



RELATIONSHIPS

The Art of Complaining: Getting Your Concerns Across Without Criticizing

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Introduction

You've been home all day trying to take care of the sick kids and also trying to get some work done. Your partner comes home to find chaos, cranky kids, and no dinner on the table. Your partner angrily points out that you've been home all day and still haven't taken the trouble to get dinner ready while they have been at work all day. You feel criticized and blamed, and lash back in anger, and the two of you spend the rest of the evening in stony silence avoiding each other.

Day-to-day stresses can affect how you and your partner communicate with each other. Some ways are positive for the relationship, others are negative. Some people are good at expressing their concerns to their partners. But sometimes concerns come across as criticism. It can be difficult to communicate with each other when there is too much criticism in a relationship. Criticism can feel like a personal attack or judgment and blame. Criticism can make a person feel defensive. The person may react with anger. Complaints can also be unpleasant. However, carefully expressed

complaints can help partners understand each other better in the long run.

How do you know when you are complaining and when you are criticizing? Most couples experience criticism in their relationship. Reducing the amount of criticism can lead to a stronger relationship.

Reducing the amount of criticism can also help you better maintain that "magic ratio" that is described in the fact sheet "*A Fine Balance: The Magic Ratio to a Healthy Marriage*," HHS-744-W. Learning the difference between complaint and criticism can help you decide how to interact with your partner so that he or she can understand you better.

The difference between criticism and complaint

Criticism. The information expressed through criticism is usually not specific. It may have blaming in it. The expression is usually harsh and judgmental. It may cause the other person to go on the defensive and become angry. Criticism tends to focus on a person's character or personality.

Examples of criticisms

- You never help around the house; you're so lazy!
- You're so messy. You always leave stuff everywhere!
- You never take me anywhere fun! We spend all weekend cooped up and bored!

Complaint. This can be a specific statement of anger, unhappiness, or other negative feeling. You tell your partner that you are angry, unhappy, or displeased about something they have done. Complaints provide your partner with specific information about your feelings. They also provide specific information about your partner's behavior that bothers you.

Examples of complaints

- I am angry that the trash was not taken out earlier this morning even though I asked you to get it out there before the trash pickup.
- We made plans to meet for lunch today. When you didn't show up, it made me feel like you didn't care about me.
- It upset me when I came home and the laundry was still in the washer. You had promised me that you would put it in the dryer before you left for work.

Compare and contrast: Criticisms and complaints

Criticism: You never want to do anything fun with me!

Complaint: I feel lonely and neglected when I am home alone most nights of the week because I want to spend evenings with you. Can we find a way to spend more time together?

Criticism: You are so irresponsible — you always leave the lights on every night.

Complaint: It upset me when I came downstairs this morning and found all the lights on. We agreed last night that our last electric bill was too high. Can we agree that the last person going to bed makes sure that lights are turned off downstairs?

Criticism: You never want to spend the holidays with my family! You are so selfish!

Complaint: We agreed that this year we would spend Thanksgiving with my parents. I felt hurt and ignored when different plans were made with your family because it broke our agreement. Can we agree to discuss any possible changes in plans before they are made with other people?

The words and the tone of voice you use to talk to your partner can help you decide whether you are criticizing or complaining. Think about a recent interaction with your partner. Consider the following when deciding whether you were complaining or criticizing:



- Is your tone of voice loud, angry, or blaming? This could feel like criticism to your partner. When expressing a legitimate complaint, consider your tone of voice. Try lowering your volume and changing the tone so that is less harsh or angry.
- Are you using words such as "always," "never," or "all the time"? These words are not very specific and probably are not accurate. They don't provide your partner with enough useful information. They may sound critical to him or her. Try providing a specific instance when your partner engaged in the behavior that bothers you and stick to that instance. It is more helpful for your partner to hear about the specific time when she did something to bother you rather than feeling like she is "always" to blame for your unhappiness.
- Are you using "I" statements? For example, "I feel angry" gives your partner very specific information about your feelings. "I" statements help you provide good information to your partner about how you are feeling. They also help you to take responsibility for your own feelings. "I" statements have four parts. I feel (state feeling), when (what occurred), because (what is the reason), and, finally, provide a possible solution, such as "Can we agree to ..." or "I would like ..." For example: "I feel disappointed when the trash is not taken outside daily because it begins to smell in the house. Can we agree to complete our assigned household chores?" Try to avoid using the word "you" because it starts placing blame, and the individual can become defensive.
- Can you give your partner some specific information about his or her behavior that is bothering you? This is a complaint about his or her behavior. It does not criticize your partner's personality. For example, saying "You are so self-centered" can feel blaming and judgmental to your partner. Instead, saying "I felt hurt when you forgot my birthday" gives your partner specific information about the behavior that hurt you without criticizing.

Criticisms usually focus on past events, hurts, and disappointments you may have experienced with your partner. Stay focused on the present or immediate issue, concern or behavior. Try to avoid “throwing in the kitchen sink” when airing complaints. It is best to focus on one issue at a time. Focusing on the feelings and behaviors that you and your partner are experiencing in the present can help you both express and air your concerns without criticizing or blaming.

Complaints can strengthen a relationship

According to marriage researcher John Gottman, no relationship is without criticisms. But criticizing can become a habit. This habit can be very damaging to the stability of a couple’s relationship. Complaints often express anger and other negative feelings. But they also provide your partner with more specific information that helps him or her better understand you and your feelings.

Activities to help you complain positively

The following exercises/activities will help you start thinking about how to implement the suggestions and strategies from this fact sheet.

- Think of three issues that you tend to criticize in your partner or your relationship.
- List these three issues in a journal.
- Now try to rephrase these criticisms so that they are less blaming and judgmental.
- Use “I” statements, take ownership for your own feelings, and provide information about the specific behavior that is bothering you.

Online resources

www.gottman.com/

The Gottman Institute: A Research-Based Approach to Relationships. Website provides information on John Gottman’s research on couple relationships, media resources, books, workshops, and training for the public and for professionals.

www.smartmarriages.com/

Smart Marriages: The Coalition for Marriage, Family and Couples Education. Website provides information on strengthening marriages and on marriage-related issues such as domestic violence and effective communication.

www.aamft.org/

American Association for Marriage and Family Therapy. Website provides links for professionals on issues related to family and couple relationships. Provides information on resources, current issues, and professional development opportunities.

References and resources

- Gottman, J. (1999). *The Marriage Clinic: A Scientifically Based Marital Therapy*. New York, NY: W.W. Norton & Co.
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- Gottman, J. & Silver, N. (2015, Second Edition). *The Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work: A Practical Guide from the Country’s Foremost Relationship Expert*. New York, NY: Harmony Books.
- Johnson, S.M. (2020, Third Edition). *The Practice of Emotionally Focused Couple Therapy: Creating Connection*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Markman, H.J., Stanley, S.M., & Blumberg, S.M. (2010, Third Edition). *Fighting for Your Marriage: Positive Steps for Preventing Divorce and Preserving a Lasting Love*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Tannen, D. (2007). *You Just Don’t Understand: Women and Men in Conversation*. New York, NY: William Morrow.

Successful relationships with an intimate partner require nurturing and attention. There are no quick fixes or fast-track methods to satisfaction and happiness in a long-term relationship. Most strategies for enhancing your relationship require repetition and practice over time. Six fact sheets from Purdue Extension – Health and Human Sciences address six areas of couple relationship challenges. The information in the fact sheets is based on research by prominent marriage and couple researchers such as John Gottman, Sue Johnson, and Howard Markman.

The titles in this series are:

HHS-742-W, *Handling Conflict with Your Partner and Staying Emotionally Connected*

HHS-743-W, *Making Time to Talk With Your Partner*

HHS-744-W, *A Fine Balance: The Magic Ratio to a Healthy Relationship*

HHS-745-W, *Increasing the Positives in Your Relationship*

HHS-746-W, *The Art of Complaining: Getting Your Concerns Across Without Criticizing*

HHS-747-W, *Sharing Dreams and Goals: Creating an Emotional Connection*

These publications are available at *Purdue Extension's Education Store*: edustore.purdue.edu