

The Relationship Roadmap



4 CONVERSATION KILLERS

1. **Criticism:** Criticism is a character assault. Instead of saying, “please unload the dishwasher” which is a request, couples in trouble say, “Why can’t you remember to unload the dishwasher? You never do what I ask!” Notice how the criticism is not about the task, it’s about the person. Any version of “what is wrong with you?” is criticism. Attacking someone’s character does not lead to positive results.

The Fix: Instead of criticizing, start with an “I” statement that includes the positive outcome or behavior you need. The formula is I feel about what. I need.

Using the dishwasher example, you’d probably get better results if you said, “I feel so overwhelmed with all the household tasks. I would really appreciate it if you could unload the dishwasher, not only because it would be one less thing for me to do, but because I would feel like we are a team.”

2. **Contempt:** Contempt means that you feel superior to you partner. This sounds like, “Why do I have to do everything around here? Am I the only person who does what they say they will? You do nothing to help out. You spend more time on your phone than you do contributing to this household!”

Notice the tone of superiority. The speaker is basically saying that the person is not worthy of being in this family. Contempt is also expressed non-verbally: eye-rolling, sneering, imitating the person’s mannerism, etc.

Contempt is really dangerous because it conveys a feeling of disgust. It is virtually impossible to resolve conflict where there is contempt. Rather, it causes more conflict. With both criticism and contempt partners become defensive, build-up resentments and an over-riding feeling of negativity sets in where love used to be.

The Fix: Contempt is the product of being stuck in a negative system. The

The Relationship Roadmap



© Melissa Cohen, LCSW

antidote is to start building a culture of appreciation in your relationship. Look for the positive traits that attracted you to each other in the first place.

Notice every small thing your partner does to contribute to your lives together. And, express your appreciation, admiration and gratitude. Unexpressed positivity is like buying someone a gift and never giving it the recipient.

3. **Defensiveness:** Defensiveness is self-protection in the form of righteous indignation or innocent victimhood. Rather than listening to what your partner is trying to express, defensiveness hijacks the conversation and makes it about the listener not the speaker.

For example, if one person says, "We need to straighten up because company will be here in an hour," the defensive partner will deflect saying, "You make just as much of a mess as I do. Why do you need everything to be perfect? Apparently, I can't relax unless everything meets your standards. Way to go, you've ruined the day for me and I was so excited to hang out with my friends."

The Fix: If your knee-jerk reaction is defensiveness, tell your partner that you are feeling defensive and ask your partner to try to rephrase in the "I feel about what. I need" formula. Instead of defending yourself, try to see your partner's point of view and accept responsibility for your part of the problem or issue.

For example, say, "I know how you worry about being judged by the way the house looks. I'll start by cleaning up my clutter and then I'll ask you what needs to be done next."

4. **Stonewalling:** Stonewalling is shutting down completely and refusing to engage in the conversation. The listener does not give the speaker the usual verbal or nonverbal signals that s/he is following the speaker is saying. The partners may be in the room together but there is emotional withdrawal from the conversation.

Stonewalling is usually the result of "flooding", which means that the limbic

The Relationship Roadmap



© Melissa Cohen, LCSW

brain has taken over and it becomes impossible to take in new information. The couple will want to walk away from each other or make their partner stop talking either by verbal attack or completely shutting down. Flooding is a version of overstimulation.

The Fix: Take a break. Here is the procedure for taking a break:

1. If one person asks for a break, the other partner needs to agree without either partner trying to get the last word.
2. Partners agree on a time that they will come back to the conversation; a minimum of 20 minutes is required.
3. The couple parts and goes to separate places where they cannot see or hear each other.
4. During the break, each partner needs to calm down using self-soothing exercises like deep breathing, progressive relaxation or visualization. If you are taking a longer break, do something that takes your mind off of the conflict.
5. The couple reunites to try again at the appointed time. If one partner is not calm, s/he can ask for more time.
6. After both partners are in a calm state, the couple can resume their conversation.

**REMEMBER: IN ALL CONVERSATIONS,
THE FIRST STEP HAS TO BE UNDERSTANDING.
ANY INTERVENTION OR ACTION
TAKEN BEFORE UNDERSTANDING
WILL LEAD TO MORE CONFLICT.**