

Negative Interpretation in Marriage Seeing Things Worse Than They Really Are

The Four Conflict Styles in Your Marriage – Part 4

By Dr. Kevin Downing & Dr. Peter Robbins

Researchers now claim that they can predict if a couple's marriage will end in divorce with about 90% accuracy. They have identified four conflict styles that best predict divorce. We have done articles on the first three of these styles and now come to the fourth and final one - Negative Interpretation (and its big brother, Mind Reading). We have come to call these conflict styles the Four Pipelines of Poison. As a marriage counselor of more than 25 years I have witnessed couples who have successfully eliminated these types of conflicts from their marriage. The results are always dramatic and wonderful! But, if these conflicts are allowed to fester with your mate they can erode the wonderful gift your marriage was intended to be. So, let me tell you a story about Negative Interpretation...

I counseled a teen one time who told me her step-father would constantly say to her over and over again, "You're a teenager, you're out of control." The teen told me, "I come home after school, do my homework and don't go out at night – I'm not sure where I'm out of control." She said that she felt that no matter what she did, her step-father would never be happy with her and that she was feeling hopeless about their relationship.

Negative interpretation is when one partner (or family member) believes that the intentions of another are more negative than they really are. This belief diagnosis', labels, or pigeon holes a loved one. It can say...

- "He/She doesn't care about me."
- "I can never depend on them - I'm going to have to do everything myself."
- "That's a woman for you." (Or - that's a man for you.)
- "He's hopeless." (Or - she's hopeless.)
- "I can't believe anything they say - it's all one big act."

Many times these internal judgments are hard to detect. They tend to center on a belief that one's spouse is inherently bad, selfish or has a negative intent towards them or other family members. (These types of judgments are sometimes easier to see in other arenas like racial prejudice or discrimination against youth or the elderly.)

If the internal judgments made against a spouse are strong and deep enough it may somehow justify ongoing anger, resentment and aggression through criticism or disrespect.

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I don't think that I have ever met a married person who at one time or another hasn't gotten at least somewhat self-righteous towards their mate. At times most of us believe we are "above" our spouse's level. This is a type of Negative Interpretation. I am cut to the quick when I remember the words of the Apostle Paul who declared that I am guilty of the things I judge others for... and that includes my mate.

"...for at whatever point you judge the other, you are condemning yourself, because you who pass judgment do the same things." Romans 2:1

Help for Negative Interpretation.

1. Recognize that your mate is a child of God, on loan to you for only a season - called life. (Your spouse is God's child before they are your husband or wife.)
2. Know that God will one day ask you, "How did you treat my child?" (I.e. you are accountable to God for your actions towards your mate.)
3. If you struggle with judging your mate remember that your judgments cost you time and mental resources. Focus on resolving your own problems and accomplishing your life mission. (If you don't know what your life mission is - it's time to identify it! If your life focus is on someone else's problems you are losing out on life!)
4. Also know that God loved you when you were unlovely. But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us. Romans 5:8. God has called you to now pass his love onto your imperfect mate.
5. Watch out for "Hollywood" expectations in your marriage. These are the expectations that are way too high where your mate is to anticipate your needs, know what you want without you asking and the like. God is your Source not your mate - even your spouse can not and will not make you a whole person. You married a human being who will at best understand you some of the time. When you lower expectations that are too high you will find yourself not being as disappointed by your mate.
6. If your spouse has a negative interpretation of you, confront them. Ask your mate to put their feeling out on the table (as painful as this might be). Ask yourself if his or her judgments are valid, realistic or reasonable. If they are, there may be some changes you need to make. If they are not - you may need to get some help for your marriage. A professional Christian counselor can help a spouse who is harboring Negative Interpretation and judgments.
7. See "A Lasting Promise" by Scott Stanley Ph.D. to read more from these researchers.

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