

HELPING YOUR PARTNER DEFUSE YOU

When you want to let off steam, it can be frustrating if you are open and your partner is closed. Some people have a hard time listening because they fear they will be criticized or they think they have to solve others' problems. However, there are things you can do to help such partners be more attentive:

1. Let your partner know that he or she is being helpful within two sentences of starting to talk: "You don't know how much relief I feel already!"
2. Assure your partner that you are not upset with him or her, but rather with yourself, your day, or someone else. Use the golden words, "It's not your fault."
3. Find a good time to talk: Don't insist on talking immediately.
4. If your partner gives you a solution (and that's not what you want), say "That's a good idea, but I'm not sure what I'm feeling. What does it sound like I'm saying?"
5. Appreciate any understanding your partner shows: "That's right. That's just what I'm feeling!" or, "That's almost it."
6. Remember that listening has more to do with skill than with love: If your partner seems insincere, it may be because he or she is just learning how to show understanding.

DISTRESS BETWEEN PARTNERS

When you are upset with your partner, it may be even more difficult to gain the understanding you want. This is especially true if you have become stuck in the role of the critic and question whether your partner can do anything right. The more you disapprove, the less likely he or she is to cooperate and the more upset you feel. Although your disapproval may feel completely justified, strong opinions suggest that you are seeing a situation only from your point of view. There are steps you can take to feel better about your partner and to help him or her be more cooperative:

7. Make every effort to thoroughly understand behavior before you criticize it: Let your partner know you believe there is a good reason for what he or she did. Once you understand what happened, you may not object to it.
8. Appreciate the good intentions behind your partner's behavior: "I know you were trying to. . ."
9. Point out good things about a mistake your partner made. Do not say, "I told you so." Remember to notice things your partner does that please you.
10. Encourage your partner to pay attention by saying, "There's something I'd like to say. Would you listen and tell me a better way to say it?"
11. Express your frustration in one brief statement that starts with "I": "I felt . . . when you. . . ." Do not blame, complain, or tell others what they should and shouldn't do.
12. Express the want behind your hurt with requests: "Would you . . . , . . . , or . . . ?" It helps to give choices. Do not threaten, order, or try to convince.
13. Identify (minimal) actions you can take when others do not meet your needs: Avoid extreme ideas such as divorce unless you are willing to act.
14. If your partner gets upset, say, "What you do is up to you. I only want you to consider my idea."
15. If it's a touchy subject, talk about it later, not while it's happening: "Remember when you . . . ?" "Would you . . . instead?"
16. Overlook unimportant mistakes: "Allow" people to do things their own way and trust them to eventually get it right. Give as little unsolicited advice as possible.

17. Act as if the change you want has already happened: “I’ve noticed that you listen to me more.”
“I appreciate the way you are starting to trust me.”

EXPLOSIONS

Frustrated efforts to talk or general dissatisfaction can cause an explosion. Even nonemotional people can hold in feelings for so long that they become enraged and make statements that can do irreparable harm. You may think you are simply expressing your feelings, but explosions always come out as an attack full of blame, accusations, and threats, and they rarely express the underlying hurt or frustration causing the problem. Even if you think you have to get your feelings out, you can take steps to do this in constructive ways:¹

18. Sort out your feelings before you go to your partner in anger: Write down how a situation makes you feel or talk to an objective friend. Writing or talking identifies and releases feelings, whereas thinking about a situation over and over simply intensifies emotion.
19. When you write, cover all four negative emotions: anger, sadness, fear/worry, regret/guilt. If you do not cover all these feelings, you may be avoiding dealing with some of your pain or unresolved hurt. Do not worry about how you sound in this part of your “letter.” You can rewrite it later or not show it to anyone. It’s just important to release what you are feeling.
20. Write down any caring, hope, appreciation, and understanding that you have for your partner after expressing negative emotions. After all, if you did not care for your partner, you would not feel so hurt.
21. Close your letter by describing the response you would like to hear: This can make you more open to receiving support and helps teach your partner how to be helpful.
22. Rewrite the first part of your letter (number 19) if it’s full of blame, criticism, accusations, or threats. Express the hurt and fears that underlie your anger and make simple requests that would help resolve the problem.
23. Ask your partner if he or she is willing to listen to what you have written. Pick a time when there are no distractions.
24. To avoid defensive reactions, first show your partner the part of the letter that expresses your caring (number 20) or describes the type of response you want (number 21).
25. If your partner is too upset to listen, take the time to understand how the situation is difficult for him or her: Show you understand by rephrasing, labeling feelings, and validating factors that contribute to your partner’s distress.
26. Write first! Later, bring up the issue with your partner when you can do so constructively.

¹ Strategies for letters to partners and other ideas in this handout are adapted from *Men Are from Mars, Women Are from Venus* by John Gray (HarperCollins, 1992).