

Honesty and Respect

Couples often struggle over sex and intimacy, but **Claude M. Steiner** offers a path to more satisfying relationships.

WHEN MARCUS CAME HOME AND SAW Joan cooking at the stove, his mind immediately turned to sex.

He knew he'd have to be careful. Joan seemed determined to avoid being sexual with him lately unless things were exactly right for her: all the dishes done and nothing to spoil her mood. In their early years together, sex was spontaneous and their relationship was more relaxed. As he thought about it, feelings of longing and desire were mixed with a sense of humiliation. He didn't like to beg for sex. He missed the old times.

But he didn't convey any of this to her. Instead, he tried a power play. "Power play" is the term I use to describe the actions we take to induce others to do something they don't want to do (or to stop them from doing something they want to do). We use power plays when we want something and don't think we can get it by asking. Power plays can be subtle—not just physical but also psychological, sometimes nonverbal attempts to manipulate someone else, even someone we love. Watch what happened between Marcus and Joan.

Instead of letting Joan know how he felt ("I love seeing you like this; it makes me want to make love to you."), Marcus put his hands on Joan's shoulders and kissed her lightly on the cheek. In doing so, Marcus lied by omission, hiding his desires and intentions from her. Lying, even by omission, is a power play, part of a strategy to get us what we want.

Without stopping her work, Joan returned his kiss. Then Marcus made small talk: What was going on with her mother? How was her new job? He engaged in the conversation without a real interest in it, hoping this would get him what he wanted—another subtle power play.

As a feeling of warmth developed between them, Marcus, forgetting himself, took hold of Joan from behind. As he tenderly cupped her breasts with his hands, he felt her stiffen. Almost immediately, he realized he had made a mistake.



Eve Ekman and Alfonso Jaramillo

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Now Marcus tried a different power play: sulking. He withdrew visibly, hoping to create interest on her part. He continued this tactic through dinner and as they watched TV together afterwards. During a commercial, he mixed a drink and offered one to Joan. She, sensing a ploy, declined. Eventually, without saying a word, Marcus got up and went to bed, hoping to make Joan feel guilty and cause her to relent.

Soon Joan joined him in bed. Marcus pretended to be asleep, thinking this would prove to her that he didn't give a damn—maybe, somehow, that would work. She caressed his face and Marcus noticed that she was naked. Hope rose in his heart. Maybe ... He turned around, sleepily pushing his leg between her thighs. Joan's legs clamped together and she turned belly-down on the bed. Now furious, he bolted upright.

"What the hell is the matter with you? Are you frigid?" His insult was a crude psychological power play to frighten her into submission.

This made Joan angry. "No, believe me. I just don't want to have sex like this."

"Why not?"

"Sex is all you want from me. I need more."

"Oh for God's sake, I give up." Sulking again, he turned from her, covering himself with their comforter. Fleeting thoughts of forcing himself on her crossed his mind—the ultimate sexual physical power move—but he dismissed them.

Joan turned off the light. They both fell asleep as a black cloud hovered over their bed.

This example illustrates a classic domestic power struggle, one over sex and intimacy. All the maneuvers used by Marcus and Joan, subtle or crude, psychological or physical, offensive or defensive, fall under the definition of power plays. As we can see, power plays incite a vicious cycle, where each attempt to control someone else elicits an opposing attempt to resist manipulation and maintain control; in the process, no one gets what they need.

The only way to escape this cycle is through cooperation. In a relationship, this means both partners agree that no power plays are allowed. Instead, they resolve to disclose 100 percent of what they want, 100 percent of the time, and negotiate until they reach a mutually agreeable solution. This is no easy feat. It depends on each partner's inherent goodwill, and it takes time, skill, and dedication—both to recognize power plays and to replace them with honesty and mutual respect.

As hard as this may be, there is no other way to make a relationship satisfying for both partners. It worked for Marcus and Joan: After consulting with me in therapy, they were able to reestablish their loving, sexual relationship when they became aware of their power plays, agreed to forswear them, and resolved to cooperate instead. Only when we communicate directly and honestly with one another—rather than trying to manipulate each other to get what we want—can we create harmonious, fulfilling, lasting, and mutually empowering relationships.

Claude M. Steiner, Ph.D., is a clinical psychologist and transactional analyst, and a founding member of the International Transactional Analysis Association. His books include *The Other Side of Power*, *Emotional Literacy: Intelligence with a Heart*, and *The Warm Fuzzy Tale*, all of which are available for downloading on his website, www.claudesteiner.com.