

DEFUSING YOUR PARTNER

If your partner is constantly pouring out emotions, you may have become tired of listening. When one person is stoic, the other may carry all the worry, anger, or grief for the relationship. When reserved people shut others out, their partners feel compelled to try to get through to them. If the less emotional person learns to show understanding, there can be an infusion of love, romance, and even sexuality into a relationship. The following steps can begin to reverse this painful pattern:

1. You only need to understand your partner: When he or she is upset, take a deep breath and remember: you don't have to take the blame for problems or "fix" them.
2. Show your interest by asking questions and making listening noises: "Uh huh."
3. Show you understand by rephrasing, labeling feelings, and validating factors that contribute to emotions: "Are you saying . . . ?" "It sounds like you're feeling . . ." "It makes sense you would feel . . . because . . ."
4. Welcome tears: They can help the healing process. Offering your hand or arm can help release painful feelings. Do not discourage people from crying.
5. Do not invalidate feelings by saying, "You shouldn't feel that way," "Don't worry about it," or "I understand." (Show you understand, as in number 3 above.)
6. Do not express your viewpoint until you feedback your partner's ideas.
7. Do not offer solutions: Even if your partner asks you what to do, find out his or her ideas first. Pretend you are not sure what to do until your partner comes up with a plan.
8. When you disagree with your partner's views, ask how he or she reached that conclusion before you say anything. Point out what is good about such thinking even when it differs from your own. Do not agree just to pacify your partner. You do not have to agree to understand.
9. When you don't have the attention to listen, ask for a time-out. Assure your partner that he or she will have your full attention later and be sure to follow through.

DISTRESS BETWEEN PARTNERS

When your partner is upset with you, it can be especially difficult to follow the above strategies. In many relationships, people become stuck in parent/child roles, in which one person is critical and the other defensive. Be your own judge and strive to meet your own standards. This will free you to be more understanding and even playful in the face of your partner's disapproval. If you have been so beaten down that you've lost self-confidence, get help, because you must learn to feel good about yourself or you will always be at the mercy of critics. At times, both partners can be emotional and attacking. Each one is trying so hard to get his or her point across that neither is listening and the situation escalates. Generally, the person experiencing the lesser amount of distress will find it easier to break this cycle. After using the above strategies, you can fine-tune them with the following:

10. Label any disappointment your partner may be feeling: "You are disappointed with me because. . ." This will greatly reduce the intensity of the attack.
11. Give yourself the right to make mistakes so that you can take an honest look at yourself. Understand your shortcomings rather than condemn yourself.
12. Agree with any part of a criticism that is true, even if it is too harsh. Or admit to how you may have contributed to a problem. Agreeing with possible truths will take the wind out of a critic's sails.
13. If you have done something wrong, express your remorse and concentrate on sympathizing with your partner's distress rather than apologizing for your behavior.

14. Come up with a plan for specific changes that you are willing to make: Express your desire to change rather than make false promises.
15. If you are “in the doghouse” for something you did wrong, acknowledge what you did and give a little extra.
16. Decide whether your partner’s standards are right for you after carefully considering his or her complaint. Be willing to change some things about yourself but not everything.
17. If you decide not to comply with your partner’s requests, be sincerely sympathetic: “It must be hard for you when I don’t act the way you want.”
18. Help your partner become aware of his or her behavior in a lighthearted way: “You’re trying so hard to improve me”; “I hope you’re not charging too much for this educational moment”; “It really helps me sharpen my viewpoint when we disagree.”
19. If your partner tends to be too much of a caretaker, take responsibility for giving more. Look for little things you can do, rather than think that your paycheck or buying expensive items are enough. Ask, “Is there anything I can do?”
20. If your partner is passive and quietly resentful, find out what his or her preferences are before making any decisions about what to do or how to spend money. Reach compromises or take turns. Don’t always give in or try to get your way.
21. If your partner brings up “old” issues, empathize and investigate what is triggering it this time. This will relieve some of the frustration of having to go over it again. Often, people have to release their feelings with a compassionate listener several times before they can let go of a concern or get to the underlying problem.

EXPLOSIONS

When your partner’s distress is approaching an explosion, it is easy to feel helpless. The first step to regaining your power is to understand that people usually feel powerless when they are yelling. They think the only way they will ever be heard is by raising their voice. When others withdraw or argue back, shouting becomes louder. Several strategies can change this pattern. Practice different approaches and use the one that works best for you:

22. If you can, tell your partner that you will talk when he or she is calmer, and leave the room or house. Do something to soothe yourself and be sure to follow up later!¹
23. Focus on your partner and make listening noises if you cannot leave or if you do have the strength to withstand the storm. Do not try to talk yourself. While you’re looking at your partner, keep asking yourself, “What is really hurting him or her?”
24. Show that you understand your partner’s point when you see an opening (see number 3).
25. Do not try to reason or disagree with people who are fuming, because in that frame of mind they are unable to consider others’ ideas. After your partner has felt completely understood, he or she may be more capable of understanding you.
26. Do not tolerate physical abuse: You may need to separate from your partner until he or she is involved in therapy and demonstrates a commitment to making changes. Do not count on promises.

¹ See *The Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work* by John M. Gottman (Crown Publishers, 1999) for more information on resolving relationship conflict.