

Health and Human Sciences

Department of Human Development & Family Studies



relationships

The Art of Complaining: Getting Your Concerns Across Without Criticizing

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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. She angrily points out that you've been home all day and still haven't taken the trouble to get dinner ready while she's been at work all day. You feel criticized and blamed, and lash back at her 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 married couples experience criticism in their relationship. Reducing the amount of criticism can lead to a stronger relationship.



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 to 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**

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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.

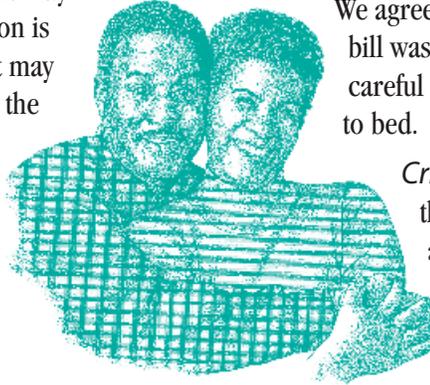
Examples of criticisms

- 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 he or she has 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 you didn’t take the trash 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: When you go out every night with your friends, I feel unhappy that we don’t spend as much time with each other as I’d like.

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. You said you would be careful to turn them off before you went to bed.

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.

When you made different plans with your family without talking to me, I felt hurt and felt you ignored my wishes.

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. 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.
- 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.

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

<http://novaonline.nvcc.edu/eli/spd110td/interper/reasons/reasons.html>

The Interpersonal Web at Northern Virginia Community College — Web site provides links to a variety of interpersonal communication and relationship issues and topics such as gender and communication, and verbal and nonverbal communication. It also provides links to research and other media resources.

www.gottman.com/

The Gottman Relationship Institute: Researching and Restoring Relationships — Web site provides information on John Gottman's research on couple relationships, links to other media resources, books, and workshops and training for the public and for professionals.

www.smartmarriages.com/

Smart Marriages: The Coalition for Marriage, Family and Couples Education — Web site provides information on strengthening marriages and on marriage-related issues such as gender, domestic violence, and effective communication. Also provides links to research, other media resources, legislative issues, and reports related to marriage.

www.aamft.org/

American Association for Marriage and Family Therapy — Web site provides links for the public and for professionals on issues related to family and couple relationships. Provides information on books, resources, workshops, current issues, and updates and training opportunities.

www.acf.hhs.gov/healthymarriage

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families: Healthy Marriage Initiative — This Web site provides numerous links to marriage-related research, articles, news, workshop and training events, marital and pre-marital education, and funding opportunities.

References and resources

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