

ODD COUPLE PART DEUX

Jim Weinberger and Debbie Wiener are a modern-day Oscar and Felix, from the show *The Odd Couple*, portrayed by Jack Klugman and Tony Randall, below.



Odd **Couples**

How to cope with the inevitable struggle when one spouse is a **mess magnet** and the other is a **neat freak**. ::

BY EMILY J. MINOR

THIS IS HOW DEBBIE WIENER knew she was headed for a mess of trouble in her marriage.

Every morning she'd come downstairs, and every morning she'd find the same odd piece of evidence. One end of her curtains was draped over the arm of the brocade couch. It wasn't the breeze from an open window. It wasn't the cat. It wasn't one of the kids. It was her husband, Jim Weinberger.

Jim would stay up late watching TV and snacking after Debbie went to bed. He was using the curtains as a napkin, wiping his hands on them.

"He's got big, long arms, and he'd just reach over there, grab the curtain and wipe his hands and then let it fall," she says. "He didn't even try to put it back so I wouldn't know." The curtains were smudged and stained, which didn't much bother Jim — but it drove Debbie crazy. An interior decorator who fell in love with the lanky, lovable 6-foot, 6-inch tall Jim

back in college, she was constantly reminding him of his hygienic faults, of which there were many. Wipe off the counter. Wipe off the floor. Wipe the food off your tie, for Pete's sake.

"There's never any question what he's had for lunch," says Debbie about Jim, who runs a website for an Australian business and leisure travel company. The couple lives in Silver Spring, Md., just outside Washington, D.C.

After 23 years, the Felix-and-Oscar couple is still married. But they're

together, she says, only because she learned to cope after years of anxiety and arguing, including one family Thanksgiving when he spilled coffee on the white carpeted stairs and she “seriously freaked.”

“It’s still embarrassing for me to think about that,” she says. “We didn’t get separated, but we almost did.”

LEARNING TO COPE

Instead of divorce court, Debbie says she had an “A-ha!” moment about 12 years ago. She decided to redesign their home with lots of dark pattern, color, and industrial and commercial fabrics that wouldn’t show dirt.

“I figured if I couldn’t see it, it wouldn’t bother me,” she says.

Messiness, be it a little innocent clutter or years of unhealthy hoarding, can be the nemesis of any live-in relationship. So when one partner is a bit anal retentive and the other is a slob, what do you do?

When it reaches the crisis point, some couples go into counseling. Sometimes, but not always, it works, says Dr. Paul Hokemeyer, a Manhattan marriage and family therapist.

“Sometimes for some people, it’s intolerable, and it’s kind of a sign of deeper issues,” he says. “Hopefully, one partner will have enough compassion left to see that their behavior is impacting the other person, and there will be some change.”

Suzu Wilkoff, a professional organizer and productivity consultant based out of Palm Beach, Fla., says that people who are messaholics need to recognize they have a problem. “They have to reach out for help just like a drug addict or an alcoholic,” says Wilkoff, who often

finds herself refereeing between neatniks and clutterers. “If they’re not ready for change, there’s nothing a professional organizer can do.”

SLOB-PROOFING

Debbie ended up using the lessons she learned in saving her marriage in her decorating business. She now markets what she calls “slob-proof” interior design strategies.

She also encourages clients with messy family members to buy from her list of slob-proof furniture, which are pieces that don’t stain easily.

But she shudders — and laughs — while remembering the early days in her marriage when she struggled with Jim’s disregard for neatness.

“Every time I went out, I would panic at the thought of coming

FRAT HOUSE

When she first met Jim back in the 1980s, he was using a couch he’d carried up from his condo garage. “I would throw a blanket on it before I sat on it,” she says. His kitchen and bathroom were dirty. The place smelled like a frat house. Everything

was tolerable because I was living in Boston, and he was in Washington.”

Then they got married and bought their first house together. Debbie, and the decorator in her, went to

town, filling the place with brocade furniture, wool rugs and billowing curtain panels.

“I did not consult him,” she says. “I immediately set to work and did it in my style at the time.” Creamy walls and hardwood floors and lots of light colors. Then she discovered that

disturbing-yet-hilarious curtain habit of his.

She also found orange streaks on the walls. “Doritos,” she says. “They are the worst.”

Today, she says she loves dark leather couches, patterned rugs, and thick upholstery on the chairs.

Not only does it look great, it doesn’t show the dirt as much.

Jim has always been a loving husband, a great dad, and a fabulous friend — all qualities that Debbie realizes are more

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important than neatness.

Coping with his slovenliness was “a big change, and I am better for it,” she says, adding, “We’re both able to laugh at each other, and that’s what keeps us together.” □



YING AND YANG Debbie Wiener picks up after her husband Jim Weinberger in their Silver Spring, Md., home. They provide solid evidence that despite differences, many odd couples can live happily together.

home,” she says. “And then I’d spend 30 minutes, easily, cleaning up after him.

“We would argue. I’d say, ‘It’s horrible for me to come home from work and have to work again.’”