Habits of People Who Know How to Get Their Partners to Treat Them Well: Dealing with Differences

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All partners in long-term relationships feel dissatisfied with or disapproving of each others' viewpoints or actions at various times. Evidence suggests that some people know how to handle such moments in ways that cultivate respectfulness and receptivity in their partners. Others react in ways that make it very unlikely that their partners will be able to genuinely care. Studies suggest that the ability to react effectively when feeling upset is not optional—it is a *must* for anyone who hopes to have a satisfying intimate relationship. In this article I'll introduce six habits that are characteristic of people who are skilled at eliciting respect, caring and cooperation from their partners. I'll describe how people who know how to get their partners to treat them well go about doing it. To make it as relevant to you as possible, in some places I'll discuss how you can implement these habits in your relationship with your partner.

The Habits

People who are effective in relationships are generally open-minded and flexible, and they expect their partners to be open and flexible, too. Being open and flexible isn't always easy, especially when partners disagree about things that are important to both of them. But it is precisely when strong disagreements occur that the differing habits of effective and ineffective people can most clearly be seen.

Effective people use the first five habits discussed below to maintain open-mindedness and flexibility (Avoiding a Judgmental Attitude, Finding the Understandable Part, Identifying and Explaining What is at Stake, Offering Assurance, and Giving and Requiring Equal Regard). When needed, they also use a sixth habit—Standing Up for Oneself Without Making a Big Deal About the Fact that One Had To. This multi-step habit is used only in situations when, in spite of a person's open and flexible attitudes, his/her partner isn't willing to be open and flexible in return. While people who are effective may implement this sixth habit only occasionally, the fact that they have the ability to implement it (and previously have done so) appears to play an important role in helping them to stay relaxed, open and flexible in the initial stages of disagreements, and also plays a role in motivating their partners to be open and flexible in return.

Habit #1 - Avoiding a Judgmental Attitude

A hallmark of people who are good at getting their partners to treat them well is that they know that when they get upset with their partners, it doesn't necessarily mean that their partners have done anything wrong. It's normal to be upset when you're at cross-purposes. Nobody has to be right or wrong. In the same situation, you and your partner might have legitimately different priorities. You won't like the way he's doing things, but that doesn't necessarily make them wrong. Researchers have discovered that the majority of the time when people believe their partners have done something wrong, they really haven't. They just have

legitimately different wants, needs, priorities or expectations at the moment. Neither partners' priorities nor actions are wrong.

Studies suggest that concluding that one's partner is wrong when he's really not is a mistake you do not want to make. It's one of the most damaging things that people do in relationships. If you make this mistake, it will lower the odds that your partner will be able to see your needs or expectations as legitimate, will care about how you feel, and will be willing to make changes. Your accusation will arouse his natural defenses and make it very hard for him to keep an open mind. You'll breed ill will in him unnecessarily. There's nothing more demoralizing than being falsely accused. As a rule of thumb, if you feel that your partner's thoughts or actions are wrong, ask yourself…

- "Is it possible that there are other sane, healthy people who might not be upset with him if they were in my shoes?" (If the answer is "yes," then it's a mistake to adopt the attitude that your partner's thoughts or actions are *wrong*.)
- "Would my partner be as upset with me as I am with him if the roles were reversed?" (If the answer is "no," then your partner's thinking or actions probably aren't wrong—they're just different from what you wanted.)

Letting go of the idea that he's wrong doesn't mean that you shouldn't be upset. It's natural to feel upset when you and your partner are at cross-purposes. Nor does it mean that you need to just shut up and let him do whatever he wants. There's probably nothing wrong with your wants or needs either, and your feelings need to count as much as his. Letting go of the idea that he's wrong doesn't mean that you don't have the right to ask him to make some changes. It just means that the *reason* why he needs to be willing to change isn't because he's wrong, but rather because your priorities or expectations are just as legitimate as his, and when you two disagree, he needs to be willing to meet you in the middle.

It's important to recognize that you can prefer your own viewpoint or priorities without judging those who may disagree with you. You can even believe that you're right and others are wrong, as long as others sense that you're open to the possibility that you could be biased. It's normal to believe that your opinions or ideas about how to best proceed are better than the opinions or ideas of others. It's when you lose sight of the fact your opinions or ideas are just opinions, and you elevate them to the status of "fact" that you get yourself into trouble. There's a fine line between believing that your opinions or ideas are better, and *being certain* that they are better, but make no mistake about it—this line clearly distinguishes those who succeed in their relationships from those who fail.

While misclassifying your partner's behavior as wrong is a mistake, it's also a mistake to pretend that his behavior isn't wrong when it is. There are some things that almost everybody recognizes as wrong, and these include deliberate and intentional lying or deception, being sexually unfaithful or physically aggressive, breaking a clear agreement without good reason, badmouthing or undermining, violating privacy or personal space, or making an irreversible unilateral decision regarding something about which the other partner has strong feelings. If your partner has done one of these things, it's best to address it for what it is—just plain wrong. However, the way you do this will dramatically raise or lower the odds that he will be able to see that what he did was wrong and be willing to make it right. We'll discuss later how skillful people react when their partners do things that are clearly wrong. For now, it's important to

understand that the evidence from relationship studies clearly indicates that the majority of the time when partners get upset with each other, neither partner has done anything that is inherently bad for relationships. The way people treat each other once they get upset is often wrong, but not the things they get upset about in the first place. *Most* of the time when partners are upset with each other, neither partners' priorities nor expectations are wrong. Relationships start to slide when people mistakenly assume that there are "correct" standards of conduct to which they are entitled to hold their partners accountable. For example, consider the following questions.

- How much arguing is acceptable in a relationship?
- How much money should be spent on what type of things?
- How much of life should be planned out versus "make-it-up-as-we-go?"
- Should we work first and then play, or play along the way?
- To what extent is it okay to socialize with people outside of the relationship?
- To what extent is it appropriate for a person who is in a committed, exclusive relationship to wear sexy or revealing clothing in public?
- Who should do what chores around the house, and how often?
- How neat and organized should our life be?
- How much time should you put into your career versus family?
- How important is it to talk about our feelings?
- How much and what type of discipline should be used with the kids?
- How much time should partners spend together versus time with friends?
- How much time should we spend with our extended families?
- How much should we keep each other informed as to where we've been, and whom we've been with?
- What kind of sexual activities are acceptable (or expected)?
- How much financial risk should we take?

Studies suggest that there are a wide variety of legitimate opinions that partners can take on such questions. There are happily coupled and unhappily coupled risk-takers, and both happily and unhappily coupled conservatives. Some partners who place high value on personal freedom are happily coupled and some are not. Some partners who argue a lot are basically happy with each other overall, and some couples who argue a lot end up divorced.

Happily coupled partners often differ on important values and priorities, but they have one thing in common: They avoid concluding that their partners' values, priorities or opinions are *wrong*, and instead assume that there are many potentially legitimate ways to live life. People who are skilled in the art of relationships understand that if you assume the worst of your partner, you'll get the worst from your partner. Instead, they give their partners the benefit of the doubt—that is, they assume that there is a legitimate reason for their partners' words or actions, even if they don't know what it is yet. Beneath even seemingly provocative behavior on the part of their partners, they assume that there are legitimate dreams or priorities that their partners are trying to obtain. In contrast, when people who don't do as well in their relationships are faced with words or actions from their partners that are upsetting to them, they assume that their partners are acting this way because they have misguided reasoning, priorities, motivations, or intentions, or that their partners have faulty personality

characteristics (e.g., “my partner is just lazy,” or “controlling,” or “irresponsible,” or “insensitive,” etc.).

Many of us grow up feeling that we don’t have the right to be upset with someone unless that person did something wrong. So when we find ourselves upset we tend to automatically assume that the other person did something wrong. Successful people find a way out of this dilemma, realizing that it’s normal for people to get upset with each other when their expectations are at cross-purposes. Nobody has to be wrong.

Habit #2 - Finding the Understandable Part

When disagreements arise, most of us tend to think of our own position as reasonable and the other person’s as unreasonable. However, at some point in the argument, those who know how to get their partners to treat them well manage to find something understandable about what their partners are saying or wanting, even if they can’t agree overall. They seem to understand an important principle: If you want to receive understanding, first *give* understanding. If you fail to acknowledge *anything* about your partner’s viewpoint as reasonable, it will be very difficult for him to truly care about your viewpoint, regardless of how legitimate it is. If you want to make it as difficult as possible for your partner to see and acknowledge the legitimate reasons why you feel the way you do, just counter or criticize each and every point he makes during a discussion.

Many people are hesitant to acknowledge anything understandable about their partners’ points of view, thinking that if they give an inch, their partners will take a mile. People destined to succeed in their relationships don’t worry about this, because they know that they can always stand up for their own points of view later. There’s no rush. They know that just because they acknowledge something legitimate about their partners’ viewpoints doesn’t mean that their own viewpoints aren’t legitimate too. They are able to do two things in succession: acknowledge the understandable part of their partners’ opinions, and hold on to the legitimacy of their own opinions, if needed. If you have difficulty acknowledging the understandable reasons why your partner feels the way he does, it may be because you don’t feel confident that you can stand up for your own feelings effectively (Habit #6, below).

People who know how to get their partners to treat them well are good at finding reasons for their partners’ viewpoints and actions—reasons that are sometimes difficult to see at first. Here’s a list of possible reasons that might make your partner’s thinking or actions more understandable to you:

- Maybe he didn’t realize how important this was to you.
- Maybe he was having a bad day.
- Maybe he didn’t have all the facts.
- Maybe he was reading something between the lines that you didn’t intend to be saying.
- Maybe this issue was more important to him than you previously understood.
- Maybe he wasn’t upset so much about this particular situation as he was about where he feared things might be headed.
- Maybe he felt threatened by you in a way that you didn’t understand.

- Maybe he was afraid he was going to lose something very important to him if he did things the way you wanted.
- Maybe he was acting this way because he felt (or had recently felt) criticized or dismissed by you, and he felt resentful and uncooperative because of this.
- Maybe he just has really different priorities or expectations than you do. Maybe he was acting perfectly consistent with his priorities. You just don't like it because they are different than yours, but that doesn't make them *wrong*.

Relationships work best when you give your partner the benefit of the doubt, find the understandable part of his feelings or opinions, and also ask (and require, if necessary) him to give equal consideration to yours. But you can't skip the first step. Unless your partner feels that you at least partly understand the legitimate logic behind his viewpoints or actions, it will be difficult for him to be respectful of your feelings and opinions.

Habit #3 - Identify the Underlying Needs, Values and Worries.

Many times, people find that when they're motivated to keep open minds and they try to understand the logic behind their partners' viewpoints or actions, they no longer have problems with what their partners want. However, there are other times when they still find that they see things differently than their partners, or that they have different priorities or expectations. In these situations, skillful people try to dig beneath the surface and explain to their partners the important things that drive their priorities, preferences or expectations. Arguments often fail because partners argue about the wrong things. People who are destined to succeed in their relationships realize that the reasons they are upset or have trouble doing what their partner wants sometimes run deeper than the present situation. Often, there is something bigger at stake.

Your ability to explain the underlying reasons for being upset will help your partner become more cooperative and understanding. At some point during an argument people destined for success pause and take the conversation to a different level, saying something like, "OK, I think I just figured out why this bothers me so much… I'm worried that…"

Consider the following examples of common "bigger" reasons why you may be upset or unable to consider your partner's opinion or request:

- You're worried that your partner is sending a "bigger message" that applies to more than just the present situation *(for example, "Your opinion doesn't count," or "You are not as important to me as my work," or "I don't think you're intelligent enough to make good decisions," etc.*).
- You're worried that if you do what he wants (or if your partner keeps thinking or acting this way), you'll lose a dream of how you want things to be or a basic need or desire that is important to you. *(Example: You find yourself calling your partner "selfish" for joining a golf league on weekends, but what you're really upset about is that his golf precludes trips to visit your parents, and conflicts with a dream or priority you have of wanting your children to grow up close to their grandparents.)*

- You're worried about where this is going. The present situation bothers you because it may be a step toward something much worse. *(Example: It's not his staying out late with his friends last night that bothers you so much as your fear that he may make a habit of it—like your best friend's husband did before their divorce.)*
- It's not what he wants that bothers you so much. It's that you feel criticized or dismissed, as if he is saying you're wrong just because your wants, needs, or opinions are different. *(Example: Although you find yourself arguing about the fact that he wants to go into the office on Saturdays, what you're really upset about is his implication that you should be working on Saturdays too, rather than relaxing.)*
- Beneath it all, you're worried that what's happening now is similar to something bad that happened earlier in your life. *(Example: It's upsetting that your partner has stopped going with you to church, not so much because of the example he's setting for the kids [as you have argued], but because when your father stopped going to church he was also having an affair.)*

Unless you are able to identify the bigger issues that lie beneath your reactions in the present situation, you may end up arguing over superficial things and leave the real issues unaddressed. People who are destined to succeed in their relationships look for the bigger needs, dreams and fears at stake in any given situation.

Habit #4 - Giving and Asking for Equal Regard

The most successful intimate partnerships operate like democracies: one person, one vote. In a democratic society, when people go to cast their votes, there is no obligation to prove that their reasoning is good enough for their votes to count. Their opinions count as much as anyone else's, regardless of what anyone thinks of their reasoning. The same is true in successful intimate relationships. Successful partners are willing to give and take, regardless of whether they agree with each other or not. The willingness to give equal regard doesn't necessarily come at the front end of an argument. In fact, sometimes when researchers looked at the arguing style of partners destined to succeed, they couldn't distinguish them from partners destined to fail. The differences only became clear later, after each partner had exhausted his or her efforts to convince the other. Both successful and unsuccessful partners often argued vigorously for their own points of view, and showed little regard for their partners' viewpoints during the argument. However, in the end, successful partners were willing to count their companions' opinions and preferences as much as their own.

Relationship studies clearly suggest that if you want the kind of love and respect from your partner that most of us would like to have from our partners, when you disagree, you won't try to trump your partner's feelings or priorities with your own. Studies suggest that there's a line you simply can't cross in relationships and get away with it, and that line involves winning at the expense of your partner. The bottom line is, if you want your partner to treat you well, you need to be willing to count his feelings as much as your own, even—actually, *especially*—in situations where the stakes are high and you feel strongly about your positions. You can each argue persuasively and passionately for your point of view, but, in the end, if you're not willing to find a way to count your partner's viewpoints or preferences as much as your own, you're never going to have the kind of love and respect that you'd like to have from

your partner. Willingness to give equal regard is a fundamental requirement for having a satisfying relationship. If you aren't willing to compromise with your partner in areas where you disagree, you'll be putting yourself squarely in the company of people who rarely get the kind of love and respect from their partners that they would like to have. Studies suggest that if you're not willing to give equal regard, any attempts to get more respectful treatment from your partner will be fatally flawed. At The Couples Clinic, we see people trying to get their partners to treat them better all the time, while hanging onto the idea that if their own way of thinking seems better than their partners', they're going to stick to their guns and make sure that their priorities or preferences prevail. Even if you are able to implement all of the other predictive habits except this one, the odds are not good for the future of your relationship. But if you're willing to cut your losses and accept the idea of prioritizing Xx's expectations and opinions as much as your own (regardless of whether or not his expectations or opinions make sense to you), you will likely save yourself years of the kind of trouble you don't really want to have. I say "cut your losses" because let's face it: If you're like most of us, when you disagree with your partner, you want your own way. It seems better. When you and your partner want opposite things, if you prioritize his feelings as much as your own, you'll come away with only half of what you originally wanted. So will he. Of course, most of the time your needs won't be completely opposite, and compromise won't need to involve dramatic concessions. But the point is, regardless of whether the compromise involves large or small changes, people who are most successful at getting treated well by their partners are committed to equality. When they disagree with their partners, in so many words they say things like:

> "You don't even need to explain. If that's how you feel, I'm going to find a way to count your feelings as much as my own. It doesn't matter if they make sense to me or not. You're my partner; you're an intelligent person; there's no reason why my feelings should count more than yours. Let's try to figure out a solution that will work for both of us."

In contrast, people who fail in their relationships are often only willing to give equal regard if they feel that their partners' points of view are compelling enough to merit concessions. Of course, the problem is that most of us rarely find our partners' points of view as compelling as our own.

People who are good at getting their partners to treat them well tend to be open-minded and proceed through life with a certain degree of humility. They are able to say things like:

> "I still think I'm right about this, but I realize that there's a possibility that your viewpoint is better, and that I just can't see it. There's no reason why either of our viewpoints should prevail over the other. I'll keep thinking about it and try to keep an open mind. In the meanwhile maybe we can find a way to meet in the middle."

Habit #5 - Offering Assurance

One thing is clear from research on intimate relationships: Arguments don't have to be pretty in order to be productive. In fact, they can be downright ugly without causing lasting

negative consequences. Studies reveal that partners destined to succeed are often defensive, bull-headed, and unresponsive to their partners. The difference is that, after a failed argument, partners who succeed in their relationships are effective at repairing the damage, whereas partners destined to fail are far less successful at repair. This finding is of vast importance, because it means that partners who want to succeed don't necessarily need to do better in the first round of arguments. It is more important to be good at repairing than to avoid getting off track in the first place.

Researchers have found that there is a wide variety of methods that people can use to repair the damage of previous arguments, yet it is difficult to find any single method that works all the time. A self-depreciating comment might work well on one occasion, but the same sort of comment in another situation might make things worse. Even apologies are surprisingly unreliable in their reparative effect. That said, over the years one method has emerged as more reliable than others in successfully repairing damage done during previous arguments: the offering of specific forms of assurance. After a failed argument, people who possess this skill begin by asking themselves, "Did my partner think I was saying that he was *wrong,* or *out of line* in some way?" or "Did my partner think I was saying that my opinion or preferences should count more than his?" When arguments have gone poorly, the answer to these questions is almost always "yes." The most powerful thing that can be done at this point is to simply *offer one or two kinds of assurance.*

Type 1 – Assurance of non-judgment

Example: "Look, I was pretty worked up back then, and I'm sure you felt criticized by me, but I don't really think there's anything wrong with the fact that you don't care as much as I do about how clean the house is. I realize that not everybody is like me. I'm sure that there are some people who wouldn't be bothered by this sort of thing, and there are probably others who would. We may just have different priorities or preferences here.

Type 2 – Assurance of Flexibility

Example: "There's no reason why you should have to adopt my standards any more than I should have to adopt yours. I'm willing to try to find a middle ground."

Of course, you can't offer assurances such as these if you aren't really willing to be flexible or if you aren't truly open-minded about the possibility that your partner's viewpoint could be as valid as your own. If your attitude doesn't match your words, your partner won't believe you. The offering of an assurance is completely dependent upon your ability to shift from a judgmental to non-judgmental attitude, and your willingness to give equal regard.

People who use assurances to repair the damage of previous arguments also sometimes use them to head off arguments as they are developing. Have you ever had the experience of talking to your partner about something that bothered you, and even though you weren't blaming or accusing him, he reacted defensively? Sometimes our partners "read-in" criticism even though we're not feeling critical, or they may feel that we're trying to control them even though we're willing to be flexible. Skillful people avoid making a big deal of it when their partners misinterpret them (it happens all the time in relationships), and simply clarify by

offering assurances. If their partners are defensive, they take it to be a sign that they are feeling criticized or controlled, and simply offer assurances such as:

> "Wait! Why are you upset? I'm not saying that just because this bothers me that means you did something bad. I just don't think I understand why you did it."

When their partners accuse them of having a critical "tone" or "attitude," they resist the urge to debate whether or not their tone was critical. Skillful people assume that there may be at least some truth in their partners' perceptions. It's no big deal. They just start over again, and this time they're sure to add assurances that explicitly let their partners know they're willing to keep an open mind and be flexible. For example, they might say something like:

> "I didn't think I had a tone, but I'm sure I could be a little biased. Here, let me try again. I'm just telling you how I feel. I realize you may feel differently, and if you do, your feelings should count just as much as mine."

When skillful people realize that their partners' perceptions are correct, and indeed they are critical, they say things like:

> "OK, maybe I am being critical, and that's not fair. I'm sure there are reasons why you did what you did that I probably just don't understand yet. Will you just talk to me about them?"

Habit #6 - Standing Up for Yourself without Making a Big Deal About the Fact that You Had To

The five habits discussed thus far are all important predictors of relationship success, but unless a person also has the sixth habit, it's unlikely that he or she will be able to continue implementing the first five over time. With the first five habits, people make it easy for their partners to care about their feelings by doing things such as having more patience with, more open-mindedness toward, and giving more attention and consideration to their partners. People who implement these habits tend to receive cooperation and flexibility from their partners in return. But it doesn't *always* work this way. On any given day it's possible that, in spite of one's efforts to have a good attitude and willingness to work cooperatively, one's partner may not return the same kind of generosity and cooperativeness. Studies suggest that this happens in most relationships at times, and the ability to react effectively when it happens is not optional. It's one of the core requirements for having a successful relationship. People who are effective at these moments *require* that their partners make some adjustments in their attitudes and actions, but they do it in a way that makes it easy for their partners to make the adjustments. They know how to stand up for themselves without putting their partners down. In the paragraphs that follow, I'll summarize how they do this, step by step.

First, let's define what we mean by "standing up." *Standing up for yourself involves asking (and requiring, if necessary) that your partner give your priorities, viewpoints or preferences <u>equal regard</u>.* There are two situations in which standing up is needed in relationships:

When criticized harshly

The first situation that requires standing up for oneself skillfully happens if one's partner criticizes harshly. There are situations where a partner uses accusatory words such as "stupid," "dumb, "selfish," or "thoughtless" to describe his/her mate's viewpoints or actions. When their partners criticize them harshly, skillful people temporarily skip over the first five habits and begin the process of standing up for themselves without making a big deal of it (the sixth habit). They return to the first five habits when their partners show at least a minimal level of regard for their explanations or viewpoints. Skillful people realize that it does no good to persist in attempts to be reasonable with someone who isn't willing or able to be reasonable with them.

When a person is flexible and open-minded, but his/her partner refuses to do the same

The second situation happens when people approach their partners using the first five habits—they avoid criticizing their partners and instead ask their partners to give and take—but their partners won't! In spite of sincere attempts to keep open-minded and flexible attitudes, explain their viewpoints without criticism, recognize and acknowledge the reasonable parts of their partners' arguments, listen non-defensively, and assure their partners that they are willing to be flexible, their partners aren't willing to do the same. In these situations, people who know how to get their partners to treat them well begin the standing up process and return to the first five habits only when their partners show at least a minimal level of regard for their explanations or viewpoints.

The Standing up Process

People who are skilled in standing up for themselves begin with the attitude that it's normal for their partners to be biased toward their own viewpoints and to want to have things go their way, and they don't expect their partners to necessarily volunteer to give up ground when disagreements occur. They don't see it as a crime when, in the beginning, their partners are critical or inflexible. When this happens, they avoid making a big deal of their partners' temporary uncooperativeness and simply make it clear that they're going to need their partners to become more open-minded and flexible. They assure their partners that they are willing to do the same. If their partners don't respond, they express distress and reiterate that they don't expect their partners to adopt their priorities or to do things their way, but they do expect their partners to be respectful, flexible and willing to "give and take." If their partners still aren't willing, skilled people temporarily refuse to continue interacting with their partners and they distance themselves temporarily. During the brief time apart, skillful people avoid making a big deal in their minds about how awful their partners are for being inflexible or closed-minded. When they see their partners again, they're not mad anymore. They don't demand apologies or try to get their partners to see how awful they were acting. But neither do they drop the issue that didn't get resolved. They simply return to the issue they were disagreeing about, assure their partners that they're willing to try to be flexible and open-minded, and ask their partners to adopt a similar attitude. If their partners are again critical, closed-minded and inflexible, they repeat the standing up process again. Skillful people are willing to hit the reset button and

communicate open-mindedness and flexibility in several rounds of conversation. If their partners still refuse to do the same, skillful people make it clear that it doesn't feel right to them to pretend everything is okay. They inform their partners of their intentions to put some distance between them. They clarify that they're still willing to try to find common ground, and that they're only distancing because they don't know what else to do—it doesn't feel like their partners care about them enough to give their opinions and priorities equal regard.

Let's take a closer look at each phase of the standing up process.

Ask and Offer

The first reaction that distinguishes people who are able to stand up for themselves effectively from those who aren't is *internal*. It happens inside of them. When feeling criticized, dismissed or controlled, most people instinctively react with irritation, frustration, disappointment or alarm. This is true of both people who are effective and those who are ineffective in intimate relationships. The difference between effective and ineffective people is in what happens next. Ineffective people are more likely to conclude that their feelings are an indication that something really bad is happening and that their partners are really bad for doing it. They are more apt to hit the panic button and jump to negative conclusions about their partners' motivations. The "my-partner-is-doing-a-really-bad-thing" attitude shows through nonverbal expressions such as breaking off eye contact, eye rolling, a sigh, a frown, or a scowl. Partners are keenly attuned to such nonverbal expressions and they often play a prominent role when escalations follow.

People who know how to get their partners to treat them well are not immune to these automatic internal reactions. The difference is that whereas ineffective people "go with" these first reactions, effective people catch themselves in the act of having them, realize that their reactions are premature, and propose counter-thoughts to themselves. Ineffective people seem to have just one voice in their head whereas effective people have two. They have the same alarmed, "I've got to do something about this right now!" voice as ineffective people, but they also have another voice saying things like:

- "It's too early to panic yet. The sky isn't falling."
- "It's not exactly a crime that my partner is being critical or inflexible. It's natural enough to be biased toward one's own perspective and to want to have one's own way."
- "Maybe my partner just needs a friendly reminder that my opinions and preferences need to count too."
- "If my partner continues to disregard my feelings, I'll stand up for myself firmly in a few minutes, but it's too early to panic. There's plenty of time. There's no rush."

For skillful people, internal self-reminders like these have the effect of helping them lighten up and avoid making a big deal of their partners' temporary uncooperativeness. This lightening up is conveyed nonverbally.

As they lighten up inside, skillful people communicate a powerful combination of two distinct messages to their partners that clearly distinguishes them from less skillful people. They (1) ask that their partners keep an open mind and be flexible, and (2) communicate a willingness to be open-minded and flexible themselves, even if they don't agree. Most people communicate one or the other of these messages when their partners seem inflexible or closed-minded. Skillful people communicate *both* of these messages in tandem. There is both an "ask" component and an "offer" component in their messages.

Here are some examples of the sort of "ask and offer messages" that skillful people can often be heard communicating:

"Stop it! I'm listening!"

Notice the "ask" component in the above message ("Stop it!") and also the "offer" component ("I'm listening!"). Again, the strength of the message is in the *combination* of asking and offering. Either part in isolation will not have the same impact. Some other examples:

- "Don't! I'm sure you're trying to tell me something I need to hear. Don't make it hard for me to listen!"
- "Don't act like obviously you're right and I'm wrong! I need to feel like you're open to the possibility that there might be good reasons for why I'm thinking (or acting) this way. I'll try to do the same."
- "I'm trying to keep an open mind, but I'm having a hard time because it feels like you've already decided that I'm wrong. Can you slow down a little and just tell me why you're upset?"
- "I'm sure there's a sensible reason why you're upset. I'm just having a hard time listening, because I feel like you're starting with the assumption that I'm guilty before we even talk."

A skillful person whose partner is putting him or her down might say something like:

"Hey! You have my attention. You don't have to talk to me like that!"

When "ask and offer" messages are made skillfully, the people receiving them will sense that their partners are getting frustrated, but they'll also sense that their partners aren't trying to change the subject from the original complaint to the fact that they're feeling criticized. An "ask and offer" message involves a short protest, followed by an assurance of continuing interest in the reasons why one's partner is being critical or dismissive. The goal isn't to stop the conversation, or to change the direction; it's just to calibrate it somewhat. People receiving skillful "ask and offer" messages will sense that their partners would like to return to the main subject as soon as possible, rather than scolding them for having been critical, inflexible or defensive. People

communicating "ask and offer" messages make no attempt to get their partners to apologize for being critical, dismissive or inflexible. The goal is just to get their partners to shift into more flexible and open-minded modes with as little fuss as possible. When their partners become more flexible and open-minded, skillful people return to the first five habits right away.

Broaden the Scope

While a skillful "Ask and Offer" message is often all that is needed to get one's partner to be more responsive, sometimes people persist in being unresponsive in spite of their partners' efforts to be open and flexible. In situations like these, the differences between people who eventually get their partners to be more responsive and those who don't can clearly be seen. Less skillful people often jump to negative conclusions about the reasons for their partners' unresponsiveness, adopting simplistic, unflattering explanations such as, "My partner is a control freak!," or "My partner is selfish!" Skillful people are suspicious of such simplistic explanations. They "broaden the scope" and look for reasons that might not be directly related to the present situation but could none-the-less be influencing the dispositions of their partners.

The following guidelines are based on studies that have identified how skillful people "broaden the scope" when needed.

If your partner continues to be closed-minded and inflexible in spite of your efforts to be open and flexible, consider two possibilities:

1. He may be closed-minded and/or inflexible because he is feeling mistreated or taken advantage of by someone, or he's feeling a lack of control in another area of his life.
2. He may be closed-minded and/or inflexible because he's upset with you about another situation (or situations) where he felt that you dismissed or disregarded his feelings or opinions.

Ask him about these possibilities. Say something like,

> *"What's going on here? I don't get it. I'm not saying that you have to agree with me. I'm just asking you to be open to the possibility that I might have a point, but I feel like you're dismissing me at every turn. Are you mad about something else? Or is there something else going on? I feel like I must be missing something.*
>
> *or*
>
> *I don't get it. I don't expect you to just do whatever I want if you don't agree with it. I'm just asking you to work with me to find some kind of middle ground -- but it seems like you're not willing to give an inch. Why won't you compromise with me?*

If your partner is feeling mistreated or taken advantage of by someone, or he's feeling a lack of control in another area of his life, it would be natural for his defenses to

be heightened. Rather than criticizing him for "taking it out" on you, take some time to ask him about the other situation. Unless an immediate decision needs to be made, put your complaint on hold and lend a sympathetic ear. If your partner feels understood and supported by you in this other area, he will likely become more open and flexible with regard to your present concern.

If your partner is upset with you about another situation (or situations) where he felt that you dismissed or disregarded his feelings or opinions, he may feel entitled to disregard your feelings or opinions now as a way of "evening things up." Be willing to switch topics and talk about any unresolved feelings he may have. Unless an immediate decision needs to be made, put your agenda on hold until his concern is resolved. Your willingness to care about his feelings coupled with your ability to use the skills described in this article will likely lead to a resolution of his feelings and a constructive discussion between the two of you.

If he can't (or doesn't want to try to) identify any underlying reasons for his uncooperativeness, say something like,

> *"It doesn't feel okay that you seem to be so sure that the way I see things is stupid or wrong. It's one thing to disagree, but it feels like you're going beyond that and acting like I'm crazy for seeing things the way that I do. Would you please try to stop that?"*
>
> or
>
> *"It doesn't feel okay that you seem unwilling to count my feelings as much as yours. I don't expect you to just give in to appease me, but it feels like you're unwilling to make any adjustments at all. Do you understand why that makes me feel disrespected?"*

Temporarily Distance Yourself

If you show a willingness to discuss things that bother your partner, he will probably become more open and flexible in responding to your concerns. But it might not happen that way. In situations where it doesn't happen, there are two mistakes that people commonly make. The first mistake is to continue trying to be reasonable even though their partners seemingly have no interest in being reasonable in return. People sometimes fall prey to this mistake because they believe that if they continue "showing the way" by being reasonable and understanding, eventually their partners will become inspired to do the same. Usually, they won't. If partners don't respond to initial flexible and open-minded requests for mutual cooperation, continued offers to be reasonable usually have little effect unless they are accompanied by other messages and actions (described below).

The second ineffective reaction is to try to get their partners to see how unreasonable they are being. It's exceedingly easy to fall prey to this mistake when you truly believe that mutual regard is the answer to relationship problems. When they are trying and their partners aren't, some people resort to lecturing, whining, accusing and generally making a big deal of the fact that their partners don't seem to be trying, too.

Skillful people are able to let go of this compulsion. They understand that beyond a certain point, attempts to persuade one's partner to be reasonable when one's partner clearly hasn't the least bit of interest in doing so may actually fuel the partner's unreasonableness. After communicating clear regard for their partners' priorities or viewpoints, if their partners refuse to do the same, skillful people avoid banging their heads against the wall and accept reality: One can't make one's partner change; one can only make it more inconvenient for one's partner to stay the same. At a certain point, skillful people discontinue efforts to convince their partners to be respectful of their feelings and viewpoints, and they embrace the idea that things may need to get unpleasant before their partners are more motivated to be reasonable. They let their partners know that they don't want to be around them at the moment. They walk away, go into another room in the house, or even leave the house temporarily. As we will see in the next section, the distancing is temporary, and skillful people are soon ready to resume conversation. However, the willingness to temporarily distance themselves from their partners is often a vital part of the process leading to mutual respectfulness.

It's natural for your partner to be biased toward his own point of view and to want to have things go his own way. Especially when feelings are strong, the correctness of his point of view will often seem self-evident to him, and it will be hard for him to believe that you could really believe in your point of view as strongly as he believes in his. For this reason, your partner may not become flexible and receptive until you draw a line with him and make it clear that you won't tolerate inflexibility. Your situation is not unique; skillful people know this is often true of their partners, and they don't hold it against their partners when they need to draw lines with them. They simply let their partners know in one way or another that their patience is wearing thin, and they're not going to feel okay talking much longer unless they sense more respectfulness toward their points of view. Before skillful people break off communication, they "call the question," explicitly asking their partners if they intend to become more respectful of their differences or not. They say things like,

> "Okay, I feel like I've been trying over here, and I'm not getting anything back! It seems like you feel that my viewpoint is completely without merit and that I should just go along with whatever you want. Do you see *anything* that could be possibly legitimate about my viewpoint at all?"

People who make this kind of statement have begun making the shift from a "You must become more reasonable with me!" attitude to a "Maybe you need to do what you need to do, and I need to do what I need to do" attitude. They realize that, inconvenient though it may be, sometimes it's counterproductive to try to get change to happen quickly, and instead you must be willing to allow things to play out. It's a part of life, and if you try to avoid it, you'll create more trouble than you had in the first place. At various points in our lives, or in various life situations, most of us have needed the corrective experience of persisting in questionable activities until the inconvenience of natural consequences became compelling enough for us to sustain motivation to change. Skillful people understand this, and, when needed, they are willing to endure

periods of discomfort or disconnection in their relationships when, in spite of their assurances, their partners disregard their opinions and preferences.

Some people are reluctant to draw a line and walk away from their partners, because they fear that if they reject their partners even for a moment, their partners will escalate, rejecting them back and holding a grudge for weeks. These people drop issues or give in to keep the peace, rather than risk stirring the pot. Existing evidence suggests that this is a prescription for disaster. Often it's just a matter of time until the "peace-loving" partner begins feeling disregarded or taken advantage of, and consequently begins harboring (often unspoken) resentment toward his/her "willing-to-stir-the-pot" partner. To have a satisfying relationship, one must be willing to "stir the pot" when needed.

The "temporarily distance yourself" part of the standing up process involves a change of direction, an *acceptance* of something you didn't want. You didn't want a rift to occur. You wanted mutual respectfulness and collaboration. You reluctantly accept a period of emotional withdrawal, but are willing to do it because *all other alternatives are worse*. You know that if you continue engaging respectfully with a partner who is not willing to be respectful in return, you'll feel taken advantage of, feel resentful and you'll begin seeing your partner as selfish or controlling. You'll feel like you're trying harder than your partner, and you'll begin looking down at him, seeing him as difficult to get along with.

Sometimes people fail to draw the line with their partners because they're trying to "take the high road" or "be the bigger person. " They don't want to be uncooperative, because then they'd be treating their partners the same way their partners are treating them. The problem with "taking the high road" is the superior attitude that inevitably goes along with it. Studies confirm that temporary distancing from one's partner when needed is relatively harmless compared to the side effects that go along with "being the bigger person." A superior attitude, or a belief that one is more reasonable or mature than one's partner, is the single most destructive thing relationship researchers have identified to date. Technically, it's a form of contempt. People who understand relationships avoid it like the plague. When it persists, relationships end. It's almost impossible to avoid contempt if you allow your partner to disregard your feelings. If you repeatedly "take the high road," down deep inside you'll end up feeling that your partner is mostly to blame for your relationship difficulties. Evidence suggests that once you begin viewing your partner as "the main problem," your partner will sense this whether you communicate it verbally or not. This will arouse his or her natural defenses and send your relationship into a tailspin. Temporary rejecting of one's partner is much less damaging than allowing oneself to be disregarded, and then blaming it on him or her. People who are skillful in relationships realize that their partners are only as selfish or controlling as they let them be.

There are two ways of looking at the issue of who is to blame for situations where one partner's opinions are consistently disregarded by the other. One way focuses blame on the person who is disregarding the other's opinions. The other way places blame on the person who allows him or herself to be disregarded. Relationship researchers have found that both habits are equally predictive of poor relationship outcomes. Skillful people avoid both pitfalls. They are responsive when their partners

require equal regard, and they also see it as their responsibility to require equal regard from their partners when their partners aren't giving it. It's no big deal. They reason that everyone needs a partner who will "throw a little cold water in his or her face" when he or she gets pigheaded. It's one of the benefits of being in a healthy relationship.

It's really important to note that successful partners "throw cold water" (i.e., walk away) only after 1) they've made it clear that they're willing to be open and flexible, and 2) they've double-checked to be sure that their partners are really intending to continue being unresponsive to their pleas for mutual respect. Skillful people don't go around threatening to walk out if their partners don't meet their demands. They're not asking their partners for the world on a silver platter. They're asking for equal regard (not *more* regard). Less skillful people skip over the offering of assurances; they neglect to double-check their perceptions, and they walk away prematurely. This is a huge mistake. When people reject their partners every time their partners become critical or stubborn, without 1) clarifying their willingness to be open and flexible, 2) verifying that indeed their partners aren't going to give an inch, and 3) letting their partners know what they need in order to stay in the conversation, their partners often feel unfairly rejected, and often become even more uncooperative over time. Skillful people pull back from their partners only when their attempts to engage their partners in a mutually respectful dialogue are disregarded. Further, when skillful people walk away, it's more with a sense of frustration than it is with an air of defiance. Nonverbally, they're conveying, "I don't know what else to do!" and they are ***not*** conveying, "I'll teach you a lesson you won't forget!" As we will see in the next section, after temporarily distancing from their partners when needed, skillful people are not interested in shaming or blaming their partners for being closed-minded or inflexible, nor do they hold grudges. The power of people who are skilled in relationships seems to be in their ability to shift from one internal state to another. The most skilled among us are able to be forceful in moments when they need to put their partners in their places, and then are completely willing to start fresh when their partners become more cooperative.

Don't Make a Big Deal of It

People who progress this far in the standing up sequence have already done quite a bit, but studies suggest that if they don't continue with the next step, all of their previous efforts often amount to very little, when it comes to getting their partners to be responsive to their opinions and preferences. People destined to succeed draw the line with their partners and walk away when they need to, and then *they let it go*. They don't make a fuss about the fact that they had to walk away. To them, it's not the end of the world when their partners act in ways that require them to end conversations. "Standing up" is all in a day's work. In contrast, in the aftermath of an argument, people destined for relationship failure become consumed with thoughts that fuel anger and indignation such as:

- "My partner is so selfish!"

- "How could he treat me that way?!"
- "What is wrong with him?"

At similar moments, the thoughts of skillful people are very different:

- "It's not a crime that I had to stand up and walk away from my partner. It doesn't make him a bad person."
- "It's natural enough for him to want to have his own way. I don't blame him."
- "It doesn't have to be a big deal. He crossed the line; I made it clear that it wouldn't fly with me. No harm, no foul. No big deal. (I'll do it again if necessary! But for now, I can afford to relax and approach him with a good attitude.)"

Skillful people don't want to punish their partners; they just want their partners to treat them better, and they know that shaming, blaming, or "icing out" their partners will arouse their partners' natural defenses and make it less likely that their partners will be able to change.

Many people feel that if they don't make a big deal of how awful their partners were for being closed-minded or inflexible, their partners will think that they're "off the hook." They want their partners to learn a lesson they won't forget. This strategy simply doesn't work. People who influence their partners do it through a combination of tough and tender. If you're the type of person who holds grudges and "keeps up a wall," your effectiveness in getting your partner to treat you well over time will be relatively weak. People who are most powerful in influencing their partners stand up when their partners are behaving badly, and they allow themselves to enjoy being with their partners when their partners are treating them well. Intermittent periods of sunshine and storms are more life-enhancing than steady, dull overcast. People whose partners punish them emotionally over long periods of time often lose heart and conclude, "What's the point in trying; it's not going to make any difference anyway."

Almost without exception, we find that people who are best able to get their partners to be open-minded and responsive to their concerns are able to avoid making a big deal of how awful their partners are in the aftermath of an argument. Of course, it's difficult to "avoid making a big deal of it" if you've spent a lot more time trying to be open-minded and flexible than your partner has. Those who are able to temporarily distance themselves from partners who are treating them disrespectfully feel less taken advantage of and find it easier to avoid making a big deal about how their partners treated them than those who stay in conversations where they feel disrespected.

It's important to note that avoiding making a big deal about how bad one's partner has behaved is something that happens *inside.* When people keep their mouths shut but ruminate inwardly on thoughts about how awful their partners are, the internal attitude "leaks." Partners are very astute at picking up on attitude.

Try Again Later

People who know how to get their partners to treat them well let go of anger and avoid making a big deal of their partners' closed-mindedness or inflexibility in the aftermath of arguments, but that doesn't mean they are willing to just drop the issues that sparked the arguments in the first place if the issues didn't get resolved. It just means that they don't consider it exactly a crime that their partners were unresponsive during earlier conversations. They return to topics that are unresolved, and they do it skillfully. They don't demand apologies, nor do they try to get their partners to see how offensive their behavior was during previous arguments. Instead, they invite their partners to talk again about the subjects that sparked the arguments.

Follow up conversations don't always happen right away. Sometimes it's good to allow some time for emotions to cool. Other times schedules and life demands preclude immediate follow up conversations. After some initial distancing, skillful people engage cooperatively with their partners in meeting normal life demands (caring for the children, going to a social event already planned, etc.). They engage in non-hostile, cordial ways, knowing that they will bring up the unresolved topics again as soon as life allows.

Skillful people often begin follow-up conversations by offering another round of assurances, clarifying their willingness to keep an open mind and to give equal regard. Often, attempts to re-process issues get off-track because couples end up arguing about how they argued the first time (e.g., "You had no right to talk to me like that! You implied that my viewpoint was stupid!"). Skillful people resist the temptation to do this. Instead, they go back to the issues they were arguing about and try to talk about them again. They are prepared to use the first five habits—explaining their points of view without criticism or contempt, recognizing and acknowledging the reasonable parts of their partners' viewpoints, listening non-defensively, and assuring their partners of their willingness to be flexible. If their partners react defensively, they offer more assurances. If their partners continue to be defensive or critical, they avoid hitting the panic button, and they ask their partners to adjust their attitudes while assuring them of their willingness to try to be open-minded and flexible too. If their partners continue to be disrespectful, they again assure their partners of their willingness to be flexible, and then they call the question. "Are you going to return the favor?" If their partners don't, they walk away, and then refrain from making a big deal of it, and they try again later. Skillful people are willing to go through this process several times before taking their efforts to "stand up" to the next level.

If Necessary, Refuse to Continue Business as Usual

Most of the time, when people skillfully engage in the "standing up" process described above, their partners eventually become more flexible and cooperative. However, situations sometimes arise where people communicate open-mindedness, flexibility and willingness to give and take in several rounds of conversation, yet their partners still refuse to do the same. In these situations, skillful people refuse to continue business as usual in their relationships.

Refusing to continue business as usual involves communicating to one's partner something like,

> "I'm not going to sit here and pretend that everything is okay when you're still treating me this way. I need to have some indication that you're trying to see things from my point of view and that you're willing to respect my feelings, even though you don't agree with them. I'm not asking you to agree with me—just to be respectful of my viewpoint and willing to give it equal regard."

In refusing to continue business as usual, skillful people inform their partners that as long as they remain unwilling to try to find ways to be mutually respectful and work toward solutions that take both of their perspectives into account, they don't want to be around their partners any more than is necessary. They communicate a resolve to avoid contact as much as possible until they can figure out what to do next. If contact is necessary for life to function stably, they keep the contact cordial. But if their partners initiate unnecessary conversation or contact, they remind their partners that they're not interested in resuming normal relating when they've had no indication that the partners are willing to give equal regard. At any point when their partners begin to show open-mindedness and/or flexibility, skillful people are ready and willing to resume conversations.

Like the process of "Temporarily Distancing Yourself" described above, "Refusing to Continue Business as Usual" involves withdrawing oneself emotionally from one's partner. However, where as "Temporarily Distancing Yourself" is done as a temporary measure, "Refusing to Continue Business as Usual" involves explicitly renegotiating expectations regarding the degree of time spent together in the relationship. People taking this step let their partners know that they intend to have as little contact as possible with their partners for the time being. They stop watching favorite TV shows together with their partners in the evenings. They stop eating together. They stop planning weekend activities together.

"Refusing to Continue Business as Usual" involves drawing a line in the sand, and those taking this step don't shy away from acknowledging it as such. However, they make it absolutely clear that this isn't what they really want. What they really want is a relationship in which they feel respected and where their viewpoints are given equal consideration. As days of emotional distance go by, they don't hesitate to let their partners know that they miss the closeness they previously had, but they continue steadfastly in their resolve to "refuse to continue business as usual" as long as their partners refuse to be respectful of their viewpoints and to give their preferences and priorities equal regard. At any point when their partners are wanting to talk, they are willing, but only if the topic involves attempts to address ways in which one or the other of them feel dismissed or disregarded.

If "refusing to continue business as usual" is done with an attitude of disgust or hostility, it will have little effect on one's partner. To be effective, the refusal to continue business as usual must be done with a sense of resignation rather than from a determination to punish one's partner. An ineffective person refusing to continue business as usual might be heard saying something like, "I'm not going to let you treat

me like that! I'll show you!" In contrast, an effective person might be heard saying something like, "I'm not under the illusion that anything I do is going to change the way you're treating me. I'm doing this because it seems wrong to just go on pretending like everything is okay when it's not."

The reality is that stating the intent to stop engaging in business as usual, particularly if it is made in a believable, non-critical, non-blaming way, will often trigger a shift in one's partner toward more willingness to listen and cooperate, and actual disengagement will not be necessary. However, if the stating of intent to disengage is made as an empty threat, partners often sense this, feel manipulated, and are much less likely to become more cooperative.

Sooner or later, partners of those who skillfully engage in refusing to continue business as usual become more respectful and collaborative. People who skillfully refuse to continue business as usual aren't asking for anything unreasonable. They're simply asking for the level of mutual regard that they're willing to give in the relationship. They aren't interested in controlling their partners or in "winning" when they disagree. They're just asking for mutual cooperation. Further, they're asking for it in ways that make it easy for their partners to respond. They are open-minded and flexible. All of these previously demonstrated qualities contribute to the effectiveness of skillfully refusing to continue business as usual. When their partners eventually do become more respectful and collaborative, skillful people refrain from "rubbing their partners' noses in it." They don't "hold their partners' transgressions over their heads." Rather, they are happy and willing to give their partners fresh starts.

One final note about Refusing to Continue Business as Usual: People who are effective in implementing the first five components of the habit, "Standing Up for Yourself Without Making a Big Deal About the Fact That You Had To" rarely need to do it. Most of the time, the first five components are sufficient. However, when "Refusing to Continue Business as Usual" is needed, it is a vital part of the "Standing Up" process. The most important thing to remember throughout the "Standing Up" process is that skillful people who use it do so only when needed, and only as much as needed. They discontinue the process as soon as their partners show signs of more open-mindedness and/or flexibility, returning to the first five habits.

Knowing How and When to Implement Each Predictive Habit When Upsets Occur: *The Sequence*

Knowledge of the habits that are predictive of relationship success is a crucial first step, but people destined to succeed in their relationships also know <u>when</u> particular habits are needed, and <u>how</u> to use them effectively. When upsets occur, successful people combine the habits described above into powerful movements that elicit respectfulness from their partners. The chart on page 24 contains a summary of a sequencing of the predictive habits that has been used by thousands of people to elicit more understanding and cooperation from their partners (This sequencing of skills will be referred throughout the rest of this book as *The Sequence*).

You'll notice that *The Sequence* begins with a *first step* which is not one of the predictive habits, but rather is a reminder to focus on the habits. When their partners say or do things

they don't like, the first thing that effective people learn to do is to remember to focus on changing their usual reactions, rather than dwelling on how offensive or uncaring their partners' actions are. People who increase their abilities to get their partners to treat them well continually remind themselves that how they react when their partners say or do things they don't like has been found to be strongly predictive of the degree to which they'll be successful in getting their partners to be flexible, open-minded and willing to make some changes. If you learn how to react effectively in the moments when you're upset with your partner, the odds are very, very good that you'll get more cooperation and respect from him in the future. At moments when you feel upset or dissatisfied with your partner, you'll need to get into the habit of reminding yourself that if you want him to treat you better, the most productive thing you can do is to learn how to react to him like people who almost always get the kind of cooperation and respect from their partners that they'd like to have.

In your relationship, this sequence is relevant any time you or your partner are feeling upset, dissatisfied or disapproving of the other's viewpoints or actions. There are two kinds of situations where this might happen:

1. When your partner says or does something that you don't like or agree with
2. When you say or do something that your partner doesn't like or agree with

You may both eventually get upset as you talk to each other, but there's usually one person who communicates dissatisfaction or disapproval *first*. People who are effective use the same general methods of reacting in each of these types of situations, but the way they do it varies, depending on whether they get upset with their partners first or their partners get upset with them first.

You Get Upset First

When your partner says or does something you don't like or agree with, the most effective first course of action you can take in order to maximize the chances that he will care about your feelings and be flexible and open-minded involves use of the top half of the sequence (Skills 1-6). Often, implementing the first half of the sequence will be all that's necessary. If you are flexible and open-minded, chances are that your partner will be too. However, it doesn't always work this way. You might approach him in a flexible and open-minded way, but he won't be willing to do the same. In spite of your good attitude, he'll be closed-minded, defensive or dismissive. When this sort of thing happens in their relationships, skilled people immediately drop down to the bottom half of the sequence and begin to implement the "Standing Up" skills (Skills 7-12). They progress through these skills only as far as needed. As soon as their partners show more flexibility or open-mindedness, they immediately return to the top half of the sequence (see the chart, *You Convey Dissatisfaction or Disapproval First,* p. 25).

Your Partner Gets Upset First

When you say or do something that your partner doesn't like or agree with and he conveys feelings of dissatisfaction or disapproval, you may need to respond with the top or bottom portion of the sequence, depending on what you sense about his attitude. If your partner is upset, but seems to have somewhat of an open mind and willingness to be flexible, you'll be most effective if you respond with the top half of the sequence (Skills 1-6). If your partner seems closed-minded and critical, it may actually be counterproductive to respond with the first half of the sequence. When their partners approach them with closed-minded or critical attitudes, skillful people temporarily bypass the "Openness and Flexibility" skills of the sequence and begin the "Standing Up" part, progressing through Skills 7-12 until their partners show some signs of more open-minded attitudes, at which point skillful people return to the top half of the sequence (see the chart, *Your Partner Conveys Dissatisfaction or Disapproval First*, p. 25). These people progress through the "Standing Up" skills only as far as needed, returning to the "Openness and Flexibility" skills at the first sign of a better attitude from their partners.

Summary

People who are skilled in implementing the predictive habits operate with confidence that they know how to get their partners to treat them well, even when their partners don't seem motivated to treat them well. These people require that they be treated with respect, while making it very easy for their partners to do so. Their basic mindset is toward equality, collaboration and equal regard, and they move naturally in that direction. They also expect the same in return, and if don't receive it, they gently request it, and then with increasing forcefulness make it clear that they value it enough to play a role in upsetting the "apple cart" if their partners aren't willing to be collaborative in return.

Step-by-Step Guidance in the Implementation of the Predictive Habits

If you're like most people, you need improvement in your ability to implement at least some aspects of the sequence of predictive habits summarized on page 24. Step-by-step guidance for implementing the habits can be found in the book, *Developing Habits for Relationship Success (*www.thecouplesclinic.com/resources/books), and in the following interactive web-based programs:

What Should I Do?
(www.thecouplesclinic.com/whatshouldido)

What Went Wrong?
(www.thecouplesclinic.com/whatwentwrong).

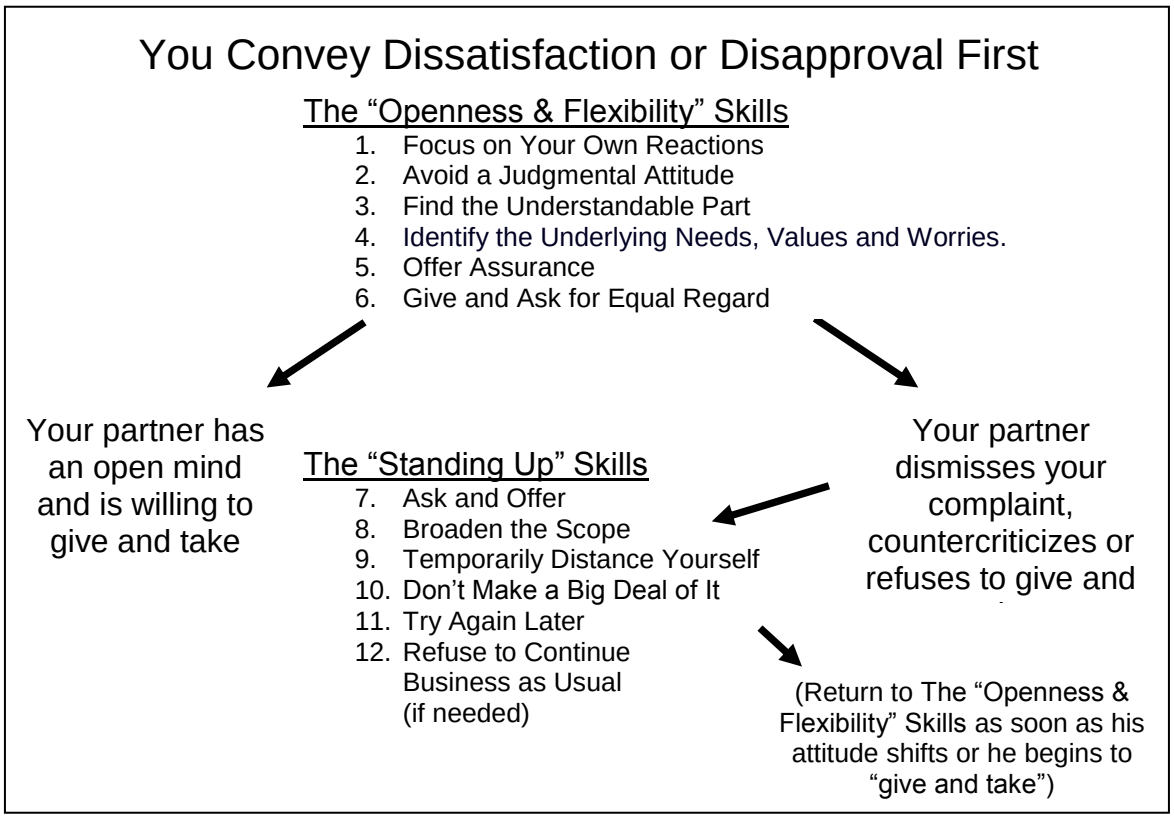
The Sequence

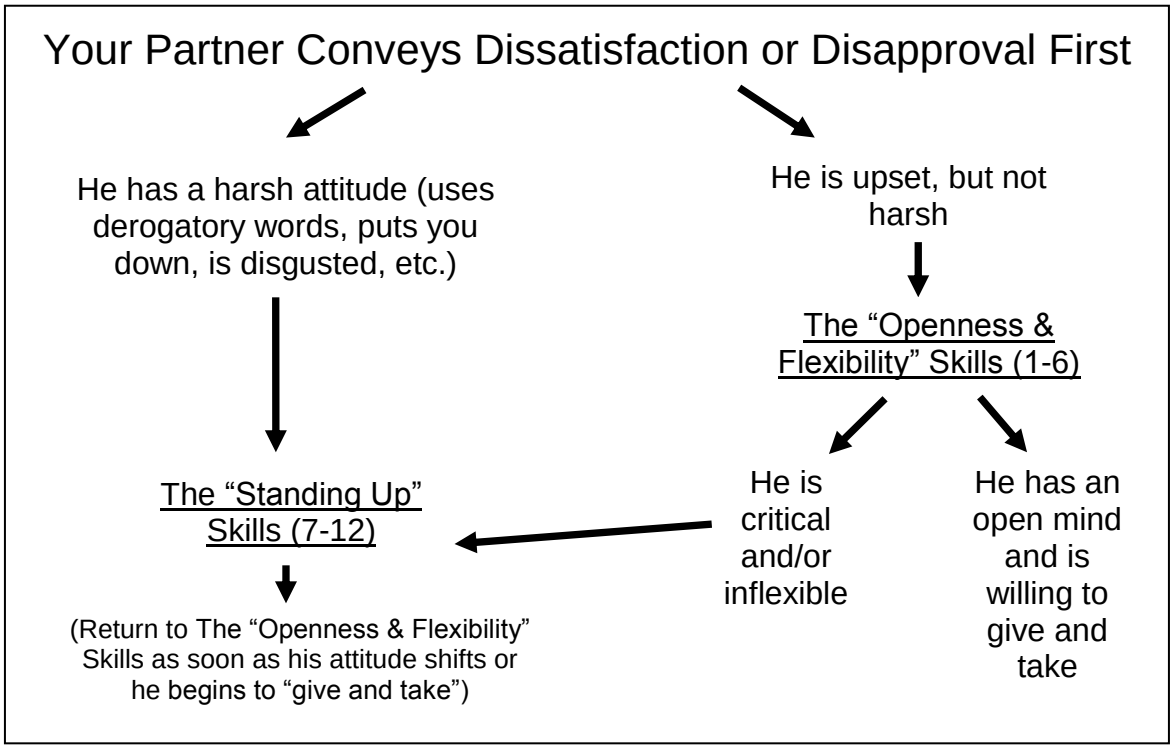
The "Openness and Flexibility" Skills

1. **Focus on Your Own Reactions.** If you want your partner to be more responsive to your viewpoint or concerns, first make sure you're interacting with him in ways that have been proven to be effective in eliciting responsiveness from one's partner, and make sure you're not reacting in ways that have been proven to be ineffective.
2. **Avoid a Judgmental Attitude.** Don't jump to conclusions. Give the benefit of the doubt and with an open mind, ask your partner why he acted as he did, or why he is thinking the way he is. Consider that this situation might not be about right/wrong, but rather about legitimately different wants, needs, opinions, priorities or standards (see pp. 1-4).
3. **Find the Understandable Part.** Find and acknowledge the part of his reasoning or viewpoint that you can understand or agree with, even if you can't agree with everything he's saying (see pp. 4-5).
4. **Identify the Underlying Needs, Values and Worries.** If his reasons don't make sense to you, instead of concluding that they are faulty, assume that there are things influencing him that aren't immediately apparent to you. There may be underlying needs, values or worries that are influencing his viewpoint or action in the present situation in ways that you don't understand. Ask him, "What do you think I don't understand?" (Try to explain the needs, values or worries that you have that may be influencing you, too.) (see pp.5-6)
5. **Offer Assurance.** Assure him that you're trying to be flexible and keep an open mind, and that you realize that you may have legitimately different opinions, wants, needs, priorities or expectations that come to play in situations like these. Let him know that there's no reason why your viewpoint or preferences should count more than his (see pp. 6-7).
6. **Give and Ask for Equal Regard.** Let your partner know that you're willing to keep an open mind to the potential merit of his viewpoint. If a decision needs to be made, be willing to be flexible and attempt to find a middle ground. Ask him to do the same (see pp. 7-9).

The "Standing Up" Skills

7. **Ask and Offer.** Without making a big deal of it, ***ask*** him to try to be more open-minded or flexible, while offering assurance that you don't expect him to agree with you or to just blindly comply with your wishes – you're just asking him to be open to the possibility that you might have a legitimate viewpoint and to be willing to give and take when decisions need to be made (see pp. 11-13).
8. **Broaden the Scope**. If he continues to be dismissive or inflexible, rather than assuming that his behavior is due to selfishness, immaturity or some other bad personality trait, consider that he might be uncooperative because he's mad at you about something else, or because he's feeling stressed or out of control in another area of his life. Ask him about it, and be willing to discuss it. Then return to your request (see pp. 13-14).
9. **Temporarily Distance Yourself.** If he continues to criticize or disregard you, let him know that you don't want to be around him right now (see pp. 14-17).
10. **Don't Make a Big Deal of It.** When you're by yourself, lighten up and let go of anger and resentment. You don't have to make a big deal of his inflexible behavior or closed minded attitude. It's not a crime that he acted this way. It's natural for him to feel strongly about things that are important to him and to be biased toward his own point of view. You just need to be sure that he respects your feelings and opinions, too (see pp. 17-18).
11. **Try Again Later.** Begin a new conversation without a chip on your shoulder. Don't try to get your partner to see how "wrong" his inflexible or closed minded attitude was. Don't demand an apology. Simply return to the issue that didn't get resolved and try to resolve it again, beginning with the Openness and Flexibility skills (see p. 19).
12. **Refuse to Continue "Business as Usual" (only if needed).** Communicate open-mindedness, flexibility, and willingness to give and take in several rounds of conversation. If your partner still refuses to do the same, make it clear that it doesn't feel right to you to pretend everything is okay. Inform him of your intention to put some distance between the two of you. Clarify that you're still willing to try to find common ground, and that you're only distancing yourself because it doesn't feel like he cares about you enough to give your opinions and priorities equal regard (see pp. 19-21).


You Convey Dissatisfaction or Disapproval First
The "Openness & Flexibility" Skills
1. Focus on Your Own Reactions
2. Avoid a Judgmental Attitude
3. Find the Understandable Part
4. Identify the Underlying Needs, Values and Worries.
5. Offer Assurance
6. Give and Ask for Equal Regard
Your partner has an open mind and is willing to give and take
The "Standing Up" Skills
7. Ask and Offer
8. Broaden the Scope
9. Temporarily Distance Yourself
10. Don't Make a Big Deal of It
11. Try Again Later
12. Refuse to Continue Business as Usual (if needed)
Your partner dismisses your complaint, countercriticizes or refuses to give and
(Return to The "Openness & Flexibility" Skills as soon as his attitude shifts or he begins to "give and take")


Your Partner Conveys Dissatisfaction or Disapproval First
He has a harsh attitude (uses derogatory words, puts you down, is disgusted, etc.)
He is upset, but not harsh
The "Openness & Flexibility" Skills (1-6)
He is critical and/or inflexible
He has an open mind and is willing to give and take
The "Standing Up" Skills (7-12)
(Return to The "Openness & Flexibility" Skills as soon as his attitude shifts or he begins to "give and take")