

When someone close to you is happy – and it eats away at you

Jealousy is a natural instinct that can blind you and harm others. But it is possible to tame this monster and even make it work for you.



Chong Siow Ann

For most of his married life, Mr R, a 60-year-old technician who worked in the petrochemical industry was reasonably happy. He married when he was 29 years old and subsequently had a daughter who continued to stay with Mr R and his wife after she married.

Things changed shortly after Mr R's 60th birthday. He started noticing what he thought were rather unsettling changes in his wife: she seemed to be talking more to their 29-year-old son-in-law and spending more time on the phone. He became convinced that his wife had been cheating on him, and not just with their son-in-law, but with his various friends. He could tell from the "way she looks at them" as he was to tell me later.

Riven with jealousy, he rummaged through clothes in her closets for evidence of infidelity, demanded to check her handphone, and confronted her about this on numerous occasions which she angrily denied. When she moved out of their bedroom to the spare bedroom, he took it as confirmation that she was

having an affair with their son-in-law. He was brought by the police for a psychiatric evaluation after he brandished a kitchen knife at his son-in-law.

Mr R was diagnosed to have what in our archaic psychiatric lexicon we call Othello syndrome, which is a psychotic disorder where there is an unshakeable delusion of a partner's infidelity.

The literary source of this label was Shakespeare's Othello – that classic cautionary play on jealousy. The titular hero (or antihero) was a Christian Moor and a much respected general in the Venetian army. Married to Desdemona, a beautiful younger woman, he was made to believe that she was cheating on him by his malign deputy Iago, who was resentful because he was passed over for a promotion. With his mind poisoned with jealousy, Othello killed his wife with his own hands.

Patients with Othello syndrome are simultaneously the tormented and the tormentor. They compulsively engage in a range of frenetic and unceasing behaviour to verify the truth of the way they are feeling – surreptitiously tailing the partner, listening in on phone calls, installing recording equipment to detect clandestine liaisons, scrutinising e-mails and posts on social media.

The long-suffering partner, exasperated and exhausted by repeated cross-examination and accusations of infidelity, may buckle and give a false confession, provoking a violent rage which could lead to physical harm to the partner, or to the suspected paramour. (There have been at least three cases of grisly murders driven by pathological jealousy in Singapore in the past two decades.)

Jealousy, especially sexual jealousy, is – according to

evolutionary psychologists – innate in us, and is a behavioural mechanism to ensure the sole possession of a mate for "genetic replication". Other scholars contend that jealousy is an integral part of normal human development arising from an individual's fear of being excluded from "the circle of love and esteem" that we all crave.

A HUMAN CONSTANT

Research suggests that jealousy emerges very early in life. Infants showed signs of distress when their mothers focused their attention on a lifelike doll. A study on three-month-old babies found that if an infant was excluded from conversation between its mother and the experimenter, it "reacted with

I have learnt now to quell those infrequent pangs of jealousy with thoughts of the people who matter to me, the good fortune that I have had, the joy and dignity of small pleasures, and the realisation that one should require less in order to find contentment.

much agitation... infants might also cover their faces with their arms... or kick their legs and put their feet in their mouth" – findings which could explain why children and infants show distress when a sibling is born and may be a harbinger for subsequent sibling rivalry.

And that complex emotion that is aroused when we think that we are losing what we have or should have, is ubiquitous if not universal. We could feel jealous not just when the shadow of an interloper falls on our romantic relationship, but potentially and possibly in almost every type of human relationship.

We may feel it when the birth of a new sibling suddenly diverts all the parental attention away from us; when parents are busy with their work or other activities and don't give us as much time and attention as we want; when a parent seems to favour another sibling; when a classmate does better in school, gets into a better university or is more successful socially; when a friend has a bigger house and or a more expensive car; when a colleague gets the promotion or a bigger bonus... the list goes on.

Looking back at my professional life to that time when I was much younger and hence possessing a shaky sense of self-esteem, I realised that I was rather competitive and anxiously – albeit quietly – striving. It wasn't an entirely bad thing because it drove me to do many things which I still think are worthwhile. But I will also readily admit that this hard-driving competitiveness came with the occasional surges of jealousy when I felt that I had been bested by someone – galling when it was someone I disliked, and I felt guilty when it was a friend. ("Every time a friend succeeds, I die a little," the American writer Gore Vidal used to say.)

According to the psychologist Abraham Tesser, people are indeed unhappier when a close friend succeeds in a personally relevant domain than when a stranger does. Our friends are a lot like us. That realisation hits closer to home – and hurts because their successes seem within our reach, too.

Unchecked, it could result in what psychologists call "the state of relative deprivation" – that sense of inferiority when comparing yourself with others, and thinking that you are worse off than them. It could make us lose focus on our own life and turn instead to the life and accomplishments of another

which is, of course, energy sapping and self-diminishing.

A GOOD THING

But is that really always the case? Or can jealousy – which is, after all, an experience that is a human constant, however painful – have some positive effects?

Not all jealousy is created equal, and while most may leave a bad aftertaste, and some may have disastrous even deadly consequences, other forms of jealousy may motivate us to be better and accomplish more.

A little bit of romantic jealousy could be a good thing in a relationship – beyond that atavistic purpose of passing down our own genes to subsequent generations. It tells us something about intimacy and relationships. A touch of jealousy attests to the value that one places on a relationship and the concomitant fear of losing something or someone. It could galvanise us to take stock and take the necessary and appropriate action to protect that love. And it may just well strengthen and improve that once-threatened relationship.

Jealousy can also be edifying. I've learnt that it is how we choose to deal with it that matters. The passage of time, the vicissitudes of life, the lessons learnt from others, and big doses of self-reflection have taught me that I shouldn't allow myself to feel like I'm not good enough – otherwise this feeling would persist, no matter what I have achieved.

And the best antidote of all to jealousy is that cultivated sense of gratitude and appreciation for whatever good I'd done and whatever I have been given. I have learnt now to quell those infrequent pangs of jealousy with thoughts of the people who matter to me, the good fortune that I have had, the joy and dignity of small pleasures, and the realisation that one should require less in order to find contentment.

And as for Mr R: he was started on some antipsychotic medication, and he stayed in the hospital for a few weeks. That knot of delusion gradually became undone, and he was discharged to the care of his family. It has been many years since I last saw him, and I reckon that it means that he has stayed well. I hope that he is as happy as he can be.

• Professor Chong Siow Ann is a senior consultant psychiatrist at the Institute of Mental Health.