

STYL A

Award-winner

11 August 2019

'The negativity
can be hard
to cope with'

Dani Dyer

on conquering
anxiety and life after
Love Island

STYLE SOUVENIRS

What the
influencers
bring home from
holidays

FIRST PERSON

'I reunited with
my first love
after 32 years'

PLUS

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Meat-free crowd
pleasers

The Sunday Telegraph

How we broke our argument cycle

WHEN I WALKED into the kitchen, which was full of acrid smoke, I thought that the toaster had exploded. Then I realised that my husband had let a pan of milk boil over on the Aga. Again. He had left a sweet note, apologising that 'this was the worst spill ever', but had had to leave the chaos as his client had just arrived. (We both work from home.) It's become a family joke - 'There's no use crying over spilt milk' - but I have regularly raged at this carelessness. Andrew is so absent-minded; he warms milk for his coffee, then forgets it, creating a bubbling mess. For years, this in-

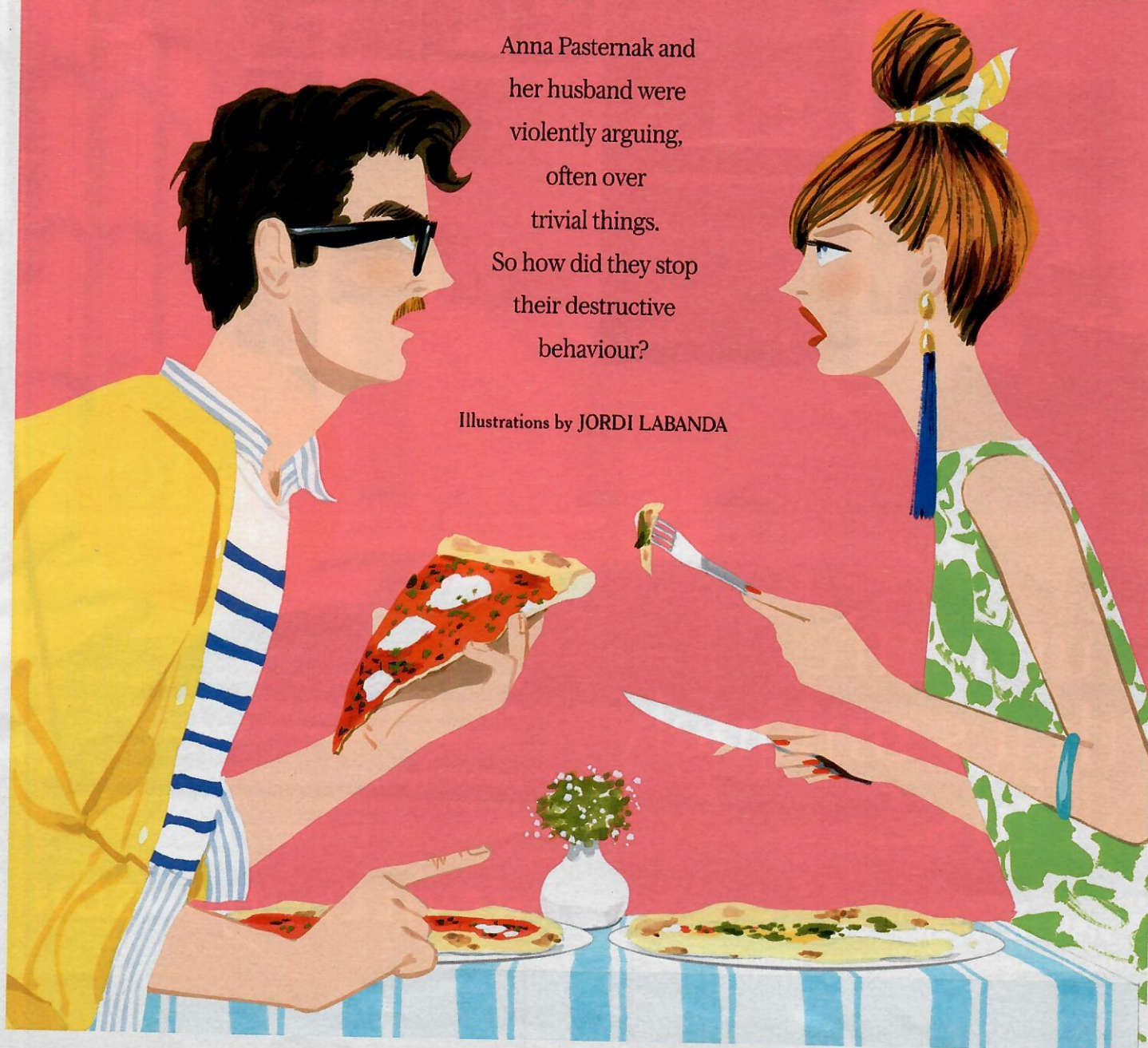
censed me. This time, as I cleaned it up, I felt affectionate towards him, and later we laughed about it. Eight years ago, when we moved in together, this reaction would have been unthinkable.

A second marriage for both of us, our early years together were moments of tender bliss, punctuated by the most volatile explosions either of us had ever experienced. Andrew had three grown-up daughters from his previous marriage and I had a young daughter, Daisy, then aged six, who lived with us. We quarrelled so much that she once commented

Anna Pasternak and
her husband were
violently arguing,
often over
trivial things.

So how did they stop
their destructive
behaviour?

Illustrations by JORDI LABANDA



that we 'could argue over the contents of an empty paper bag'. Everything was a bone of contention for us and we soon discovered that we had a list of triggers that would set either of us off. These included sexual jealousy over each other's past relationships, parenting styles (I am a strict parent, Andrew is more liberal), pronunciation of certain words, differing use of vocabulary (drawing room vs lounge, loo vs toilet), style differences in terms of clothing and decor, his messiness and my neat-freak mania... It was exhausting. But the cause of our argument armageddon was table manners. I like a properly laid table with side plates and napkins; he prefers to eat standing up, preferably without cutlery. He always wipes his plate with his fingers and licks them after a meal. It used to make me want to scream.

Such was the ferocity of our fights – which neither of us had witnessed in our parents' marriages – that in our early years together we regularly discussed splitting up. Our close friends, who sat through some appalling rows, could see how destructive it was to be so polarised about everything and advised divorce. We were ashamed of our childish behaviour and appalled at ourselves for hurting one another. I ripped his cashmere jumper off his back when he went to see his daughter on Boxing Day, shortly after my mother died, while he once forcibly pushed me out of the front door during a row about his children. We both felt out of control – and guilty as a result.

The irony was not lost on us that my husband, a skilled psychotherapist with a lengthy celebrity-client waiting list, was successfully advising people on their lives and marriages, while our own was a battleground. When Gwyneth Paltrow and Chris Martin split up,

Trying to change the other person in your relationship is an insane delusion. Yet we all attempt to do it

he even became the UK's go-to expert on 'conscious uncoupling', appearing on TV shows. While *Vogue* was heralding his bespoke style of 'fast-tracked healing', we worried about the impact our own unstable coupling was having on our children. While we agreed that it was healthier for the children to witness rows and see us making up (rather than being exposed to suppressed rage and passive aggression), we were undoubtedly modelling too much discord. We weakly consoled ourselves that when we weren't in conflict, we were terribly in love.

Early on, Andrew explained to me something that he'd observed from his years working as a psychotherapist – that in all relationships, people are either in partnership with each other or engaged in a power struggle, and that the latter is always about avoiding intimacy. In our case, we couldn't sustain



prolonged partnership. I began to see that it is exposing to give yourself completely in a relationship, so it's easier to have the row because distance feels safer. We all have a longing for emotional intimacy, but sooner or later one of us creates the row for the fear of the other pulling the rug out first.

After about a year, I began to notice this pattern between us and together, we found our first positive area of common ground: we agreed that it didn't really matter who started the argument. As Andrew puts it, 'The world is full of women thinking that they have difficult husbands and husbands thinking that they have difficult wives. But until we each take responsibility for our part in the relationship, we can't move beyond these destructive patterns.'

It took about three years from when we married, but I finally began to see that when you feel triggered or enraged, it is never about the other person. I started to realise that they merely flag up your areas of insecurity, fear or suppressed rage. For instance, when I used to feel irate because he left the kitchen cupboards open and the milk out after making a coffee, I learnt that this wasn't intentionally to rile me. He's just messy. So instead of feeling resentful as I cleared up, I did it happily because I prefer a tidy kitchen. Equally, if I asked him to do something for me in the house, instead of complaining that he felt 'controlled', he began to make an effort because it was important to me. We stopped taking everything so personally.

Our epiphany was the realisation that trying to change the other person in your relationship is an insane delusion. Yet we all attempt to do it – not just in intimate

relationships, but in families and businesses.

It's how we feel inside that influences how we react in the world, so if we are secure and centred, we tend to create a more balanced life around us. Andrew helped me to realise that to change this you need to set an intention. When we decided to take responsibility for our emotional reactions, and commit to soothing our insecurities ourselves – no longer projecting our fears on to each other – we effectively set the intention for a harmonious marriage. It's not the same thing as a resolution (and we all know how many of those survive past 31 January). It goes deeper, because you have to create an internal shift in your behaviour. Taking responsibility is empowering and liberating because you no longer rely on your partner to make you happy or blame them for the days when you feel miserable.

From that point on, we made a concerted effort to change our ways. The goal was to stop blaming each other and take total responsibility for our behaviour. I learnt to contain myself, instead of blurting out the most hurtful and unnecessary comments, while Andrew, who was prone to shutting down and being moody, learnt to reach out and communicate with me more. If either of us was triggered, we gave each other respectful space and often agreed not to discuss a contentious issue for 24 hours. Within about three months, we both became less reactive, far kinder and more appreciative of each other. We began to see that if we

could turn our cycle of constant criticism of each other to gratitude for each other, we felt so much happier. Appreciation is the quickest relationship balm.

Two summers ago, we were sitting in a café in Florence when we realised that we hadn't been destructively volatile for a few years. For Andrew, it was a light-bulb moment. He decided there and then to write a book about what we'd done: setting the intention to create a happy marriage. After all, if we could do it, anyone could.

Having the discipline not to overreact, criticise, blame or feel superior to the other person is crucial. The trick is to stay with your feelings, however uncomfortable, in the heated moment. Our daily refrain became, 'Why am I feeling like this and how can I soothe myself?'

Andrew and I still have flare-ups, but we regain our equilibrium in a matter of hours – as opposed to the days, or even weeks, of the past. But even better, Andrew always uses a napkin, and I eat salad with my fingers. It's the recipe for our happy marriage. **✓**

Intention: How to Tap into the Most Underrated Power in the Universe to Create the Life You Want by Andrew Wallas (Aster, £10) is out now

How to set your intention for a harmonious marriage

- Shift the focus from your partner to yourself. When triggered, see it as an opportunity to change something in you that is making you unhappy.
- Take responsibility for your emotional reactions.
- Make a happy, harmonious relationship your priority. This might mean backing down or extending kindness when you don't feel like it.
- Develop daily discipline not to overreact or expect your partner to fix you.