

Expert Relationship Advice: What's In a Name?



By Toni Coleman, LCSW, CMC for [Hope After Divorce](#)

I recently received the letter below and offered my expert relationship advice in my response.

Expert Relationship Advice from Hope After Divorce

Dear Toni,

I have a problem that many people might feel is one of my own making and something I should be able to deal with myself. However, I haven't been successful so far, and it's causing a

real disconnect between me and my fiancé.

This will be my second marriage; I was married many years ago for about twelve years and have been divorced for over five. When I married the first time, I took my husband's name. Many women did that back then, and since it was important to my ex, it was an easy decision for me to make. Following our divorce, I kept the name because it had become my identity; it was my children's last name; and more importantly, it was how I was known professionally.

Related Link: [Can Love Be Better the Second Time Around?](#)

Now, my fiancé wants me to drop my last name and take his. He has said that my reluctance to do so points to my lack of commitment and to our future relationship and love together. I have explained my reasons for wanting to keep it, primarily my professional identity and recognition, which is very important, especially in the virtual world where I have a strong presence. My identity is also wrapped up in my name, as I have been this person for 17 years. Not changing it would change nothing else about who I am, who we are together, and how strong my commitment to him is.

I have presented my case in detail and, at times, have grown so weary of the resulting power struggle that I have thought about just giving in or calling off the engagement to see if he will relent. Our relationship is truly good on so many levels, and I don't want to lose him over this issue. We are at a dead end here. I would love your thoughts and any expert relationship advice you might have on how to go about resolving this stalemate.

– Identity Challenged

How To Compromise In Your

Relationship And Love Life

Dear Identity Challenged,

What's in a name? Apparently, much more than many of us give any real thought to until we are put in a position like the one you now find yourself in. Our names contribute to our identity: where we come from, our history and experiences, who we are connected to by blood or choice, and how others get to know and define us. In other words, our name is significant to our sense of self and is therefore something we don't easily relinquish. This is why you are not able to easily "deal with this" yourself.

Ironically, your fiancé appears to share your strong name attachment, so much so that he is willing to risk your relationship and love rather than have you be called by another man's name. Yet while you have "presented your case in detail," he hasn't been able to acknowledge your feelings, even though he clearly hears and understands them. Therefore, I have to wonder what else might be going on here.

Related Link: [Learning to Compromise: My Way or the Highway!](#)

You have shared that the relationship is good on many levels, but I feel I must play the Devil's Advocate here. What makes it so good? How well do you discuss and come to compromises on other issues? Do you find that you often give in because a problem just doesn't feel important enough to get into conflict over? Are you generally a "pick your battles" kind of person who can let things go and let the other person win more often than not?

The reason I ask these questions is because I have to wonder if the relationship works because he is dominant and you are submissive, because your yin works well with his yang. If so, this dynamic could work very well until you encounter an issue that is a potential deal breaker, as this one may be. You

shared that you have considered calling it quits even though you don't want to lose him, and he has expressed concerns that you are not really into him and the relationship. This definitely brings you at least close to deal breaker territory!

If I am even slightly warm, challenging your status quo could help you move towards an answer. Sit down again for another talk, but this time, talk about your relationship and love in general, how you often discuss and resolve issues together, and how it feels for him when he is asked to compromise on something that's important. If he gets defensive, gently point this out and remind him that you are on the same side and really want to understand how he feels and what he needs from you.

That brings me to a key issue here: what he is looking for in a partnership. Have you been the easy and compliant woman he prefers until recently? It's also possible that the whole name issue is a loaded one for him and that he isn't even completely tuned in to why. So exploring what his name means to him and what the significance of a woman taking her spouse's name is for him should yield some useful information.

Related Link: [Hang Tough – You'll Get Through It](#)

It might be hard to have this discussion without an objective third party. Premarital counseling is widely accepted and often recommended to couples of all ages and marital histories. Finding an experienced therapist to help you work through this issue is certainly a middle-step to consider before walking away. In addressing it together, you will inevitably wander into discussions about your different personality styles and how you generally discuss and negotiate issues together. The answer you're looking for will be found in the overall way you communicate your wants and needs to one another and whether or not you both have a willingness to be there and compromise for one another.

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