

Complaining Well and Staying Out of the Past By Bruce Johns, Ph.D.

Be calm in arguing, for fierceness makes error a fault and truth discourtesy. –George Herbert

The verdict's in. Healthy couples argue. And how could it be otherwise? Thankfully, we see things differently (two heads being better than one). We have different family backgrounds, have been raised in different subcultures, and gender differences are their own challenge, all of which adds spice to marriage. With diversity running rampant between us, inevitably some desires and priorities won't line up. Disagreements will surface and disquiet the waters. The only way for a couple to avert some intense clashes of opinion is for one to quickly acquiesce or feign indifference, both of which can sow dangerous minefields.

So rather than dodging conflict, can we learn to air disagreements without harming the relationship? Yes. And the next few articles will identify a few basic principles which can help us transform friction into clearer vision and even greater closeness. Today we'll focus on two assists: complaining well and staying out of the past.

According to Dr. John Gottman, complaints focus on the problem at hand without inferring that the spouse's character or personality is really the root of the problem. Criticism, on the other hand, paints a partner with a black brush that doesn't even try to stay within the lines. Criticism uses all-inclusive descriptions for dramatic effect like "ever," "never," and "always." The other's character or personality is the focus of the attack. Let's consider some examples:

Criticism: "You didn't vacuum the floor as you promised. You're just always in your own little world, aren't you? Why did I even ask?"

Complaint: "You didn't vacuum the floor as you promised, so I had to do it when I didn't have the time or energy. That really bugged me."

Criticism: "Why do you keep putting your friends ahead of me? It never crosses your mind to ask me before you commit me to things, does it?"

Complaint: "You said you'd ask me before inviting someone over for dinner. I was looking forward to a quiet evening. I'm not happy about this."

If you had difficulty distinguishing why one was labeled a complaint and one was labeled a criticism, go back and ask yourself which one was more focused on the problem and which was more focused on personal flaws. Notice that offering a complaint does not mean pussyfooting around. Complaints can be direct and to the point. But complaints stay laser-focused on the problem, not the person.

Another trap that we easily fall into is arguing about the past. This is a hard concept for couples to wrap their minds around. "How can I tell him what he's doing wrong if I can't talk about what he did?" Actually, as the examples (above) show, you certainly have a right to voice a complaint. But frequently that's not where it's left.

We try to hammer home the point by bringing up additional examples from the more distant past that rehash how clearly it's the other person's fault. The spouse, understandably, feels attacked and, predictably, gets defensive, retaliates or withdraws. Arguments involving the past quickly devolve into a destructive game of pin the blame on the donkey.

Jill: "You didn't vacuum the floor as you promised. Why did I even ask?"

John: "I didn't promise. You asked if I thought I could get the floor vacuumed and I said yes. That's not a promise."

Jill: "Now you're just trifling with words. You told me you would get it done."

John: "I said I thought I could. The operative word is 'thought.' That's not a promise."

Jill: "Whatever!"

A better alternative is to give up trying to pin your partner down until he cries guilty. Instead, ask for what you want, without even rehearsing your grievance, unless your partner voices cluelessness about what you're referring to. Consider what the vacuuming example above might sound like if the focus was on the future rather than the past.

Jill: "John, going forward, if you say you'll vacuum the floor, I need to be able to count on you to get it done!"

No fuss. No mess. Just ask for what you want. And defensiveness can be handled in similar fashion.

John: "I was going to do it but then Jeff called from work and when I heard what had occurred there it upset me. I was distracted after that and forgot."

Jill: "I understand you were upset and got distracted. Nevertheless, if you tell me you'll vacuum, please do whatever you need to so you can remember to follow through? I need to be able to count on you."

John: "Sorry. Yeah. I can do that."

Staying fixedly focused on the future instead of the past avoids a multitude of sins. We're less likely to get mired in arguments about who said what or whose memory is right. Instead we focus on what we mean and what we want.

Marital disagreements are inevitable, even healthy. Complaining is legitimate. We have the right to speak up when our partner's standing on our toes. Complaints

keep the focus on the problem not the person. Asking for what we want helps us avoid the pitfalls that tend to mire couples in futile mud slinging about the past.