Why Do Some People Always Want to Pop Their Spouse's Pimples?

My wife is one if them. What gives?

By Chris Shott Aug 20 2017, 9:16 AM

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Even after a decade of marriage (and then some) my wife still can't keep her hands off me.

It's not what you think.

Some nights, when the kids are finally in bed and we're all alone, she snuggles up close and sneaks a hand up the back of my shirt. Her fine-tuned fingernails roam widely across my skin until she finds it: the bulge. Whether it's a small blackhead or a big swollen pimple, the result is the same. She proceeds to squeeze until it bursts or my pathetic cries for mercy somehow convince her to stop.

She finds the whole spouse-on-spouse pimple-popping experience very "satisfying," she tells me. I think it's annoying as hell.

As strange as it sounds, this sort of amateur intramarital dermatology is not uncommon among couples, says Matt Traube, a child and family psychotherapist based in San Luis Obispo, California, who specializes in what experts call "body-focused repetitive behaviors," like skin picking.

"For many people, there is a wonderful satisfaction that comes from popping a pimple — it's almost euphoric," says Traube. You not only relieve the physical pressure of the blockage, there's a pleasant mental effect as well from the release of dopamine, your brain's happy chemical.



While that feeling of physical release is most immediate when popping your own pimples, you can get a similar emotional response from lancing another person's zits too, Traube says. That vicarious thrill also helps to explain the bizarre popularity of online pimple-popping videos, like those of California dermatologist Sandra Lee, aka Dr. Pimple Popper, whose massive YouTube following is now nearly 3 million strong.

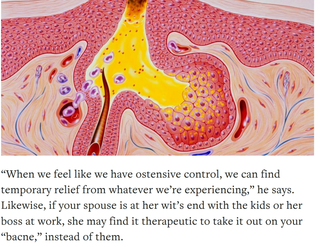
It's not always just about feeling good, however. Psychologically, there are many possible motivations that can compel a person to start surface-mining the skin of the person next to her, Traube says.

In some ways, it's a sign of love. Sure, there are more romantic ways to show your affection, but here is someone who is not only willing to attend to your sores, but *volunteering* to do so. That takes a whole other level of comfort and commitment.

"As disgusting as it might sound to some, that you would pick your partner's pimples, that does show a certain closeness, a bond, an attachment between you and your partner," says Traube. "If someone is on a first or second date, I don't think you're going in for a pimple pop."

On another level, it suggests that your partner is trying to fix you. "For many, the skin itself can be a metaphor for the person or the relationship," says Traube. The pimple, therefore, represents an irritation or imperfection — "things that you somehow think need to be cleaned up or organized or otherwise taken care of," he says. "It's kind of analogous to finding a solution. You look at it and go, 'Ew, it doesn't feel right, it's on my partner, I need to fix it.' In some regards, it's a way to improve your husband."

It could also simply mean that your partner is just really stressed out. Traube explains that when people are feeling stressed or anxious over issues beyond their control, they may seek to regain a sense of control in some other way. For instance, he notes that children who get bullied at school sometimes develop serious skin-picking problems because of this desire to retake control of their own bodies.



"When we feel like we have ostensive control, we can find temporary relief from whatever we're experiencing," he says. Likewise, if your spouse is at her wit's end with the kids or her boss at work, she may find it therapeutic to take it out on your "bacne," instead of them.

Partners who routinely pick at their sweethearts' skin may try to justify their actions by suggesting some altruistic motive, like helping to improve your completion. But that's usually not the full story. "If one partner is constantly doing it, well, it's probably not to help the other partner — it probably has more to do with themselves," Traube says.

The key to better understanding is feedback. "If the partner's feedback is, 'Yes, this is good. I want more of this.' OK, great, that's a healthy response," Traube says. "But if the partner's feedback is a little more hesitant or 'I don't know how much I like this,' and yet the other partner is still going for it, I don't think it's, at least on a psychological level, helping their partner. It's helping themselves. It's a need. It's an urge."

While it can be annoying, unwanted spousal zit-picking isn't usually a deal-breaker for most couples in committed relationships, Traube says.

That's the good news. The bad news is, there's no easy cure, either. Even if you are outspoken in your opposition, as I am, your partner may have trouble resisting the compulsion. Altering the behavior, once it's ingrained, usually requires some form of "cognitive restructuring," Traube says — essentially, reprogramming the self to behave differently over time.

But perhaps there's another solution: those pimple-popping videos, for instance. After all, if the emotional response is the same, then watching the videos might just help to satisfy the urge. Anecdotally, Traube suggests it's at least possible: "There are patients of mine that have said, 'I pick less when I watch those extraction videos.' " On the other hand, it's also possible that too much on-screen zit-purging could have the opposite effect, making the desire more intense.

There may be no simple way out for those of us who can't stand being the target of our partners' pimple-popping obsessions. We might just have to wait until our children grow up to be pimple-faced teenagers — thereby taking the attention away from us. Then, we might feel some relief too.