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Got the Courteney Cox syndrome? Feel more like a mother than a wife?

By **JAN TUCKWOOD**

Palm Beach Post Staff Writer

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Note to well-meaning wives everywhere: Don't mother your man.

If you're married to a responsibility-shrugging goofball, state your needs and boundaries clearly and without nagging - then expect your spouse to act like a grownup.

Experts say that's the only way to avoid the Courteney Cox-David Arquette trap.

Arquette, 39, said last week that Cox, 46, his now-estranged wife, told him to grow up with these classic words: "I don't wanna be your mother anymore."

Many a wife has moaned that her husband behaves like a child. And many a therapist has reminded those women: Nagging or scolding a man probably will make his irresponsible behavior worse.

If Cox mothered Arquette, "she was simply asking to be loved," says therapist Connie Ingram, who practices in Royal Palm Beach.

"Women tend to think that if they tell him what's wrong with him, then he'll fix it, and they can be close and connected," says Ingram. "The problem is that 'mothering' is often seen by men as 'shaming.' A man's basic need is to be respected and admired. Shame and respect are like oil and water. They just don't mix."

Arquette's own words seem to bear this out. The actor called Howard Stern's radio show soon after his legal separation from Cox, the *Friends* and *Cougartown* star, was announced. The two married in June 1999 and have a 6-year-old daughter, Coco.

'Trying to grow up'

"She's the greatest woman I've ever met," Arquette said. "Now, yes, she's got her issues. She tries to take on everybody's problem. She tries to be the mother to everyone - that's why she doesn't want to be the mother to me anymore."

The actor, who said he's been in therapy because he's "trying to grow up," added that he and Cox haven't had sex in four months because "she's in a place of wanting to be real and emotional. She's an emotional being. She's an amazing woman. If it doesn't feel right, she doesn't feel like bonding in that way."

Cox's caretaking nature was apparent to Arquette on the set of the first *Scream* film in 1996, when Arquette's mother was dying of breast cancer. Cox's loving support helped him get through that tragedy, he has said - but her need to nurture might have set herself up for an emotional trap.

"Mothering men fosters a continued learned helplessness that prevents the person from fully developing as an adult," says John Baudhuin, a therapist at Caron Renaissance Center in Delray Beach. "Whenever we do for others things they should be doing for themselves, we infantilize them and teach them a learned helplessness. It prevents people from growing emotionally and spiritually. It keeps the mothering person in a trap, and once it is established they have to continue with that behavior."

One of the things Baudhuin and other counselors at the addiction treatment center try to do is "help people move from a dependent to an interdependent position."

Men who are easiest to mother often have been raised in a dependent position by parents who do too much, he says.

"We encourage the family to stop excessive parenting behavior," Baudhuin says. "We see many 25-year-olds who have helicopter parents; they do not even have their own checking accounts. Those are perfect cases of people who will get into a relationship with a mothering woman."

Finding balance

What's the right balance between nurturing and smothering? It's hard for women sometimes, therapist Pepper Schwartz told CNN.com, because "we've been taught that the way to show love is to do for others." Schwartz says some women believe that the more they nurture, the better a woman they are.

"I was at a dinner party once," she told CNN, "and I watched a woman lean over and start cutting up her husband's meat."

Cutting meat isn't half as damaging as cutting remarks, Ingram says.

"When a man feels criticized, it makes it virtually impossible for him to feel connected to his partner. Therefore, he withdraws," Ingram says. "The more he withdraws, the more she criticizes or tries to 'improve' him - she mothers or points out or suggests or rolls her eyes or believes she knows what's best for the relationship. And so it goes the chasm between them grows deeper and wider."

If your spouse is emotionally immature and continuously fails to follow through on basic adult responsibilities, Ingram says "you must clearly speak your needs (in 10 words or less) - firmly but with kindness. Then follow up with an attitude of 'desire' that your spouse will hear and respond in a positive way. Having a desire rather than an expectation frees you and your spouse to respond in a loving and responsible way.

"An expectation says 'you better, or else.' A desire says 'I hope but it will not be the end of my world if not,' " Ingram says. "Women need to realize that when a husband does not follow through it is not because he doesn't care for her. Men tend to see things concretely and independent of other things. For example, if she asks something of him, he sees it as simply a task and does not equate it to his expression of love for her. Women are more relational and often think, if he doesn't follow through it is because she's not important to him."

Cox remains important to him, Arquette says, telling Howard Stern she's his best friend, and he's hoping for a reconciliation.

"We're still tight. I love her with all my heart and she loves me with all her heart She's a stand-up girl. She's the greatest woman that ever lived."

Post Staff Writer Emily Mendez contributed to this story.

When 'caring' becomes 'mothering'

From Sedona.com, the website of the Sedona Method to well-being, run by bestselling author Hale Dwoskin

How do you know if you've crossed the line and begun to 'mother' your spouse to the point where your relationship is in danger? Here are the top signs to watch out for:

- You want to change your partner's beliefs or habits
- You often correct or criticize your partner
- You feel your partner isn't capable of doing things without you (even small things, like loading the dishwasher)
- You give your partner 'instructions' and nag him or her to do them
- You feel like you are the only adult in the house
- You demand that your partner do things your way (such as eating what you eat or going to bed when you do)
- You use a reprimanding tone of voice when speaking to your partner
- You often belittle your partner's choices, mannerisms or routines

A common complaint of people facing 'mothering syndrome' is that they have to tell their partner what to do because he or she acts like a big child. As it turns out, the more a person is treated like a child, the more they will tend to take on that role.

Mothering a child is one thing. Children need rules and limits; they need to learn where the boundaries are and how to stay within them. Adults, however, already know the rules and need to take responsibility for their own decisions, choices and lives. This is where having a 'mothering' partner can severely backfire.

In a study led by psychologist Tanya Chartrand of Duke University, it was found that the more you nag your spouse to do something, the less likely they are to do it.

People who are 'over-mothered' by their partners often report the same thing: They don't feel respected. In any relationship, and particularly in those where one person is trying to control and/or change the other, respect is a critical, but often missing, component to improve your relationship.

If you are a 'motherer,' giving your partner respect will allow him or her to feel valued and equal to you.

Want to connect with your spouse without mothering?

If you don't feel loved, try loving in a different way

Tips from therapist Connie Ingram, Ph.D., of Ingram & Associates Counseling & Consulting Inc., in Royal Palm Beach:

- Learn how to love: 'More times than not, I find that spouses aren't loved well because they do not know how to love. If she demands to be loved via her mothering tactics - believing if her husband follows through on tasks that means he loves her - and he withdraws from her demands because he feels criticized and shamed, the couple is not creating a loving and safe environment for each other wherein they can love and be loved well!'
- Look at the big picture: 'A far better way to connect with your spouse is by appreciating and valuing him or her. Take a step back and look at the big picture and what she or he does well. Compliment, appreciate and encourage those things. A myopic view of the person to whom you have pledged your life is devastating. Safeguard your spouse's self-worth and your marriage by creating an atmosphere in which he or she can safely grow and love you well.'
- Keep it simple: 'Ask yourself, is what I am about to say or do going to help us deepen our connection or keep us from connecting?'

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