

How to handle conflict

(See also my article on how to have a *good* argument).

1. *Don't try to make your partner change!*

Someone recently asked me what I thought was the best piece of relationship advice.

I have one. But it needs to be hedged about a bit with disclaimers, because there are all kinds of different situations in relationships. If you have a partner who is, for example, abusive, addicted, unfaithful, or suffering from problems such as ADHD or depression, then that's a **different** situation. I'm sure you can think of other situations where the following advice doesn't apply!

But in general, if you are unhappy with your relationship, don't assume it's all about your partner. **Assume it's something about the way the two of you are interacting.** Don't assume that they are trying to annoy you, or don't care about you. And especially don't try to change them, because that rarely works, and usually just annoys them.

Start by trying to figure out what **you** are doing that keeps the pattern going. It may be not so much what you say as how you say it. Make changes to **yourself** and see what happens. Try to change yourself, in the direction of not getting caught up in whatever it is. Change your reactions. Don't try to figure out your partner's thoughts, feelings, motivations, or causes for how they got to be how they are, but focus on trying to understand your own. Don't try to control or cure your partner. Do not ask for promises to change from them, and don't accept promises if they offer them.

This doesn't mean I'm saying it's your fault. Quite the opposite. If you are blaming yourself, that's part of the pattern that you need to change. Whatever "the problem" is, you need to stop participating in it, because that's all you *can* do.

If you succeed in **changing yourself** and distancing yourself from "the problem", see whether you get a corresponding change from your partner. If they respond in turn, that's good. If they don't, it may be time for counselling, or thinking clearly about whether the relationship needs to end. If it ends, you will leave it with the benefit of knowing that you've grown and improved for whatever's next, and that you gave it your best shot. Improve yourself, so that you won't repeat the same pattern again with someone else.

I am nervous writing this, because no advice is ever applicable to every situation. Nevertheless, this applies to a lot of things I see.

2. Find something to agree with

If your partner is "giving you a hard time" criticising you, see if you can find *something, anything*, in their point of view, that you can **agree** with.

Most people do the opposite. If they don't like what they are hearing, they'll look for any little point they can correct. "It wasn't a Tuesday, it was a Wednesday". If it's in writing, they'll point out a typo or a spelling error. If they can't deal with the point, then they'll say "you've said this 100 times before", or "you've never said this before", or "there's no need to shout". Or "now is the wrong time to bring this up". They look for any irrelevant reason to reject the message.

My recommendation is, look for something in what they are saying that you can sincerely **agree with**. Not sarcastically. Ask for more information if you need it.

How does this work? Suppose your partner says “whenever you get in from work, you just slump down and watch television”. You can tell from the tone that it’s a criticism. The **worst** thing you can do is say “not every night”. Getting all defensive, contradicting over pointless details. Or saying “but you...” and counterattacking. Slightly less bad would be to explain: “I’ve just got in from a commute where I’m on the train for an hour and I don’t even get a seat” or whatever. That may be a good point, but it’s not the best tactics.

It might be better to **agree**. Say “yes, I guess I do” and see what comes next. If more information doesn’t follow, ask: “does that bother you?” It’s important that these enquiries are sincere. Find something you can agree with. If your partner says “it’s really annoying”, perhaps you could say “yes, I can see it could be disappointing”. Keep your sentences short and non-defensive. A similar approach might work if the criticism is “you always talk so much”, or “you never say anything”, or “you eat too fast”, or “you eat too slow” ... start by acknowledging anything that you possibly can.

Ideally, at some point, they will stop trying to prove to you how bad you are, and come up with an actual request for things to be different in the future, which you can then discuss.

3. How to Apologise

Suppose you’ve done something that upsets your partner, and want to apologise?

If you don’t regret what happened, then **you shouldn’t give an insincere apology**. But if your partner is upset, it probably *was* regrettable. It’s no defence to say that you wouldn’t mind if they did the same to you: you are not both the same. And it’s no good trying to counter-attack by saying that they are making too much “fuss”. It has to be an apology. Not a defence.

What is an apology? **It doesn’t mean just saying the word “sorry”**. It means that you show that you really understand how it affected them and how upset they are. It means responding to their pain. In order to do this, you may need to ask them questions to understand better what is going on. That may seem like the exact opposite of what you feel like doing. You want to tell your side of the story. Don’t do that. Ask more about the effect on them. “I need to understand more about how you feel about it”.

Validate what they say. That doesn’t mean agreeing with it: it means saying that you can understand it, it makes sense. If you can’t say that, then you need to find out more. Validating it is the opposite of trying to prove that their feeling is “illogical” or unjustified. If you think they are over-reacting, then your task is to **ask more questions** to find out why it’s such a big deal to them. Then you can say sorry.

And finally, explain how you plan for things to be different in future.

If you are afraid of apologising because you think that it will be held against you for ever, it may be a case for some counselling.