be very helpful around the house. Rob felt quite dependent on her emotionally and otherwise, since they lived in an isolated area and he had no siblings.

Occasionally, she gave him beatings where he had to lie across her lap while she hit him across his buttocks with a hairbrush. Even though Rob was clothed during the beatings, he remembers experiencing them as mildly erotic, particularly since he didn't get held and cuddled all that much. His sexuality developed around themes of masochism: women with whips, women treating him like a slave, or women treating him like an animal. He could not become aroused in a situation of tenderness or emotional closeness.

Sexual games of dominance and submission for adults can be a variation, a way to spice up sexual life. But when the only variety of sexual interaction which feels good, and the only means of sexual arousal, revolves around strict, fixed roles of dominance and submission, this implies that something was terribly amiss in the power dynamic in the family.

In Rob's situation, he flipped his feeling of being victimized around in his mind. His erotic desires remained intact, but only in a situation where power roles were well defined, and he could be in a scripted game where he could choose to be controlled. In George's case (see below), his unconscious link between power and sexuality growing up in a controlling family caused a complete absence of sexual desire.

George was brought into sex therapy by his second wife, Sima. He had no sexual desire and was struggling with erection problems. "Sex is just a job to me," he said. In fact, he reported, he had never been much interested in sex.

Sima was hurt and upset by his attitude because she truly loved him and used sexual relations for comfort, for connection and relaxation. George always avoided her sexual overtures and never seemed interested.

George came from a background of overwhelming control, physical abuse, and emotional neglect. Besides being given no physical nurturance, George was frequently shoved, slapped, and spanked to the point of bruising.

In addition, there was emotional abuse. George was called names, embarrassed, and was allowed no expression of his own needs. His father bellowed, "How dare you ask for \_\_\_\_\_," if he ever requested to get his own way. In his mental imagery of childhood, being hurt and losing control figured prominently.

George's family governed his every move, even into adolescence. The parents owned a successful shoe repair store, and from the time he was six or seven, he was expected to work in the store before and after school, with his silent, critical, angry father. He was not allowed to take time to have normal relationships with peers: no softball games, Boy Scouts, or any other activity.

Whatever sexual urges he did have terrified him. He certainly did not want to be controlling or aggressive with another human being. He barely had an opportunity to date, because he wasn't allowed to have any free time. He couldn't bring anyone home. In adolescence, he parked with girls a few times, but never went beyond kissing.

As soon as he could, he left his harsh family and went into the army. When his army mates found out that he was still a virgin, they took him to Pigalle, a red-light district near Paris, and bullied him into having sex with a prostitute. He was terrified and the experience upset him deeply.

As George reexamined his history, he began to see a connection between power, control, and his repressed sexuality. His current problem seemed to be that he was angry at Sima for the way she was spending money. Unexpressed anger is often connected to lack of sexual desire.

Sima knew that she and George were having conflicts, but she could tolerate her feelings of disappointment at George. She could fight with him over control issues, yet still feel her sentiments of love for him and continue to be sexually interested in him.

But George could not stand to think of himself as an angry man. In fact, he was actually afraid of his irate feelings, so he repressed them. He could not stand to see himself as the kind of seething person his father was. He could not express his anger nor ask for what he wanted. He just shut Sima out and felt himself not attracted to her.

Most importantly, George just didn't think of himself as a sexual person. (It seemed that he had never discovered masturbation.) George's lifelong distaste for sexual expression was related to his abusive childhood. His associations to touch were violence and fear, not pleasure. Once when George was asleep on the couch, Sima looked down at him and felt such love that she came up and kissed him gently on the cheek. George jumped up, startled! He felt that Sima was trying to control him sexually as well as financially, and continued to feel vulnerable.

George had learned to be fearful of aggression and any wish to control. He could not imagine a constructive way of changing his relationship with Sima. In the process of simply surviving the brutality of his life, he shut his feelings off, including his sexuality, and could not integrate power and love.

Some children from homes like George's recognize the abuse and break away in adolescence (whether escape is healthy or not). They seek solace elsewhere, in other friends, by using drugs, or, like Tom, in the temporary relief of sexual arousal and orgasm. George was overwhelmed by the oppression. In turning off his feelings about the abuse, he also turned off his ability to love, to deal with conflict, and to feel sexual desire.

### **Sexual Criminals**

There is a direct link between families who abuse power and the creation of sexual criminals. Parents who lack empathy covertly reinforce the

child's aggressive behaviors toward others. In a study of forty-three adolescent or sibling incest perpetrators, Pierce and Pierce (1990, 102) commented, "It appears that juvenile offenders frequently reside in families where they receive minimal warmth and care."

These authors found that 63 percent of the abusers had been physically abused in their family themselves. In several other studies of incestuous fathers, common themes from their childhoods included overwhelming physical abuse, abandonment, powerlessness, maternal seduction, and paternal rejection.

Of course, only a tiny percentage of people who grew up in abusive homes wind up becoming sexual predators. But, in all of these examples, you can see the range of sexual adaptations to different family power profiles.

If you grew up in an angry, controlling family yourself, it takes a lot of courage to look at your past. Most people who grew up in a violent home minimize the problem. Even George, who we met in this chapter, doesn't describe himself as having come from an abusive background!

And as George's case illustrates, growing up with abuse affects people differently. In George's case, it destroyed his sexual desire. In Tom's case, he had strong sexual desire, but his fantasies tended to link sexuality and control. He was able to love, but couldn't integrate tender sexuality with love. Sexual addiction, which will be addressed in chapter 10, is another common outcome of growing up in a family in which power was misused.

## A Sense of Owning Yourself

Think again about the relationship between power and sexuality. What lessons have you learned in your family?

Parents who controlled you all the time were abusing their power—this shouldn't have occurred—and as a result you have learned bad lessons about how horribly power can be misused by loved or trusted people. You must now intentionally *unlearn* them in order to have a healthy, equal sexual relationship with another person.

If power was abused in your family, many sexual problems may have resulted. You may not have a sexual drive at all, like George. You might have problems with intimacy because of unrelenting power and control issues, like Greg or Jenny. You may have become sexually compulsive, using

sex not to connect with another human being, but instead to soothe yourself when you are frustrated, like Tom.

In Rob's case, his old family dynamic taught him that an egalitarian, fluid sexual relationship with a woman would be too dangerous. The only way he could enjoy sex was to assure himself that the power issue was decided ahead of time. Unlike his childhood, when he didn't have the choice to submit, as a sexual adult, Rob would choose to be submissive, and he would consciously request the other person to be dominant.

Sexual addicts' patterns are similar to Tom's sexual habits. (See chapter 10.) In extreme cases, abusive families create criminals—sexual predators with a lack of empathy for others, who act out their rage by using sex to hurt others.

To experience sexual ecstasy with another person (in a relationship between peers) you must let go of the controls over your body, and allow an instinctive, biological process of arousal, continuing excitement, and orgasm to occur. You need to trust the other person to take good care of you, to listen to your wishes, and to give you sexual pleasure.

To be able to "let go" sexually, allowing yourself to feel unambivalently good about turning your body over to someone else to go into a sexual trance, you need to have a basic sense that you own yourself. You must feel secure that, in life, you are in control of *your* body and *your* wishes. Only then can it feel safe to make the *choice* to let go. Use the chapter exercises as well as the resources for this chapter (page 255) as a starting point for reclaiming your own power.

## Exercises

### Assess the Power Dynamics in Your Family

Take this quick test and reassess whether your family was primarily empathic, mixed empathic/controlling, or unempathic/controlling. If your family was primarily empathetic, you're less likely to have sexual problems involving control issues. However, if one or both of your parents were extremely domineering, or a mixture of domineering, neglectful, and occasionally empathic, it is likely that this has affected your sexuality in a negative way.

**Test One**

Answer the following questions.

	Yes	No
• I felt secure and unafraid in my family.	_____	_____
• I felt accepted by my parents.	_____	_____
• My parents met my basic needs.	_____	_____
• I felt my parents listened to my views and were willing to reconsider their decisions.	_____	_____
• I was allowed to control my own life in several areas that were important to me (for example, friends, food, beliefs, career).	_____	_____
• I was touched tenderly and appropriately by my parents.	_____	_____
• Physical violence was absent in my family.	_____	_____

If you answered yes to all of these questions, go on to the next chapter of the book. If not, go on to the following test.

**Test Two**

Answer the following questions.

	Yes	No
• I feel anxious whenever I have to see one or both of my parents.	_____	_____
• My family interactions left me feeling powerless and hopeless.	_____	_____
• Even as an adult, I worry if my parents disapprove of choices I am making in my own life.	_____	_____
• I find it hard to ask people for what I want.	_____	_____
• I have a hard time with people in authority.	_____	_____
• I find myself worried about who has more or less power in every relationship.	_____	_____
• I believe that there is a one-up/one-down dynamic in most relationships.	_____	_____

Yes      No

• I sometimes find myself in what feels like power struggles with people, even though I don't think I am really a competitive person.	_____	_____
• I just don't feel comfortable getting close to other people.	_____	_____
• I'm not sure that I really link sexuality and love.	_____	_____
• I have a lot of trouble letting go and being vulnerable in sexual relationships.	_____	_____

Now, looking at what you checked off, what bad lessons do you think you learned about power and relationships in your family? List them here.

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Having read this chapter and answered these questions, what are the ways in which you now think that your family power profile is interfering with your ability to connect closeness and sexuality?

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If you answered yes to more than three of the questions in the second test, issues of power and control are prominent in your relationships and may cause problems in your sexual relationships. Continue with the following exercises.

**My List of Fears About Control**

Especially considering people with whom you are or want to be intimate, list your fears about how people currently in your life may try to control you:

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**Reality-Test Your Power Fears**

Looking at your responses thus far, list current fears about power dynamics that are based in past negative experiences with your family (for example, "If I give in to Jim on this then that'll be the beginning of a pattern where I never get my way."):

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List your current fears about power dynamics that are based on your current life (may be based on fact: list the evidence for your belief next to your belief):

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**Reevaluate Your Fears**

List three new ways you want to think about the power dynamics in the current relationships in your life:

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_

Do you have a pattern of avoiding contact? If so, list the times you have been afraid of getting close to another person and may have "missed the boat" on a relationship you wish you had pursued. If you need more space, use another piece of paper.

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