

Louise Atkinson, married to Jonathan for 22 years, tells what happened when a new book inspired her to secretly change her behaviour

# Are you the DRIVING FORCE in your marriage?

**W**riter, Louise, 52, and Jonathan, 53, live in Oxfordshire with their three teenage children.

When we met all those years ago I was very much attracted to Jon's lovely soft, caring "beta" qualities and I'm pretty sure he thought my thrusting go-getting "alpha" nature was exciting and possibly even sexy.

Now though, even he might say I'm far too often the one trying to wear the trousers. Like many of my girlfriends, I'm ambitious, organised, straight-talking and (usually) decisive and the only way I can juggle full-time work with the slippery fish of family life is by extending some of the planning and decision-making I use at work at home.

But then I read a new book, *The Alpha Female's Guide to Men and Marriage* by

US relationship expert, Suzanne Venker and began to wonder... are the mood swings and short fuse of menopause starting to put a little too much alpha icing on my already alpha cake?

Many of my closest friends run their families like they ran their careers, with ruthless efficiency. And when we get together over a bottle of Prosecco, one of us will inevitably end up moaning about having to take charge of the shopping, cooking, finances, the kids, birthday presents, holidays and ageing parents (on both sides). I'm ashamed to admit the kind, gentle men we married are sometimes vilified for their inability to do the most menial tasks "properly".

We might chat about how our men are becoming more set in their ways

or ageing faster than us and we share stories of nipping back from the gym to whip up a green juice or kale salad to find our blokes slumped in front of the TV, with a glass of red wine in their hand.

Sounds familiar? There's little doubt that in many long-term relationships it's the alpha women who so often stay busy, while their men fall into the pattern of

shutting up or doing nothing. But this book made me wonder – could we strong women be inadvertently crushing our men into infuriating passivity?

According to Suzanne Venker, the key to marital harmony lies in dialing down your alpha tendencies and giving your man the space to rev up his. Would it work for us? Time to experiment (secretly of course). >>

*"A slight shift on my part has led to renewed harmony"*

## relationships

I started by briefly showering Jon with uncharacteristic kindness, complimenting his new haircut and praising his choice of sweater. Cooking the family meal is one of my tasks (mostly because I like to micro-manage the children's nutritional intake, boosting their vegetable-consumption by stealth) but when he asked what was for dinner I said "surprise me!" and then took the dog for a walk so I couldn't take over. Sausages (again) might not have been my choice, but it felt good to be off kitchen duty and he was clearly thrilled with his culinary achievement.

Spurred on by my success, I found myself subconsciously diluting other alpha urges. I have a habit of stepping in to hijack and finish off Jon's long-winded stories. It's become a source of irritation on both sides, but the book has made me wonder whether having me hovering beside him forever poised to pounce could be causing him to make his storytelling even more laborious.

So I let Jon start and complete an entire anecdote without once interjecting – even smiling warmly afterwards (too Stepford Wife? Perhaps, but you've got to start redressing the balance somewhere). Last weekend I was heard to say to friends, "Oh tell them that story about the dog, Jon". There's a chance I might have been able to tell it better and it wasn't embellished with nearly as much exaggeration and theatrics as I'd have used. But something odd happened – I really did love seeing him centre stage. His re-emerging self-confidence was attractive in a way that echoed our younger selves.

I started to hunt for more ways to relinquish control and share out the power base I'd clearly been hogging, and now Jon has the delights of dealing with the accountant and day-to-day finances (dull, dull, dull), the supermarket shop (I will not complain about his choices) and holiday transport logistics (it's quite hard to relinquish trust on that one, but after numerous missed flights



I trust myself less and I have faithfully promised not to intervene.)

One month later and he really does seem to be happier. It's all very subtle and I'm not sure he's even noticed that I've changed, but he seems to be taking more of a lead in the kitchen (as long as I stay out of the way) and the odd jobs I used to feel I had to nag him about are miraculously getting done.

When you've been a couple for decades it's easy to blame your man if errant hormones make you feel grumpy or disillusioned. But looking at our marriage from a different perspective has helped me to remember that long-term marriages have ups and downs, excitements and disappointments. I certainly haven't morphed into a fawning, Stepford Wife, (and who would want to?) but I was surprised to find just a slight shift on my part has led to renewed harmony in our home. Men – it turns out – really can be more fun when you cut them a bit of slack.

## Are you alpha or beta?

**Suzanne Venker, a self-confessed Alpha Wife, is convinced that in trying to be all things to all people and fulfil our true destiny as women, many of us are unwittingly putting strain on our marriages.**

✦ The Alpha Wife is easily identified as the woman who feels nervous or out of control when not in charge – both at home and at work. She might also be inclined to contradict her husband or tease him in public, talk over him or frequently interrupt.

✦ An alpha husband will probably kick back and trigger fireworks, but if your partner has easy-going beta tendencies he's more likely to stay quiet, convincing himself that the home is happier (and life is just easier) when you hold the reins.

✦ "In taking over you can inadvertently allow your need to be in charge to suffocate your man's masculinity," Suzanne warns. "He might duck out of your way and adjust his alpha level to make room for yours, to avoid conflict."

✦ She believes an Alpha Wife can become so picky about the perfect holiday that, over time, her beleaguered husband could lose faith in his own ability to choose. If you're married to someone who is happy to "go with the flow" you'll be lucky if he puts his head above the parapet to impulsively book that romantic getaway you might crave!

### 3 TIPS TO TRY

**1** Talk less and listen more – stop finishing his sentences and improving his anecdotes.

**2** Avoid saying "no" or "I have a better

idea", and try "okay" or "that's interesting" occasionally instead.

**3** Go back to "first date mode" in your head and behave (at times) like you did when you were courting.

✦ *The Alpha Female's Guide to Men and Marriage* by Suzanne Venker (Post Hill Press) is out now.

