

Turn Criticisms into Requests

by Kevin Downing Ph.D. MFT

A criticism is a request gone bad.

We criticize because we want something. But when we criticize our request is not heard. The criticism puts our loved one on the defense – and defensiveness only breaks the closeness or **emotional bridge** that we desire. Rather than the **safe harbor** we long for in our loving relationships – we create a war zone – a road to escalation (e.g. attack – defend – attack – defend – over and over.)

Requests start with:

“Will you...?”

It’s a pretty vulnerable thing to ask, “Will you...?”. You could get a big fat “NO” response. But you can’t have **intimacy** without **vulnerability**. Intimacy is the great expectation of marriage and family relationships. It is the **emotional bridge** – or what is called “oneness”.

Requests need to be...

A) Humanly possible.

B) Something that we are willing to do.

Don’t say “yes” to a request without the above two things.

If you are **forced** to do something, it’s not a request it’s a demand or obligation. Demands and obligations can be imposed on you by others – or by yourself! (This is when someone makes a request of you, but you hear it as a demand or obligation. This is a major problem!)

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You can ‘yes’, ‘no’ or offer alternatives to a request. (Alternatives are generally better than a straight up ‘no’ response. They say, “I’m trying to work with you.”)

When you are tempted to criticize, ask yourself – **“What do I want?”** If you don’t know specifically what you want it’s better to stay quiet until you do know.

When faced with a criticism don’t defend yourself – instead ask your partner...

“What would you like?”

(You can add, “Sounds like you are not happy with me. Would you tell me what you want?”) You’re looking for a **concrete – observable and measurable** request.

Example...

Criticism – “You’re such a slob. I can follow the trail of your messes all around the house!”

Request – “Will you... pick up your dirty laundry off the horizontal plains of our bedroom (i.e. bed, floor, dresser, etc.) Monday through Friday for the next two weeks?”

Next, know the **Deep Symbolic Meaning**.

In the above example– The conversation really was not about dirty laundry. It was about **respect**. Respect is the deep symbolic meaning of their interchange. So ‘little things’ on the surface are really ‘big things’ because they symbolize deeper issues.

Homework: sit down and make a list of the things you want from your loved one. Get in touch with what you’d like to have. Make them specific and concrete.

Go for one full week – no criticism - only make polite requests. You can do it!

Adopt this healthy family ground rule. It says...

“You can ask for anything you want has long as you are polite and respectful.”

So, no one gets the “raised eyebrow” or “disapproving scowl” for making requests.

This way everyone in your family has a voice!

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Spiritual Insight:

We are instructed to bring our **requests** to God with prayer and petition with thanksgiving. It's probably a very good idea to approach each other in a similar way.

Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your **requests** to God.
Philippians 4:6

Jesus said,
Until now you have not asked for anything in my name. Ask and you will receive, and your joy will be complete.
John 16:24

You desire but do not have, so you kill. You covet but you cannot get what you want, so you quarrel and fight. You do not have because you do not ask God.
James 4:2

You'll be surprised to see what doors open when you make polite heartfelt requests. Shed the criticism and enjoy the power of "asking"!

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