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I love you, but not your clothes

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How many times has your significant other said "You're going to wear that?"

A couple of weeks ago The Boyfriend and I were headed out for a little al fresco dining. I came downstairs in a cargo-style skirt, kitten-heels, a bunch of jewelry and a white, ribbed tank top. I grabbed my bag and announced I was ready to hit up Lanie's.

"Aren't you going to put a shirt on," he asked.

I laughed, thinking he was joking. Then I saw his face.

He looked confused.

"Isn't that an undershirt?" he asked.

While the top (sort of) mirrored something Tony Soprano may wear to bed, this shirt did not come from a Hanes package. It was a ribbed tank from the Gap, meant to be worn alone, uncovered, just as I was wearing it. My outfits are a constant point of curiosity for The Boyfriend. His look is conservative and classic, while I tend to favor trendy and fun to the point that my "little black dress" is red.

You know how it goes: Either your partner wears something you don't like -- or don't understand -- or you don't like his or her style. It's time to speak up, but you aren't sure how.

In my case, the way The Boyfriend addressed what he thought was something more appropriate for a "Cops" episode than dinner out worked. He was blunt and honest and upfront. That's the kind of relationship we have.

Sometimes, though, tact is paramount, and you can risk insulting your partner -- and damaging your relationship -- if you don't properly communicate your dislike or confusion.

Instead of blurting out something insulting, always come from a positive place. Don't blurt out "Whoa, that looks like something Amy Winehouse would wear," unless it's Halloween and your wife or girlfriend wants to be compared to the famously drug- and alcohol-addicted musician who sports a messy beehive and minimal clothing. Instead, says Lisa Paz, a Coral

Gables, Fla.-based sexologist, compliment a feature and suggest something that highlights that body part. Say your wife has a great butt, point out a specific piece of clothing that (tastefully) highlights her assets.

Be honest: If your partner asks if he or she looks fat, honesty really is best, says Lindsey Rietzsch, author of "How to Date Your Spouse." She stresses there is a right way and a wrong way to be honest. Instead of "you do kind of look like a 'before' on 'The Biggest Loser,'" say "Honey, maybe that's not the best skirt to wear today, but I love it when you wear that other dress." That way, says Rietzsch, you are agreeing -- and being honest -- but aren't saying "Yes, you look fat."

Watch your words: Sure, honesty is important but, as we kind of touched on above, the words you use when telling the truth are just as paramount. Kind words, that take your partner's feelings into consideration, so that you have his or her best interest in mind.

Gift him (or her): We all like surprises, and a new outfit can be the perfect way to get the wardrobe conversation started (plus the "thought factor" that comes with unexpected gifts will earn you mucho bonus points). Don't, says Paz, go out and buy your husband or boyfriend a whole new wardrobe. Instead, purchase a couple pieces, see how receptive he is. If he's strutting about the house like a glossy show dog, you know you scored. If, on the other hand, he keeps looking longingly to his closet full of jeans, baseball caps and sports T's -- while wearing the Brooks Brothers button down and pressed khakis you purchased -- you may have to try again.

A little compliment manipulation doesn't hurt: That's right, we are giving you permission to (sort of) finagle to get your way. When your boyfriend (or husband) is trying out a new look -- one you've helped develop -- encourage your friends and family to tell him what they think. Well, OK, what we really mean is only have your friends speak up if they like the look. Encouragement is the word here, not discouragement.

Do not feel guilty: If your S.O. regularly dresses too young or old, or seems to have stopped making an effort, you're now dealing with a pattern -- not a single-incident curious fashion choice. That pattern can effect your relationship. So, when faced with a constant such as this, remember your desire to alter your partner's look is a reasonable request, says Paz. "We have a responsibility to stay attractive for our partner. We sign on to be their one and only. We are saying 'I only want you to look and lust after me and I am only going to look and lust after you.' But to hold up your end of the bargain you need to remain attractive in your partner's eyes."

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