



UPPER ISLAND ASSESSMENT AND RESOURCE SERVICE

## DESTRUCTIVE COUPLE COMMUNICATION STYLES

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### 1. Over-generalization & Lack of Specificity:

Dissatisfactions are phrased in ambiguous and vague terms, and more than one problem is introduced at a time which will hopelessly confuse a conflict and only add more fuel to the fire. Avoid global, undifferentiated complaints and personality trait labels such as "insensitive", "sloppy", "lazy", and "demanding". Instead, express feelings and refer to specific behaviours that bother you.

Avoid over-generalizing with words such as: always, never, all, everybody, nobody, everything, and nothing. Also avoid dividing things into only two extreme possible alternatives, which is called dichotomous reasoning or absolute thinking. Do not be an extremist, seeing things as either black or white, love or complete absence of love, trust or distrust.

Another type of over-generalization is crucializing. Instead of dealing with a specific conflict, this is the tendency to make a particular problem into a generalized test of love or power, challenging the very foundation of the relationship. Instead of remaining issue-specific, the conflict becomes relationship-oriented. A core issue like love will often be called into question with a phrase such as, "If you really loved me, you would ..."

### 2. Dominating, Interrupting and Not Listening:

Listening is a prerequisite for effective communication, but many partners do not feel listened to or understood. A fundamental communication skill is the ability to convey empathy concerning the feelings of one's partner. Even if you understand, your partner may feel misunderstood unless you communicate that you understand. This may be done by briefly summarizing your partner's feelings, and also by your non-verbal behaviour. Do you maintain eye contact and nonverbally convey that you are interested, attentive and receptive? Or, are you absorbed in looking elsewhere, or absorbed inwardly in thinking about what you are going to say next, as soon as your partner finishes talking?

### 3. Mind Reading & Speaking for the Partner:

Without inquiring, partners often assume that they know what their companions are feeling and thinking. We make interpretations about sensory data. For instance, in seeing one's partner very quiet and self-absorbed, some people jump to the conclusion that this silence means they are angry or upset, and may even accuse them of this. Instead of trying to be clairvoyant, "check out" and ask if the other person is reacting as you believe. We can also simply describe their non-verbal behaviour ("You seem really quiet"), and wait for them to tell us what it means. Especially avoid trying to second guess your partner's motives. We usually only attribute negative motives to them instead of positive ones.

Similarly, do not operate on the assumption that if your partner loves you, they will magically be attuned to your feelings, needs and desires. Many persons become frustrated because their partners do not have a crystal ball that allows them to discern their unexpressed expectations. They assume, "If he loved me, he'd know!" This is also the case sexually, where we assume the partner should magically know what type of stimulation we are in the mood for. Accept the principle of being self-responsible: we are responsible for our own pleasure and happiness, and must openly express our feelings, desires and needs.

Also, in public, avoid assuming that you know the feelings and thoughts of your partner so well that you can assume the role of being a spokesman for them. Speak for yourself, and allow them to speak for themselves.

#### **4. Judgment, Blame, Attack & Rejection:**

Attack and rejection, especially in a heated and angry manner, results in psychological casualties. Ridiculing, name-calling, sarcasm and attacks are usually made in the form of "you" statements. They have a quality of finger pointing and one-upmanship: "You're stupid;" "You don't know what you're talking about;" "You don't give a damn about anyone but yourself." Instead of making "you" statements which judge the other person and make them defensive, talk about your own feelings with "I feel \_\_" statements. However, be careful not to make "sneaky you" statements by saying, "I feel that you ..."

#### **5. Coercion and Manipulation:**

A manipulator seeks to control his companion rather than respecting him/her as equal and autonomous. Instead of genuinely expressing his feelings, the manipulator conceals motives and plays roles to create a desired impression that will maneuver his partner in the way he wants. Rather than directly expressing his desires and preferences, the manipulator demands or more passively coerces compliance. They may actively manipulate through lecturing, arguing, making threats, dominating, or lying, or other persons passively manipulate through their dependency, killing with kindness, being stubborn, forgetting, conveniently not hearing, or being passively silent.

#### **6. Taking for Granted:**

Pre-maritally we are so appreciative of what our partners do for us, but after we win their hearts we often stop courting them and simply expect things from them. The spouse is expected to cook dinner, take out the garbage, and be available sexually. When these expectations develop, courtesy and politeness and expressions of appreciation often cease. Consider for a moment the special things that frequently occur during most courtships, but which may have declined with the passage of time: opening doors; saying "please" and "thank you"; surprising the other with a small gift, card, note or phone call; inquiring about the partner's feelings before making a decision that will influence both parties; attentively listening and displaying interest in the companion's views and the events of their day. It is vital that couples continue to court each other in romantic ways, remain considerate and courteous, and continue regularly expressing appreciation.

#### **7. Concentration on Negatives:**

In troubled relationships, the partners seldom feel recognized and appreciated. Research has found that when individuals from distressed marriages interact with opposite-sexed strangers, they make more than three times as many positive statements, and only half as many negative statements as they do with their own mates. People in troubled relationships come to rely on aversive and coercive strategies for bringing about change in their companions, rather than positive reinforcement and encouragement. In many marriages an extinction schedule is operating where pleasing behaviours are ignored and the negative is attended to. Yet all of us know that when satisfying behaviours are taken for granted and attention is primarily given to "what's wrong" and unpleasant, that discouragement and demoralization set in. Too many of us use discouragement strategies instead of encouragement strategies for trying to bring about change in our partners. Goethe said, "Treat people as they are and they will remain as they are. Treat people as they can and should be and they will become as they can and should be." Develop the habit of recognizing what your partner does positive and reinforcing it with sincere expressions of appreciation. We have a choice in what we focus on. For instance, you can complain that the toast was overdone again, or thank your mate for taking the time to fix scrambled eggs and bacon. One approach will encourage her; the other will discourage her in the future.

#### **8. Replaying Ancient History:**

A very time consuming and unproductive style of interaction is to rehash and replay past arguments and conflicts. In this pattern both partners tend to take on the role of the "prosecuting attorney", seeking to prove the rightness of their recollections. In so doing, they operate on the "myth of the immaculate perception", assuming that they can accurately remember what occurred in the past. The over-generalizations "always" and "never" are frequently used. In some cases, this temporal expansion of conflict will also involve negatively predicting the future and anticipating the worst. Conflicts can only be solved in the present. Resist the temptation of becoming the relationship historian and engaging in time travelling. You might ask yourself: By going back to the past, am I just trying to establish blame and win out over my partner so that I can feel

superior? By going back to the past, am I avoiding issues in the present, trying to distract everyone's attention? Rather than playing archaeologist, concentrate on the present.

### **9. Intellectualization and Avoidance of Feelings:**

Some women are taught that if they communicate feelings or openly show affection that they will be too "forward", and men often perceive emotional expressiveness as a sign of weakness. It is acceptable for men in our society to express anger or happiness, but it is often thought to be unmasculine to express fear, hurt, weakness, tenderness, or to cry. Because of this stereotype of masculinity, many men are ill-prepared to enter into intimate relationships, and women often complain that they lack tenderness and emotional expressiveness.

Due to their difficulty in expressing tenderness, some men may instead express anger or make belittling remarks. An example of this "negative-for-positive substitution is the man who inwardly feels concern and sympathy when his wife burns her fingers, but instead of expressing his tender feelings, he responds in a stereotypic "manly" way by criticizing her for doing such a "stupid" thing. Intellectualizers will also often ask "Why" questions, which usually lead to rationalization and justification and away from feelings.

### **10. Over-emotionality:**

Instead of being emotionally inhibited, occasionally we see someone who tends to be over emotional and to over exaggerate and dramatize their views. They may use display of emotion to get attention, nurturance or sympathy. Others use over emotionality as a way of emotionally blackmailing, coercing and overpowering the partner. Sometimes over emotionality may serve as a diversionary tactic, distracting everyone's attention with a "sideshow." The person involved, however, often does not realize that they are not a victim of their emotions, and that they create them to a considerable extent by the way they think. I can recommend some books that will help you understand how we create many of our strong emotions, without realizing it.

### **11. Avoidance of Conflict:**

Conflict is unpleasant for most of us, and therefore, it seems almost natural to avoid it. Some of us, however, habitually avoid unpleasant feelings and situations and are what has been called "pain phobic." Such persons engage in "gunnysacking," suppressing negative emotions. They may play the role of the "placater" or "nice guy", trying never to disagree, acquiescing, and seeking approval. When asked, "What's wrong," they may dismiss it by saying, "Oh, nothing."

There is certainly wisdom in forgoing unnecessary conflict and concentrating on the positives in a relationship. Too many couples crucialize minor situations and fight at the drop of a hat. This can be carried to an extreme, however, where the individual adopts a "peace at any price" philosophy. We need to learn to avoid the extremes of suppressing all resentments or of venting anger in destructive attacks. The goal is to express negative emotions constructively.