

Sweet freedom

Ellen Tout was put out that her attempts to help and guide those closest to her were rebuffed, until she learned more about what it means to be free

Last year, I decided to go vegan. I made the choice for ethical reasons but, after learning about the potential health benefits, I was excited to share them with my younger sister. Since childhood, she's suffered from low immunity, so discovering how certain foods can help, I eagerly made notes and explained it to her. She rolled her eyes, changed the subject and dismissed the whole idea – she's often like this when I try to help her. I felt frustrated and overlooked.

Later that week, a colleague told me I should eat dairy otherwise I'd make myself ill. I felt shocked and judged, even though she was not the first person to react this way. Since making the change, people often take it upon themselves to question my health and nutrition.

But the incident made me think. Was it actually any different from how I treated my sister? If I want to be free to eat and do what's right for me, then isn't it true that I, equally, don't have the right to tell others, even those I care about, what to do?

Recently, I met speaker and coach

Gabriela Lerner, who talks about freedom, and how by valuing it in ourselves and others, we can be happier. What Lerner means by freedom is our freedom to choose – to be and act as we wish without judgement – and honouring the freedom of others to do the same. 'If you immerse yourself in the idea of freedom and use it in your daily life, you will find it gives you tremendous power, independence, strength and peace of mind,' she says.

'I love you, now do as I say'

The concept of freedom is particularly important in our close relationships, she says. 'Long-lasting, healthy and happy relationships rely on it.' This brings me up short; I believe I respect the freedom of others but, in situations like the one with my sister, is it possible my desire to help could be interpreted as overbearing or even controlling? Although my sister and I are close, we often argue. I decide to spend time observing my behaviour around her, as well as with friends and my partner, and try holding back when I think I might be encroaching on their freedom.

Lerner explains that there are common situations in which we might believe we're helping, but actually we're limiting the person's freedom: a kind of affectionate control. She gives me some examples: 'When you acknowledge and value that your partner is free to leave their socks on the floor, you can negotiate over it without resentment, anger or judgement.'

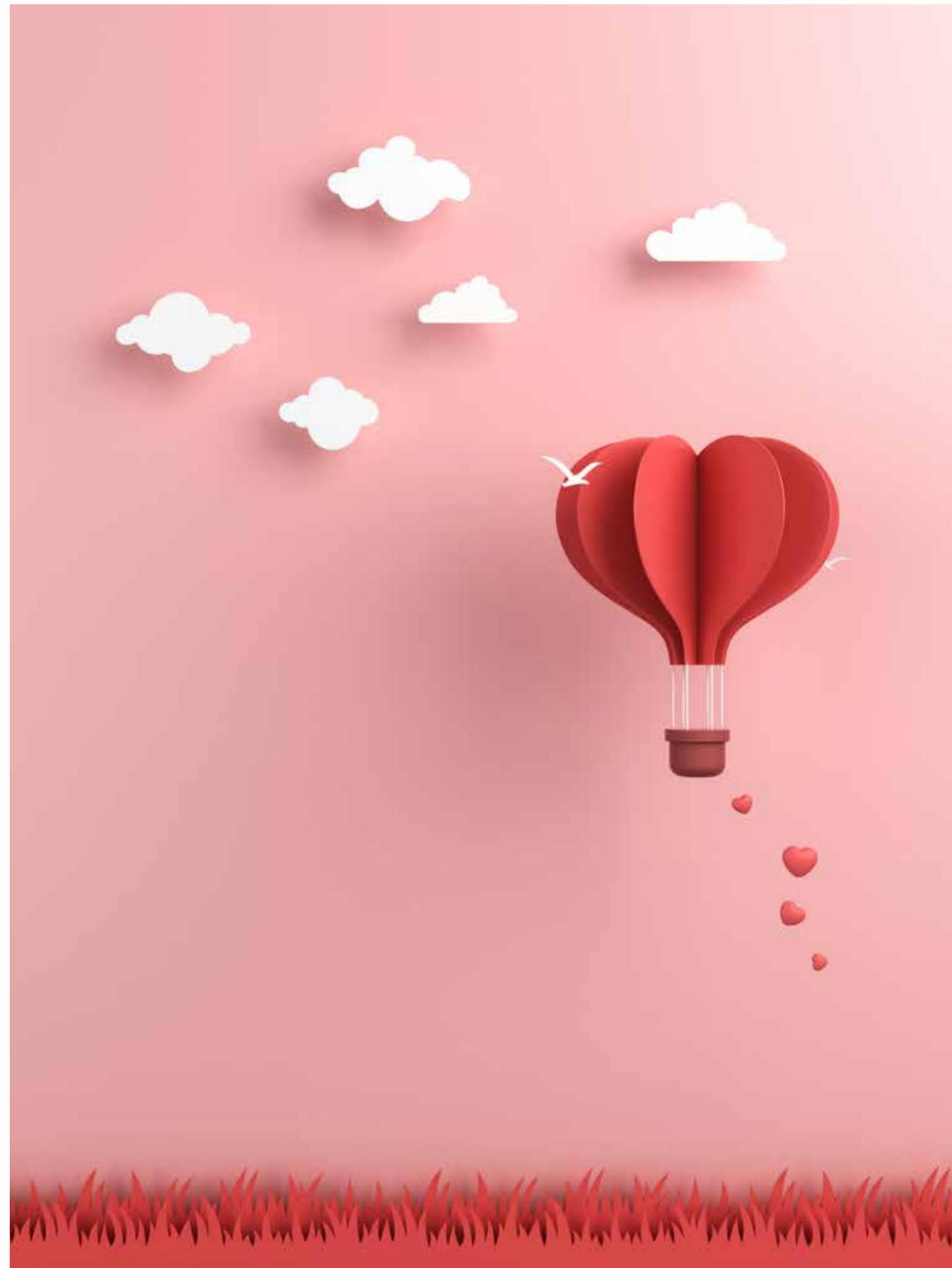
Try to think about what has motivated your partner to leave the socks. Are they tired? Is your anger reflecting more about you than them? Perhaps if you wait, and ask about their day, they'll tidy up in their own time. If you choose to discuss it, do so from a place of respecting their freedom, rather than judgement. 'To be free, we must consciously choose to value freedom above being right, and to let go of judgement.'

She gives another example: 'When you acknowledge and value that your parents are free to do what they want with their money, it's easier to feel less resentment when you watch your inheritance dwindle.'

Although my sister is an adult, I still feel a level of responsibility for her, and I realise this may be curtailing our

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>>> relationship. We arrange to walk my dog together at the weekend, but my sister tells me she doesn't know what time, as she wants a lie-in. I feel annoyed and want to tell her to get out of bed and make the most of the sunshine – but I don't. It feels odd at first, but I bite my tongue and remember that she's free to spend her weekend as she wishes and, equally, I'm free to go for a walk by myself, to wait for her or to make other plans. I feel much calmer knowing that I'm actively making a choice and also avoiding an argument.

More realisations follow. I'm a natural worrier and often find myself saying to people: 'Don't drive too fast!' or 'Remember to switch off the gas.' I've told myself this is my way of making sure the people I care about are safe but, actually, by mentally taking responsibility for stuff, I'm disempowering the other person and burdening myself. These seem like small things but can set an unbalanced tone with a lack of freedom or respect in a relationship. I also realise this has become a habit I barely think about.

'How many times a day do you find fault in another person – what they are doing or how they are doing it?' asks Lerner. 'How can we possibly know what motivates another person to do what they do? By judging them, we presume we know better. By letting go of judgement, we acknowledge their freedom and, simultaneously, we free ourselves.'

A little goes a long way

I'm nine months into a new relationship and I realise the way I interact with my sister is echoed in other connections. In my previous relationship, I was the 'responsible one' with my ex getting annoyed by what she interpreted as nagging, which I saw as caring. I want to actively set a tone of freedom and respect in my relationship, so I'm consciously aware of it when we're together.

'When you both respect freedom in each other, you realise you don't lose anything, but gain a lot. By behaving in a way that restricts another's freedom,

Let go of control, worry less

Free yourself, and others, by addressing these questions

- **Do I value the freedom of choice of (insert person's name) more than I like or dislike what they are doing?**
- **Would I rather (insert person's name) changed who they are, or that they are free to be who they are?**
- **What in their action triggers fear, anger, upset or resentment in me?**
- **What is it reflecting in me?**
- **What am I contributing to the situation that makes their behaviour an issue for me?**

we restrict our own.' I find this easier with small things, like not moaning if my girlfriend forgets to put the milk in the fridge. But, when she tells me she's going to a rave with her friends, I feel awkward and realise I don't want her to go. Being more of an evening-on-the-sofa person, I worry about the potentially unsafe environment of a rave, and my mind skips to what could go wrong. But I remind myself of Lerner's words. Although I dislike the idea, I see it's not my place to make the decision, and I'd hate for her to tell me where I can and can't go. As Lerner reminds me, my thinking is based on my own judgements and concerns; I cannot know what motivates another person's decisions. My reaction doesn't make me feel good: it feels possessive and that's not who I want to be.

Lerner encourages me to look inwardly. 'What we judge in another is often what we reject in ourselves. We are afraid to be seen that way and, as an act of protection, we reject and judge it in another,' she says. I notice, too, that my own anxiety underpins these situations. But, actually, when I consciously remind myself of the other person's freedom, I feel lighter and freer, too. 'When we value and respect a person's freedom, more than we like or dislike what they are choosing, we reduce

our suffering,' agrees Lerner. She talks me through some exercises to get into this frame of mind. 'Think of a person close to you with whom you have issues. Be honest and make a list of the things that bother you about them.' A friend's partner comes to mind. We don't have much in common and it's creating distance between her and me. 'Look at the list and ask: "Are they free to be or do the things you've listed?"'

Making the switch

It's not easy, but I know it's my friend's choice to stay in her relationship, and her boyfriend is free to behave as he sees fit. By retraining my feelings of dislike, I remind myself I'd rather keep the friendship than foster a negative outlook. I'm also free to spend less time with them.

'Notice when you're not acting from a place of freedom and change it, in that moment,' says Lerner. 'There's free choice in every moment and in everything we do, and you can change your thoughts.' She explains that living mindfully helps this become more natural. 'When you're in the present moment, freedom comes easily because you're not getting it muddled up with worries about the past and concerns about the future.'

Practising this, I see how it relates to different areas of my life: an annoying neighbour, a difficult relative, or the way I judge myself. Letting go of worry about others' behaviour gives me a clearer head and I feel liberated. When I catch myself judging someone, I remind myself of our shared freedom, and to value their decisions as I'd like them to value mine.

Lerner emphasises that valuing our own freedom is paramount. 'When we value our individual freedom, more than we value what people think of us or how we think we should be in the world, we can act from that place of freedom.'

It's like an invisible weight has been lifted. The more I value others' freedom, the more I notice and love those close to me for appreciating my freedom, too.

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