

Criticism in Your Marriage

Have you ever wondered how to communicate with your loved one without criticizing? What to do with that spouse of yours who just keeps criticizing?

You can now predict whether your marriage will succeed or end in divorce with over 90% accuracy. We have just completed a series of four articles highlighting what researchers declare to be the four best predictors of divorce (and how to avoid them). These predictors consist of four styles of conflict found in marriage. If you will eliminate these four conflict styles your marriage will have far greater odds of surviving and thriving.

Many studies on the topic of criticism in marriage have also been conducted and some researchers consider criticism to be a major contributor to divorce as well (see Dr. John Gottman's book *Why Marriages Succeed or Fail*). Gottman says criticism involves "attacking someone's personality or character - rather than a specific behavior - usually with blame." (I sometimes call this type of criticism - character assassination.)

After 25 years of providing marriage counseling, I can tell you that criticism is one of the deadliest things we face in our marriages. I simply don't allow it in the counseling room and I show couples how to avoid using criticism. Never-the-less, for those of us who are married, it seems to be an easy thing to move from complaining about what our spouse is or is not doing to criticizing who they are. It may sound like this...

"You only care about your friends. You really don't care about us anymore." "You keep leaving messes for me to clean up. You are like one of the kids. I can't trust you anymore."

And then there is what Gottman calls "kitchen sinking" - this is a rapid fire list of criticisms that is sure to blow the circuits of any mate. It goes something like this...

"You don't listen to me - ever! And heck, you give the dog more attention than me. I don't believe it - you can love the dog, but you won't love me. And you never do a darn thing around the house. I can't be with someone who is so stuck on themselves."

So how do you respond to that?

Have you ever had 14 basketballs thrown at you, at the same time? That's what it feels like to be the target of this type of attack.

First, let's get an understanding of the good and the bad of criticism. Then we will look at the natural knee-jerk reaction to criticism.

We talked in a previous article about escalation in marriage. You may recall this is when - he yells - she yells - over and over - hotter and more intense until there is a giant eruption of ugliness. We have noted that this

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pipeline of poison has nothing redeemable about it - nothing good will come from it, because we deeply regret what we say at the height of our anger.

Criticism Is A Different Story.

There is something of value buried deep inside of each criticism - it is a request - a deep desire and longing for something we want from our mate. By using criticism this request is being expressed in the most dysfunctional of ways. It is the guarantee that we will NOT get what we want.

Because criticism is so often a deep and personal offense, the natural response is to defend ourselves or to attack our spouse. It's common to see couples go into "attack/defend mode" over and over again, shuffling through their criticisms like a deck of cards to the point of exhaustion and complete hopelessness. Trying to get a spouse to think differently about you through verbal debate is almost always a fruitless endeavor. Attacking back and attempting to prove that your mate is "worse" is a prescription for more pain.

Criticism is usually where "rabbit trails" begin. If the conversation between you and your mate gets a little uncomfortable, one of you can usually change the topic very quickly by launching a criticism. Outraged by such a notion, the person receiving the criticism will attempt to defend themselves and there you go ... the topic is flipped to debating the critical comment!

Here Are Some Simple But Profound Guidelines For Dealing With Criticism...

1. Declare a truce on criticizing each other - Start by declaring a 24 hour period with no criticizing. Imagine a full day without criticism! You will find out just how hooked on criticizing you are with this simple exercise.
2. Change all Criticisms into Requests - when you are tempted to criticize, ask yourself - "What do I want? I'm very unhappy with my spouse right now. I know what I don't want but what is the flip side of this? What is it that I really want right now?" If you can't figure out what you do want then you need to stop trying to communicate until you do know.
If you are being criticized - don't defend yourself or attack back. Practice self control and say, "You seem really upset with me - what is it that you want from me?"
3. Change Requests that are vague to Requests that are Observable and Measurable. - I remember one wife who asked her husband to be "more thoughtful" so he bought her a subscription to Field and Stream magazine. Of course he didn't know what she meant by the words "more thoughtful" and so it was meaningless communication.

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A criticism that says "You are such a slob" can be changed to a request that says... "Would you please pick up after yourself?" This vague request can be made observable and measurable by asking... "Would you pick up all your dirty underwear from the horizontal planes of our bedroom (i.e. the floor, bed, dresser top, etc.) before you go to work each morning for the next two weeks?"

Want to Go Deeper?

Couples who are truly great communicators understand the symbolic meaning of their requests - that is the deeper issue. Couples often come into counseling saying that they argue about the silliest little things - like how to squeeze the tooth paste or which way to put the toilet paper on the holder. These are not little things; they are usually deep with symbolic meaning such as trust, care, value, tradition, conservation of family resources and the like.

The couple arguing about the dirty underwear is really talking about respect. The wife felt deeply disrespected that she had to either live in or clean up her husband's mess. When she stopped criticizing and made a clear request explaining why this was so important to her (and avoided "rabbit trails") she got her husband's attention.

The World's Greatest Criticizer

I had the good pleasure of counseling a woman who simply had to be the world's greatest criticizer. I have to admit that I was in awe at her absolute hard core ability to criticize. I can remember sitting back and thinking, "Wow, this lady could win some kind of award - she is amazing!" Her husband was a pot smoker and there was nothing good she could say about him - from the way he chewed his food, to his driving, or the way he snored at night. She was also one of the hardest working people I have ever counseled. Her desire to change over shadowed any and all short comings she possessed. In time she became one of the world's greatest requesters. One Mother's Day (instead of criticizing) she composed a Wish List for her husband. It started with something like this - "Dear Husband, if you would like to have an immensely happy wife this Mother's Day you can do so by getting me one of the following..."

She listed about eight items each with a box to check next to the items she desired. Much to her surprise she received several things off the list (not just one!). She promptly rewarded her husband by telling him how happy she was and gave him a huge, heartfelt hug. (This was a major change from the "if only you had..." or "why couldn't you have..." she used to respond to him with). Her husband began to learn that he could make his wife happy. This took a long time because he had come to believe that there was nothing that he could say or do that would ever please her.

So what happened with this marriage?

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In spite of the fact that she became an excellent requester, her husband would not give up his pot and she really struggled with staying married to him. She was lonely and the kids had an absent father. After much debate and prayer she decided to stay. She would love this man with his addiction. Years later she gave me a call. Her good requesting had got her husband to go to church with her. In time his heart was won over to Christ and he fell deeply in love with his Maker. There was no going back for either now. The world's greatest criticizer became the world's most grateful wife.

From Scriptures - Some Nice Alternatives to Criticizing

“Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.” - Philippians 4:5-7

“In the morning, O LORD, you hear my voice; in the morning I lay my requests before you and wait in expectation.” - Psalm 5:3

“Some people that made requests in the Bible... Then Jesus answered, ‘Woman, you have great faith! Your request is granted.’ And her daughter was healed from that very hour.” Matthew 15:28

“Then Queen Esther answered, “If I have found favor with you, O king, and if it pleases your majesty, grant me my life—this is my petition. And spare my people—this is my request.” Esther 7:3 (and with that Esther saved her entire nation!)

“Jesus summed it up by saying... So I say to you: Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you.” - Luke 11:9

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