

Today's Topic: Criticisms, Complaints and Requests

You will always have some complaints about the person you live with. But there's a world of difference between a complaint and a criticism.

-John Gottman

Understanding The Difference

Some of us are reluctant to bring up concerns or issues in our relationships. We fear being perceived as "nagging", "nit-picking" or "too demanding". We don't want to offend another, or risk conflict, friction and hurt feelings.

Yet we all know that little irritations have a way of growing into seething resentments. If we don't clear up issues as we go along, we risk having a volcanic eruption over something trivial, at some point in the future.

So it makes sense to learn how to raise our concerns in a constructive manner. Understanding the difference between a criticism, a complaint and a request can help us do just that.

A Personal Mystery

How to bring up and successfully resolve an issue with my husband was something of a mystery to me for years.

Sometimes I was able to do it flawlessly. I expressed my concern, he heard what I was saying, he told me how he felt, and we worked out a solution we both felt good about.

Other times I felt like I'd put my hand into a meat grinder from the moment I opened my mouth. He reacted defensively, justified his position, pointed out my shortcomings and generally dug his heels in. No "win-win" here!

I have now come to realize that the outcome of our conversations often depended on whether I expressed my issue as a CRITICISM, a COMPLAINT or a REQUEST.

If I started with criticism, his back went up and we got nowhere. If instead of criticizing, I simply expressed a complaint, he was somewhat more receptive to what I had to say. And I got the very best response, if I could translate my complaint into a request.

As I have learned to distinguish between a criticism, a complaint and a request it has become much easier and smoother to raise my concerns and resolve them positively. I share these distinctions with you, in the hopes that they will give you a helpful road-map for dealing with concerns.

Let's start with the difference between a CRITICISM and a COMPLAINT

Here are two examples of a COMPLAINT one spouse might make of another:

- "You left your dirty laundry all over the floor again and I'm really tired of picking up after you." OR

- "I'm really ticked that you promised we'd go to your parents for dinner tonight without consulting me.

A COMPLAINT addresses the specific action or behavior of another and your feelings about it.

A CRITICISM, on the other hand, doesn't simply focus on a behavior or action of your partner. It adds an element of blame and even "character assassination".

Delivered as a criticism, the above complaints might sound like this:

- "You're such a slob, leaving your dirty laundry all over the floor." OR
- "You never think about anyone but yourself when you make plans. You always put your parents ahead of me.

Notice the difference?

Criticisms often contain accusatory words and generalizations like "you never" and "you always". They attack the person's character and personality. And there is an absence of "I" statements. A criticism is all about "you" and the speaker is not taking any ownership of his/her own feelings. The tone is also more contemptuous.

Criticism tends to elicit a defensive response. The criticized partner often justifies their behavior or tries to shift the blame by also going on the attack. No one gets heard, tempers flare and a positive resolution becomes very unlikely.

A complaint is a definite improvement over a criticism.

A complaint is a negative comment about a BEHAVIOR, rather than the person's character. It is usually a statement of feelings, in which the speaker reveals (and owns) his/her feelings. For example: "I'm really angry about" or "I get so frustrated when", etc. A complaint is less likely to provoke a defensive, angry response.

However a complaint is still a weak communication, in terms of creating change. And it is often negative in tone. It tells the other person what you're unhappy about, however it doesn't have the positive power of a REQUEST.

A REQUEST asks for a specific behavior change, that you desire.

In the case of the dirty laundry being left on the floor, a request might be:

- Before you get into bed each night, would you put your dirty laundry in the basket? And if you forget, do I have your permission to remind you?

Or in the case of the partner planning dinner without consulting their spouse, a request might be:

- Would you promise to consult me first, before you accept a dinner invitation from your parents? criticisms often contain accusatory words and generalizations like “you never” and “you always”.

A request can be accepted, declined or negotiated. Perhaps your partner won't accept your first request; however she/he may offer an alternate solution. In either case, loved ones are much more likely to respond in a non-defensive and willing manner, if they are not attacked with criticism.

We always have a choice.

We can voice our concern via a criticism, a complaint or a request. I suggest that if you do complain, stick to YOUR feelings about the BEHAVIOUR of your spouse. Steer clear of generalizations and those global judgments about her/his character. Criticism is corrosive to any relationship.

Remember, you can always choose to go straight to a request for what you really desire. You might be surprised at how often you get it!

Invitation to Action

Next time you need to raise an “issue” with your partner/friend or co-worker:

- 1) Identify the behavior that you are unhappy about.
- 2) Formulate your request of them.
- 3) Make your request calmly and respectfully.
- 4) Be open to negotiation.