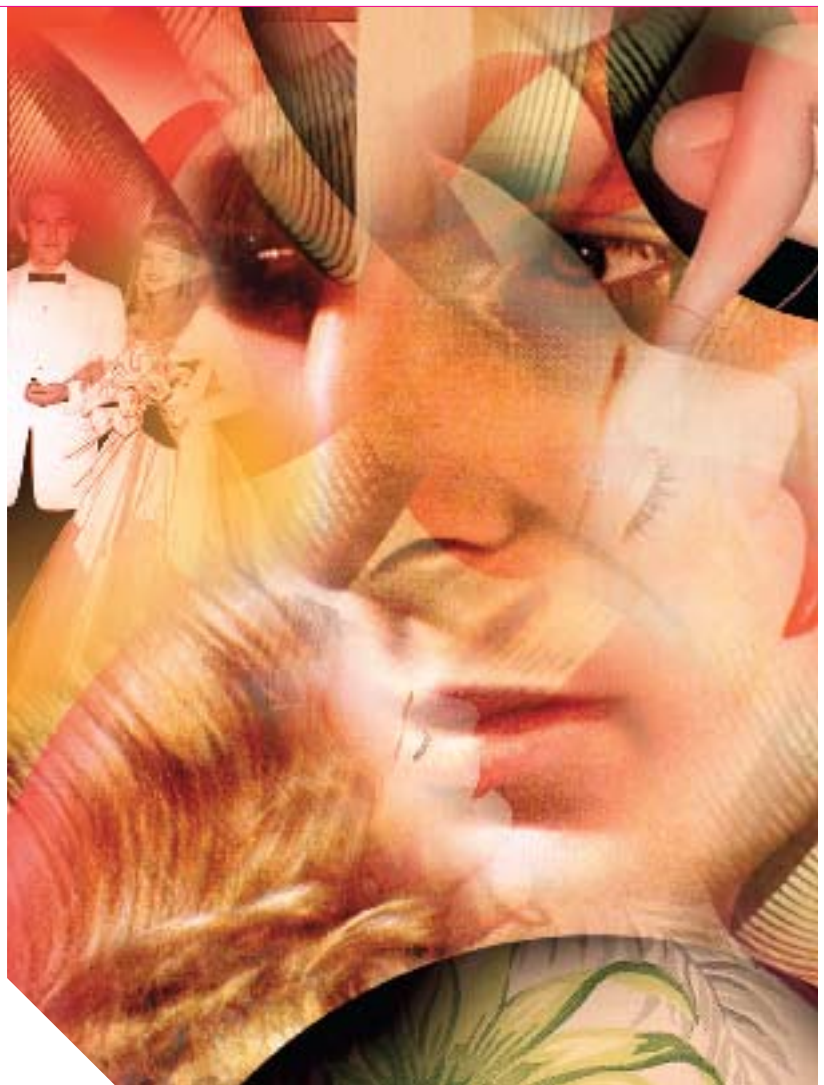


The Othello syndrome

WHAT HAPPENS WHEN JEALOUSY BECOMES PATHOLOGY

SIX YEARS AGO, Cindy Joseph*, then 47, flew to England for her grandmother's funeral. When she arrived back home in Burlington, Ont., 10 days later, her husband, James*, was a changed man. The minute she walked through the door, he told her in urgent whispers that they needed to talk as soon as their kids went to bed. "I thought he was going to say there was someone else, that he was having an affair," says Joseph.

Instead, her husband told her he knew *she* was the one having an affair. And he said he had the evidence to prove it, producing a plastic grocery bag filled with photos, receipts and phone bills. It also contained concert stubs and love letters Joseph had saved from her teenage years. "At first I thought it was some kind of misunderstanding, it was just ridiculous." But her normally rational husband was convinced that all this "evidence" pointed to her repeated infidelities, and he wanted answers: Was that New York number on the phone bill a call to a stateside lover? Was she still seeing that old teenage friend? Was the receipt for golf balls a gift for another man? Whose number was scrawled on this tiny scrap of paper?



“Even though I had logical explanations for every single question, there was just no satisfying him. We spent hours that night going over all this stuff.”

The unwarranted accusations continued the next day, and the next. Soon her husband began to call her at work, distraught because he’d found some further proof that she was cheating on him. He highlighted questionable calls on the phone bill and, with him at her side, she dialed each number in an effort to reassure him. “I’d be on speakerphone and half the time I had no idea whom I was calling. He’d tell me what he wanted me to say because otherwise he thought I might be speaking in code, tipping off the person at the other end of the line.” The calls were to work colleagues, her children’s friends, a local business. “He’d look defeated when he saw it was a legitimate call, but he was still always suspicious.”

James started rifling through her purse and flipping through her appointment book. He checked her coat pockets and inspected the clothes in her closet. He followed her to work and parked the car outside her office with the expectation of catching her going out to lunch with another man. Soon James was paying less attention to his landscaping business, drinking more and clearly caught in a grip of paranoid thoughts and manic actions.

Within weeks, Joseph’s life was transformed from that of a middle-class hockey mom to a surreal kangaroo court existence in which she was presumed guilty of adultery. She was the object of constant scrutiny and suspicion, always on the defensive, always pleading with and trying to convince her husband that she had been completely faithful to him throughout their 26-year marriage. The day he said he was sure someone else must have fathered their two children, she called her family doctor for help.

James, now 59, was diagnosed with morbid jealousy. Identified more than 50 years ago, it’s characterized by extreme sexual jealousy and an irrational, unswerving belief in a partner’s unfaithfulness, despite a complete lack of evidence. There are constant searches for proof of an affair, repeated interrogations of the partner, tests of her fidelity and sometimes stalking and violent behaviour. Sufferers refuse to change these beliefs, even in the face of conflicting information, and tend to accuse their partners of cheating with not just one, but a host of lovers. Morbid jealousy is also known as erotic jealousy syndrome, delusional jealousy, conjugal paranoia and, most commonly, Othello syndrome. (A quick literary recap: After Othello is duped into believing his beloved Desdemona betrayed him with another man, the Shakespearean character goes mad, smothers Desdemona and kills himself with his own dagger.)

Morbid jealousy is not a disorder, according to Nimish Purohit, chief of psychiatry at Joseph Brant Memorial Hospital in Burlington, Ont.; rather it’s a symptom of an underlying disease — usually depression, schizophrenia, alcohol addiction or personality disorders. While there are no studies to indicate the incidence of morbid jealousy, it affects men far more often than women. Purohit has treated about 10 cases over the past decade, including James, and expects many cases often go unrecognized because sufferers aren’t willing to tell health professionals about their obsessive thoughts — especially when they believe they are being rational. Those able to recognize that their obsession isn’t based on fact have the best luck with treatment — either therapy or medication, or a combination of the two. Others, unable to resist their thoughts, become delusional and have far less success. “If it crosses over into a true delusional disorder,” explains Purohit, “the breakup of the relationship is usually inevitable.”

Alcohol was likely a mitigating factor in James’ case; he drank regularly and excessively. Michael Kingham, a forensic psychiatrist in Britain and the co-author of a seminal

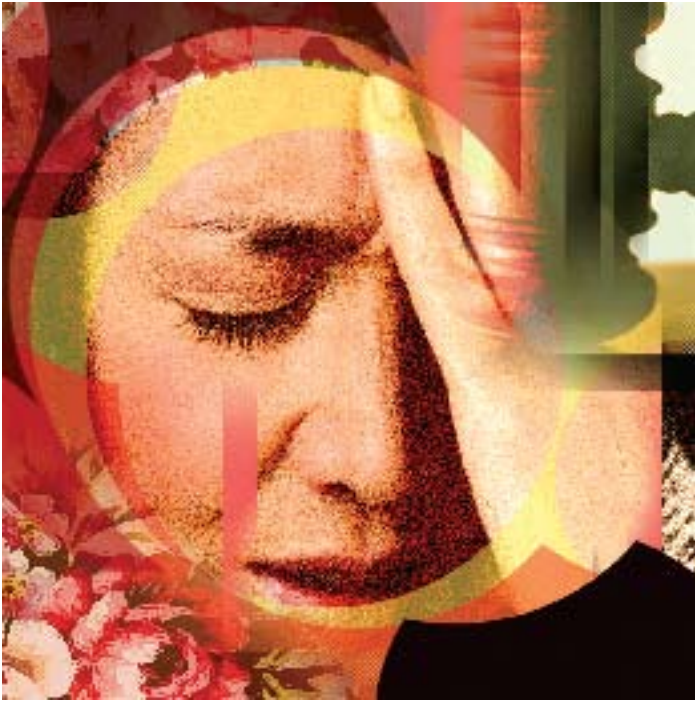
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paper on morbid jealousy, cites two studies that show the syndrome was present in 27 per cent and 34 per cent of men recruited from alcohol treatment services. Another study showed that depression was present in more than half of sufferers. “[One study’s authors] viewed a sense of inadequacy, oversensitivity and insecurity to be major predisposing factors in the development of morbid jealousy,” says Kingham.

There are a host of theories for what sets off the syndrome: Todd Shackelford, a professor of psychology at Florida Atlantic University whose area of research includes jealousy and infidelity, says men with Othello syndrome have “hypersensitive jealousy mechanisms.” In other words, some men’s brains may be more prone to jealousy.

In 1992, Dinesh Bhugra, now president of the Royal College of Psychiatrists in London, reported an increase in cases of obsessive jealousy among men in Britain. “Many [of these men] were middle-aged, often they’d become redundant or unemployed,” he says. “All had lost all sense of self-esteem.”

Purohit further points out that middle-aged men are also at greater risk because of “waning sexual function, which makes them more insecure.” He adds that older men with early signs of dementia may also slip into morbid jealousy.



Joseph says it's possible her entry into the workforce may have spurred her husband's irrational beliefs. After years as a stay-at-home mom, she started working as a receptionist in 2000 and, at the same time, her husband took a cut in pay and left a secure union job to start his own landscaping company.

Even if Joseph's return to work was a precursor to a decline in James' self-esteem, what he was suffering from now was clearly a psychotic break. She points out that her husband was accusing her of sleeping with so many men — a total of about 75 over the past five years — it would be physically impossible to keep up such an ambitious sexual schedule. "He felt I had all these powers — that I could charm his doctors and the psychiatrist."

The irony is that Joseph and James had a perfectly good sex life right up to — and even beyond — the time of his diagnosis. ("Every Friday and Saturday night, without fail," she says.) Sometimes, in the middle of lovemaking, she'd tell James he must know that she didn't want to be with another man. But even then she couldn't convince him. "He'd just say, 'Let's not talk about this now,'" says Joseph. He'd repeatedly tell her that if she would just fess up to the affairs, he'd forgive her. "Sometimes I was tempted to do that just so it would all be over. But I knew that wouldn't really end it."

While Joseph tried to shield their children, it wasn't long before they heard their father repeatedly accuse their mom of sleeping around. Joseph began to wonder if James' accusations had planted a seed of doubt in her son's mind. "I wondered if he thought there was something to it because sometimes he'd kind of look at me sideways." One day her

son, who was 20 at the time, came right out and asked her if his father was really his father. Joseph promptly ordered a DNA test, which proved his parentage once and for all.

Their daughter was also affected by her father's mania. Once, when she was 21, James frightened her when he tried to convince her a photo of their furnace, taken for insurance purposes, reflected an image off its silver surface of her naked mother with another man. "He tried and tried to get my daughter to see this in the picture and when she said she didn't see it, he accused her of siding with me," says Joseph.

In an effort to prove her faithfulness, Joseph stayed home as much as possible. "But even if I didn't leave his sight he still thought I was somehow doing something. It was so exhausting that eventually I threw my hands up and gave up."

Today, Joseph describes her husband as "a broken man." After years of therapy and taking the antipsychotic drug Seroquel, James was put on another antipsychotic — Risperdal — last year and this has finally helped to tone down, although not eliminate, his jealous obsessions. But Joseph says the drug has also sapped her husband's energy and his zest for life; he's lost his business, has no friends, no hobbies and spends most of his time on the couch reading the newspaper, watching television news, drinking coffee and alcohol, and smoking cigarettes. Now that their children are in university, Joseph says it's time to end the marriage. "His psychiatrist says there is nothing I can do, so there's no sense in being with someone who doesn't believe me."

While some studies show that about one-third of those diagnosed with morbid jealousy are able to make significant improvements by taking medication or undergoing cognitive therapy, most, like James, have a poorer prognosis. Says Kingham: "The possibility that morbid jealousy will recur is significant, and careful monitoring is warranted indefinitely."

James' inability to work has meant the couple had to drain their RRSPs and seek financial help from family members. Because of his illness, James has recently been approved to receive a monthly government disability payment. "We used to do quite well financially — our home was paid off and we travelled quite a bit," says Joseph, who, now 53, plans to move in with her mother after the divorce.

Despite the grief he's caused her, Joseph blames the mental illness — not James himself — for robbing her of the husband she once knew. She says she still loves and cares for James and worries about how he will cope when she leaves. "He was a good husband, father and a great provider, and I was really satisfied with my life. This whole thing is a tragedy for our family," she says, adding that she could not have survived the ordeal without the help of friends and family.

"I stayed in the marriage for the past six years because I always had hope that he would see the light," she says. "But I see now that isn't going to happen." **M**

**Names changed by request*