

Relative Values

The sexiest doctors on TV, Chris and Xand van Tulleken, 37, are identical twins. They admit it isn't always a blessing. Interviews by *Caroline Scott*. Photograph by *Charlie Clift*

Xand

Chris and I yell at each other every day. At least half of our phone calls end with one of us hanging up in anger. If it's me, I'll phone back 30 seconds later, going: "I'm sorry." At which point he'll be so angry, *he'll* hang up. We'll do this five or six times in a row, because it doesn't matter — we're bound together for life to care about each other.

Both our parents are Canadian; Dad was a designer, Mum ran her own publishing company. Mum was the main breadwinner and it was she who pushed us along — not in a hothouse way, but by not setting limits [both boys went to the independent King's College School, in Wimbledon]. She always thought we could do a bit better.

Chris is younger than me by seven minutes, but he drags me forward. It was Chris who cooked



up the idea that we should both go to medical school. We just thought it would be really smart to do the same thing. It meant we could be study partners through school, and then again when we went to Oxford. We saw it as a way of doubling our net worth. Twins who compete are insane — I'll never beat Chris by more than 1%.

Being a twin is being engaged in a constant inquiry about who you are. If you're an identical twin, you see a better version of yourself every day. Chris is married to a beautiful woman, he has a great job, a great house. And because he's my twin, I think: "I can be him. I can have his life, too."

My life's been more complicated. After Oxford, I went to Harvard on a Fulbright scholarship in 2008. My son, Julian, was born in February 2009 after a brief relationship. In America, people say you eat your problems. That's what I did. I was trying to process the fact that I was going to be a dad and was away from Chris for the first time. As a result, I got absurdly fat — 19 stone.

Chris was very upset, not just because I was unhappy, but because I was his fat ambassador, out in the world looking like a fat version of him. It took years to lose the weight and Chris was so mean about it. He tried to help, but it just made me crazily angry.

Our friends would say I'm the more relaxed twin. I think Chris is more ambitious and tenacious than me. After Oxford, we both went to the School of Tropical Medicine, then I went to work in the refugee camps in Darfur and Chris went on

an expedition to Greenland.

I now work in humanitarian aid in New York, while Chris works as an infectious-diseases registrar. He is also doing a PhD. I live in New York to be nearer my son, but the TV part of my job is in London. I find admin very difficult, so Chris looks after me a lot.

The argument we have at least once a week is over whether it's worth trying to change someone. I'm in a constant state of cynicism that Chris hauls me out of, and he's in a constant state of optimism that I drag him down from. That's the lovely tension in our existences.

Recently, I actually tallied up all the fights we'd had over a short period of time and I reckoned we were each right about half the time. Of course, it's all stupid. All I want is for Chris to be happy, and I know that's all he wants for me.

Chris

Anyone who has known us will tell you I'm the evil twin — the slightly more calculating one, the more motivated, the less likeable one. Xand, on the other hand, is so warm, people gravitate towards him. It's fine, honestly. If you have an identical twin, you want them to be the best possible version of you.

I'm pretty sure I need him much more than he needs me. A lack of certainty propels me through life, and Xand gives me the mental tools to deal with it. If he says he defers to me, he's f***** wrong. He won't listen to anything I say.

He probably said we argue violently every day. It's true, but



FIERY RELATIONS
Xand (left) and his twin at Chris's north London home. Below left: Chris gunks his brother

Love



we're trying to do it less because it's so dysfunctional, so unprofessional. But there's no jeopardy: he won't leave, I won't leave, so we can say anything. It can be horrible and offensive. But it doesn't matter. It's nonstop competitive sharing of shame and embarrassment.

All the best things about me, I stole from him. Our medical degree was conventional, academic training. But Xand's also got this weird classical education that's led him to be a humanitarian academic. We now both sit on the board of

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the charity Doctors of the World UK. It was Xand who dragged us out of the tedium of surgery.

The nature of being identical means we're forever being brought together by our similarities. If one wanted to do something different, the other would go: “Either he shouldn't be doing that, or I should be doing it, too.” I compete with our younger brother, Jonathan, but feel no competition with Xand. It would be pointless. His successes are mine; we bask in each other's glories.

Equally, his failures are my failures, and that's more significant, because seeing him screw up is awful. When he was fat, I thought he looked ridiculous. There was a professional argument. “You're a TV doctor, you can't be fat.” But really it was an emotional response. It's a taboo we still don't talk about.

If you spent a week with us, you would think: “Those van Tulleken

STRANGE HABITS

Chris on Xand

He's a terrible glutton, but then so am I. He eats Chinese food alone. He can't tell I'm also in a Chinese restaurant when I call to tell him off, as the music at the one he goes to in New York is louder than Ba Shan, my regular in London

Xand on Chris

Like me, his weird quirk is eating alone in Chinese restaurants



brothers don't get along at all!” In truth, it's all noise. When I fight with Xand, I am fighting with myself. Both of us feel 100% happier and safer when the other is in the room. When Xand isn't around, I'm only half present. The fact is, if you haven't met Xand, you haven't really met me ■
Frontline Doctors: Winter Migrant Crisis is available on BBC iPlayer