

Managing Criticism

It seems that most couples struggle with criticism, though some tolerate it better than others. Nevertheless, criticism of, or from, your partner will happen periodically. This post provides an alternative way manage criticism that may help sidestep defensiveness.

Here are some common options when we want to be critical of our partner:

1. Keep our mouths shut, and say nothing. Besides, we all were told that if we didn't have anything nice to say, then don't say anything, right? (This one probably fell in to the category of 'do as I say, don't do as I do.')
2. Provide unvarnished criticism, regardless of the impact it may have on our partner, and ultimately on the relationship. If it leads to defensiveness, an argument, a fight, so be it, just deal with it.
3. Sugar coat it, water it down, either because you can't deal with your reaction to your partner's reaction to your critical remark, or, you want to protect your partner from his/her feelings that surely will arise from being criticized. ('You can't handle the truth!')

Maybe there is an alternative, an option that satisfies both sides of a chronically thorny equation: on the one hand, how to get your point across without selling yourself out; on the other hand, lower the odds of running in to defensiveness.

Enter the complaint. Set alongside that of criticism, let us compare the two, see how they differ, and why it matters.

A **complaint** is about the one complaining, and a **criticism** is about the other, the listener.

Or, the **complaint** is about me, and a **criticism** is about you. Take a guess as to which one will usually be easier for the listener to hear: The complaint. Why? Because a complaint is not about the listener, and therefore, tends to lower the risk of listener defensiveness.

Not only that, if I'm talking about me (instead of you) I have a much better chance of being understood.

The goal of transforming a criticism in to a complaint is to increase the odds of the speaker being heard and understood, while simultaneously reducing the odds of the listener being defensive. Ultimately, the goal of the process is to preserve the closeness and intimacy of the relationship.

Consider the following vignette:

On long road trips, the majority of the driving is done by the same partner. One of the difficulties for the passenger is that the driver tends to speed—we're talking about 90 to 95 mph vs the limit of 75mph.

They have never had an accident, nor a speeding ticket. But they are constantly bickering about the speed, and the danger. The driver doesn't understand what the "big deal" is, and the passenger doesn't think the driver cares about the passenger.

The passenger criticizes: "You are the worst driver ever! For you, it's all about the speed and the thrill! You have no respect for the fact that you might get us both killed! And one of these days you will get a ticket—it's only a matter of time! You have no respect for what it's like being a passenger when you're the driver! Nobody likes the way you drive!"

In this case, there is a lot of accusation, attack and judgement, while focusing on the driver/listener.

The passenger complains: "When you drive 95 mph I feel so scared! I'm am so afraid of speed, that I literally sit in sheer terror when when I look at the speedometer, and when I see us pass other cars at what feels like warp speed! And when I tell you how I feel about all of this, it seems to me it doesn't matter to you. Please understand I am not telling you what to do or not do, I am telling you how I feel and why. After this last trip, I am going to have to re-think whether or not I can drive with you on long trips. I may have to fly and meet you there.

In this instance, the main focus is the passenger, feeling states, and possible decisions about future travel the passenger might make based on experience. There is no attack, judgmental attitude or accusation.

Re-read each one again. The main difference between them is that the critical one is all about the driver, and the complaint is all about the passenger. Bottom line, which way would you rather hear the speaker? No doubt, some of you who are less conflict averse will prefer the direct criticism, or at least might not be derailed by it. Others may want to hone their skill of complaining. And by the way, complaining is NOT the same as whining!

Complaints require that you talk about yourself, not your partner. Complaints are NOT "I" statements. Complaints are descriptive statements about your experience which, indeed, may contain the word "you," such as, "...when you drive 95mph I feel scared!"

The purpose of the complaint is to detail your experience, make it real for the listener. While generally not responding favorably to demands, listeners do tend to respond more favorably to hearing the speakers experiences and behavioral changes the speaker makes in response to their experiences.

Why? Because when I become aware of the impact of my behavior on you, I can then access empathy or compassion for you. That often results in behavior change because ultimately I do not want you to feel bad.

On the other hand, while being criticized, which is often experienced as an attack, it will be very difficult, if not impossible to simultaneously feel empathic. Attack triggers the fight or flight response, not the compassion response.

Is it possible to be critical without attacking? Certainly, but it takes couples working out a system they can both agree on, practice, become comfortable with, and trust.

In the mean time, try developing the art of the complaint. Remember—it requires you to talk about yourself, take responsibility for yourself, while not attempting to change your partner.

Wishing you a satisfying relationship,
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