

# AMERICAN HEALTH

AMERICAN  
HEALTH

problems  
insurance and af-  
because, as a self-employed  
writer, he has faced those problems  
himself. "I like being able to show people the  
big picture as well as remind them they aren't  
alone in their frustration," he says. His big pic-  
ture begins on p. 46.



Anthony



Paulson

In 13 years as a general-assignment TV and radio reporter, David Paulson built up a powerful desire to step out from behind the mask of "objective" journalism to write more personal pieces. And what could be more personal than his own vasectomy?

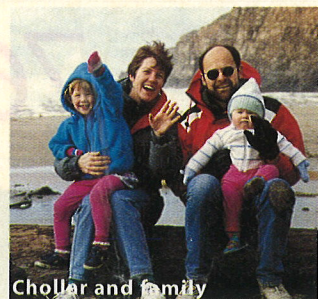
"I found there was almost universal interest in the subject among my friends," he says, "and some surprising misconceptions and fears, particularly about post-op sex." "Diary of a Vasectomy" begins on p. 70.

Melinda Blau, the author of "Just Teasing!" on p. 64, is drawn to the subject of family dynamics—her specialty—"for the same reason most of the shrinks I interview are: It helps me understand my own life!" Writing about teasing, she says, was a particular challenge "because most teases don't translate well on paper. You had to be there."



Blau

And Susan Chollar, a working mother of two in a nuclear family, reaches more complicated—and generally more optimistic—conclusions about the changing American family than those advanced by such critics as former Vice President Dan Quayle and *The Atlantic* magazine (see "Happy Families," p. 52). She finds that what children need to develop into healthy adults is harmony and stability and that they can get both in a wide variety of family configurations. "It's easy to oversimplify the research and blame all the problems on family structure," she says. "But the evidence shows that all kinds of families can work well if they're nurturing. The issues parents and kids face are too complex and difficult for us to be wasting time brooding about the way we think families used to be."

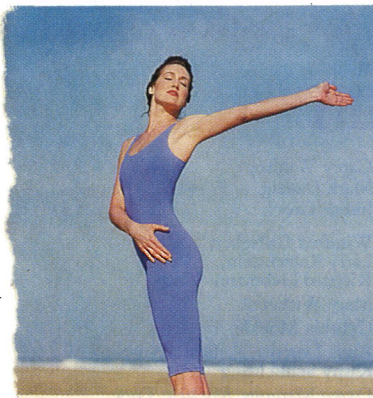


Chollar and family

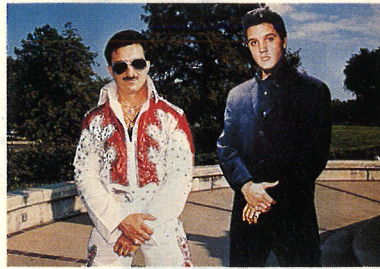
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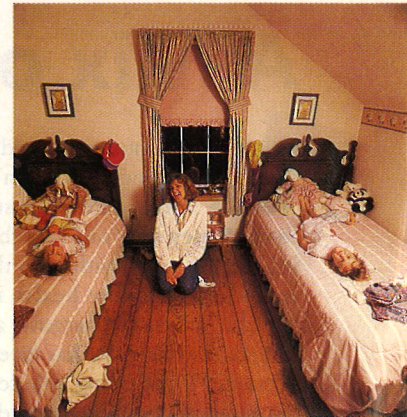
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And you thought yoga was for wimps! p. 58.

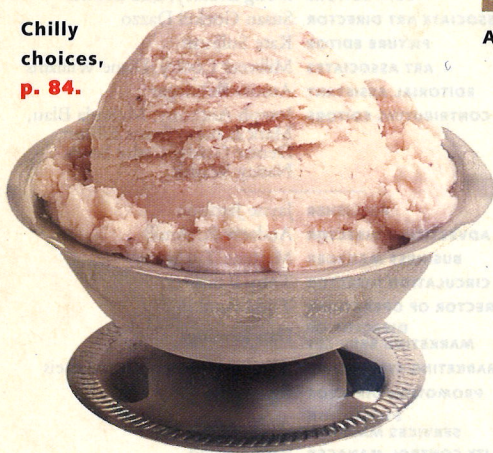


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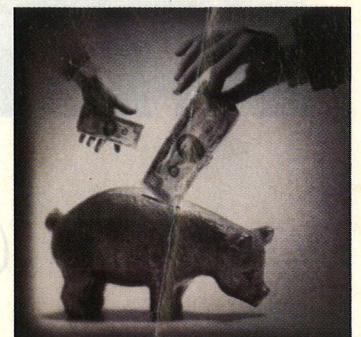
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Don't hesitate to negotiate, p. 46.

CLOCKWISE FROM BOTTOM RIGHT: WILLIAM DUKE, DENNIS M. GOTTLIEB, SALLY GALL, DAVID GRAHAM/BLACK STAR, DANNY TURNER



JUST THE

**Poking fun can be fun—**

**but it depends on**

**who's playing**

**the game**

A photograph of a man with dark, curly hair and a black turtleneck. He is looking upwards and to the left with a playful expression. A large yellow flower is held in his mouth, with another smaller yellow flower tucked behind it. His right hand is raised near his chin, with fingers slightly curled. The background is a dark, solid color.

**ASING!**

BY MELINDA BLAU

**PHOTOGRAPHS BY**  
Patricia McDonough

# TEASE.

Even the word, with its high-pitched needling sound, suggests what it is—a sting on the wing, a verbal thrust whose meaning goes beyond the words that bear it. We've all teased others—and surely we've all been teased. At home and on the job, in casual friendships and intimate

relationships, in the playground and on the playing fields, we taunt, goad, kid, mock and poke fun at one another. Some teasers bludgeon with gross exaggeration; others fire deftly worded darts. Some teasers are out to draw blood, while others are just kidding around. But regardless of style, the very essence of a tease is that its meaning is always open to interpretation, particularly by the person on the receiving end.

*Marsha's phone rings. It's Helen, an old friend who'd been at Marsha's house for dinner the night before. Helen has a reputation for forgetting things. Recognizing the voice, Marsha laughs and asks, "Okay, Helen, what did you leave at my house this time?"*

Is Marsha's crack friendly or insulting? It's Helen's call, but Marsha's laughter is an important clue. Chances are, Helen will recognize Marsha's tease as an affectionate if well-deserved dig. Of course if Helen is having a bad day or feeling particularly sensitive, she might be less likely to laugh at herself.

At its friendliest, teasing can be a form of affectionate play, creating camaraderie and closeness within a family or among a group of friends or coworkers. It can also thicken the skin and help us not take ourselves too seriously. And a "good" tease knows no age limits.

*When Ellie, a novelist, is asked by her 10-year-old son what her next book is about, she says it's about "a woman who's not a*

*very good writer." Grinning, her son shoots back: "Oh, an autobiography!"*

But in some circumstances, teasing can become a nasty abuse of power and a source of humiliation, observes Dr. Barrie Thorne, a professor of sociology at the University of Southern California. Indeed, the ambiguous nature of teasing makes it hard to analyze the true meaning of a specific barb. "The teaser can always say, 'I was just teasing,'" says Thorne. "But he's already shot his arrow, it's hit the mark, and everyone knows it. That's the social power of teasing—it's hit-and-run."

Whether a tease turns out to be humorous or demeaning depends in part on how the target reacts—or fails to react. The meaning of a tease is also colored by the audience's response, the mood of the target and the tone of voice and facial expression of the teaser.

*Janet, a book editor, is leaving the office an hour earlier than usual. She tells Bob, her boss, she's going. Bob glances at his watch and cracks: "Half-day today?"*

If Janet enjoys a comfortable working relationship with Bob, and he's an inveterate tease, she might parry the thrust: "Just going

out for a late lunch." If coworkers are within earshot, and they too laugh at her comeback, the tease isn't at anyone's expense, and no one walks away wounded.

On the other hand, if Janet is new on the job or running late with her work, her retort might be defensive: "Oh, but I came in early." Or if she came from a family in which teasing was rare or where teasing was torment, she might miss the joke and interpret Bob's remark as pressure to work harder.

We learn to tease in childhood, from adults, siblings (of course) and other children. Teasing is one way some parents prepare their children to endure life's hard knocks. For example, in a study of families in Baltimore, Dr. Peggy Miller, an associate professor of speech communication and psychology at the University of Illinois at Urbana, found that working-class mothers made a point of teasing their children. "The kids were growing up in a tough community," she says, "where defending yourself was a key to survival."

But parents from all walks of life are influenced by their perception of what their kids need to survive and by the broader socioeconomic and ethnic culture in which the family exists.

*Max, a lawyer, repeatedly says to his young son, "Gavin, think fast!" and feigns throwing a pencil or book at him. Other times he exclaims, "Wow! Look at that!" when there's really nothing there. Inevitably he follows his tease with "Gotcha!"*

Like the Baltimore mothers, Max, a middle-class dad, teases Gavin to toughen him up and also to hone his verbal gamesmanship skills. Parents often use teasing to teach children the nuances of language, says Miller. Those who engage their toddlers in a mock chase, saying "I'm gonna get you!" are inadvertently teaching their children that tone and facial expression are important cues to meaning. Such teasing has very positive social value, Miller says.

When kids tease other kids, the classic taunt tends to be aimed at children who are overweight, less attractive or less able. Teasing is the way children—and some adults—distance themselves from un-



popular or less fortunate peers. But very early on, several researchers note, boys develop styles of teasing that are different from girls'. In a study of teasing among young adolescents, Dr. Donna Eder, an associate professor of sociology at Indiana University in Bloomington, found that girls do more playful and therefore more successful teasing, in which the target often joins in to make fun of herself. "It's a group event, a way to bond with one another," Eder explains. They also tend to poke gentle fun at traditional values, for example deriding romance and romantic roles, Eder says ("Oh, if he comes over here, I bet you'll just faint!").

Boys, by contrast, go for the jugular, challenging each other's masculinity ("You're a sissy!" or "You play with girls!"). They tease by ferreting out each other's sore spots. "Boys try to embarrass each other," she says. "But when they're victims, they may be too vulnerable to make fun of themselves, so often they end up in a fight or they get angry and leave."

Gender differences in teasing persist into adulthood. "Women tend to be merely playful in their teasing," says Dr. Cheryl Pawluk, a professor of psychology at Western Nevada Community College in Carson City. "Men, however, are notorious for using teasing as a way of sending ambiguous messages."

George is irritated because his 30-year-old daughter Jill still lives at home even though she has a good job. Yet he conceals his anger, and instead waves the newspaper real estate section at her and booms, "Read this lately?" Other times he makes pointed jokes about getting the

Teasing can be a clumsy way of expressing feelings. In some cases, however, a playful quip may be a useful way to deal with an impossible situation.

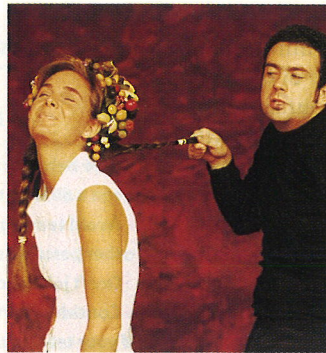
*Joe is devoted to his querulous, demanding mother. But whatever he does, it's never enough. He drops in on her every day after work before going home to his own family. Still, the woman always complains: "Just 15 minutes—that's all you can spare for your mother?"*

*"Oh?" says Joe. "It seemed like a week!" Joe's mother shrugs; she'll try again tomorrow, and Joe heads home without getting into an argument.*

Playfulness can also put a lighthearted spin on interchanges between husband and wife, says clinical psychologist Michael Metz, an assistant professor of family practice and community health at the University of Minnesota Medical School in Minneapolis. Dr. Metz, who has studied the role of playfulness in marriage, makes the point that affirmative playfulness, which includes affectionate teasing, can help couples relax and even resolve disagreements.

*She spills the soup. "Oops!" he chuckles. "Feeding time at the zoo?" And they both laugh at the silly remark.*

"Teasing shows a kind of competitive playfulness," says Metz, "but for many couples it's very difficult to pull off, because the tease is on the margin; it's pushing the jest to the limit." When other playful rituals—



dramatically different outcomes. In both cases, the husband hid in a closet and at the opportune moment jumped out to surprise his unsuspecting wife. "One of the women saw this as playful," Metz says. "But in the other instance, the wife was panicked."

Why would two women react so differently to the same event? The answer depends on context. Every tease is filtered through previous experience. In the first case, Metz suspects, the wife's family went in for humorous pranks, so she associated similar shenanigans with good times and positive feelings. In the second scenario, however, a history of negative surprises had colored the woman's view of the unexpected. To her, surprise was threatening.

"Adults who were teased a lot as children," says psychiatrist Carole Lieberman of Beverly Hills, Calif., "are often more sensitive to certain kinds of teasing, or they misinterpret what the teaser means because it reminds them of their childhood." Like many other practicing clinicians, Dr. Lieberman takes a harsher view of teasing than some nonclinical researchers. ("They don't deal with the pain of people who've been teased," she explains.) Lieberman emphasizes that for teasing not to be humiliating or shameful, there also has to be "real love or trust" in the relationship.

*Charlie's wife, Sandra, is all thumbs when it comes to operating high-tech equipment. Her daughters and husband have*

**T**he teaser can always say, "Only kidding!"

but the arrow has already hit its mark, and everyone knows it.

*names of good moving companies. Jill takes up the challenge: "You know you couldn't get along without me if I left."*

All of this gets nowhere except to erode the relationship between father and daughter. George's teasing is a form of shorthand for his true feelings. It would be better if he had a heart-to-heart talk with his daughter and asked her directly, "How about making plans to get your own place? I think it would be better for all of us."

shared jokes, a wink across the table—are lacking, and when the recipient, typically the wife, perceives a negative intent in the tease (the soup spiller believes her husband thinks she's a slob), it shifts from playful to hurtful.

What's more, Metz adds, what we hear in a tease is usually based on our earlier experience. He offers an example: In one of the studies he conducted, two couples described precisely the same kind of teasing behavior, but with

*dubbed her "the V.I.," or Village Idiot.*

Sandra laughs along with her daughters when they call her the V.I. She knows they respect her intelligence—even if she can't program the VCR. But the same dig from Charlie becomes a put-down, because she feels he means it. What's more, teasing is Charlie's favorite form of communication. Sandra sees it as destructive, hearing a barrage of past teases in every remark.

When Metz works with couples, he

takes the position that the husband is really attempting to communicate through teasing: It's his way of trying to be intimate. So Metz encourages both partners to "give each other a little slack." But in Sandra and Charlie's case, he acknowledges, the real issue may go beyond communication. "If Sandra perceives Charlie as really not caring about how she feels, then Charlie should explain what he's really trying to say when he teases her."

Teasing in the workplace requires restraints that differ from those in personal relationships, says Metz. "We shouldn't tease people we don't know well, because we can't gauge whether a remark that seems playful may offend or hit a hidden vulnerable spot."

In a work environment, a person's rank also affects the "teasability quotient." Sociologist Thorne cites a 1960 study by sociologist Rose Coser, who observed teasing practices among the staff members at a Boston hospital. Those with the most power—the male senior psychiatrists—did the most teasing, almost always targeting their arrows at workers lower in the hierarchy. It's usually the boss who does the teasing and not the employees. "If a lower-status person makes a joke upward, it can be quite risky," says Thorne.

In a more recent study of young people's playful behavior on the job, sociologist Kathryn Borman, associate dean of research and development at the University of Cincinnati, found that "playful behavior creates solidarity among young men, whereas it often denigrates young women."

Women, of course, are frequently the brunt of inappropriate teasing, often in the form of sexual innuendo, which is generally not a joking matter. As for sexual harassment, it doesn't fall under the heading of teasing at all; it's far more serious. Still, many women interpret any form of teasing with sexual overtones as harassment, as in the following example from Borman's study:

*Marty, a man in his early 60s, walks up to the front desk of the health club he owns and greets the young receptionist, "Hi, cupcake! How are you today?" Turning to a man standing at the desk, Marty adds, "Isn't she a sweetie?" Then, winking at the receptionist, he remarks, "I forget my age when I'm around you."*

If the receptionist sees the exchange with the health club owner as a form of

## TIPS FOR TEASERS—AND TARGETS

### How to Be a Good Teaser

- ▶ Give behavioral cues—a wink, a smile, an exaggerated gesture or a gentle poke in the shoulder. Even a different inflection in the voice can mitigate the sting of a cutting remark.
- ▶ Avoid teasing strangers or casual acquaintances. You should first know something about the other person's sensitivities to gauge what's appropriate.
- ▶ Don't joke about a person's impediments or serious problems: They're not fair game.
- ▶ Consider whether there's a covert message—a real concern—buried in your caustic comment. If your teasing topic is always the same, examine your motives. No matter how well the recipient fields your remarks, teasing shouldn't be a substitute for serious discussion.
- ▶ If teasing is the only way you express yourself, try to break that pattern. Dr. Michael Metz, an assistant professor of family practice and community health at the University of Minnesota Medical School in Minneapolis, tells his mostly male clients who rely on teasing to communicate with girlfriends or wives to vary their repertoire. "If that's all you're giving her, supplement it by sitting down and talking. Just listen to her feelings."

### How to Be a Smart Target

- ▶ Look for behavioral or verbal clues that reveal the teaser's intent before you react (or overreact). In friendly kidding, there's something in the teaser's face or voice or in the context of the remark that suggests it isn't serious.
- ▶ Try to joke back or laugh at a tease—even if it hurts. Certainly, don't react in a way that might give an unfriendly teaser more fuel for the fire.
- ▶ Watch the reactions of people who witness you being teased. Teasing can be drawn out when others join in on the joke, and some teasers heckle only when there's an audience for their linguistic archery. But your response can also sway onlookers, no matter whose side they seem to take. If you treat even a harsh comment as a joke, it will deflate the tease.
- ▶ Know where your emotional Achilles' heel is, to better respond when you're struck there by a teaser's dart. Do you bristle when someone needles you about your appearance? Lateness? Inability to accept criticism? Work on not being so sensitive, or at least understand why you are.
- ▶ Review your history. What kind of teasing was accepted in your family: loving pranks or abusive taunts? Were you teased a lot by your schoolmates or siblings? Realizing that you're reacting to the past may reduce the sting.

sexual harassment (which is about power, not sex) it's probably a no-win situation for her. Marty might claim, "I was just kidding." If the receptionist counters with, "Well, you seemed serious to me," Marty can always reply, "You've got no sense of humor."

"The woman is in a classic double bind," says Thorne. "She can put up with the remarks or speak out. But if she expresses her feelings, people will say she's making a big deal out of nothing. Either way she's been humiliated, as Anita Hill says she was by Clarence Thomas." The very nature of teasing—that the teaser can always dodge responsibility for his remarks—makes it particularly problematic for women, who are often surrounded by men who have more power than they do. This is especially true with sexual innuendo, says Thorne, "because the intent is unclear, and power and rank affect whose interpretation will be accepted by others."

If you're the mark of an insensitive

coworker or friend, or worse, if you're the victim of a true bully, the best way to deflect a tease is to tease back. At the very least, let the tease roll off your back (see "Tips for Teasers—and Targets," above). Of course, teasing is easier to take if you don't buy into the teaser's message, and if you can laugh at your frailties. It also helps if you sense support in the audience—and if you have the verbal skill for a clever comeback.

*The story is told of an encounter between Clare Boothe Luce, writer, congresswoman and wife of Time magazine founder Henry Luce, and The New Yorker wit Dorothy Parker. At a formal dinner, both women were escorted to the dining room entrance. "Age before beauty, dear Dolly," said Luce, stepping aside. "And pearls before swine, dear Clare," replied Parker as she swept into the room.*

*Melinda Blau lives in Northampton, Mass., and is the coauthor of Our Turn: The Good News About Women and Divorce.*