Is Your Partner Really More to Blame?

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The main thing that stands in the way of relationship change is *blame*. Relationship studies suggest that if you believe your partner is more to blame for your relationship problems than you are, chances are slim that she will be able to become more caring and respectful toward you in the future. If she’s like most people who feel blamed by their partners for the overall condition of the relationship, her natural defenses will be aroused to the point where she’ll be unable to care consistently about your feelings, even if she’s really trying. Few people can swim upstream against the current of their partners’ messages of overall blame. If you want her to be open and responsive to your concerns, you can’t hold on to the belief that she’s more to blame. She’ll sense your belief whether you verbalize it or not. She’ll pick up on it through nonverbal expressions and gestures that are too automatic to be consciously controlled.

Of course, if it’s true that your partner’s attitude or actions have been more damaging than yours, there isn’t much you can do about it. It won’t work to sugar-coat your own thinking or pull the wool over your own eyes. But relationship studies suggest that when relationships are distressed, usually both partners have habits that are equally responsible for the depleted condition of the relationship. It’s likely that you’ve done things that are just as destructive as your partner, and that you just can’t see it—your perceptions are biased.

The erroneous belief that one’s partner is more to blame is an offense that has direct impact on the odds that one’s relationship will survive over time. It fuels what contempt – the tendency to see oneself as being on a higher level of emotional maturity or moral development than one’s partner. In dozens of relationship studies, contempt has emerged as the single most damaging thing that people do in relationships. When one partner inaccurately assesses the other as more to blame for their relationship problems, and this inaccurate assessment persists over time, relationships rarely survive.

**Common Sources of Bias in the Assessment of Overall Blame**

If you’re like most people who are dissatisfied with their partners, it’s likely that you have often believed your partner’s actions were wrong when they weren’t, and it’s also likely that you’ve been blind to the destructiveness of your own attitude or actions at important moments in your relationship. These have probably been honest mistakes in perception, more likely due to an inaccurate or incomplete understanding of the range of attitudes and actions that are destructive to relationships than a desire to frame your partner as the “bad guy.” Studies suggest that most people have serious gaps in their knowledge of the kinds of habits that are harmful to relationships (see a summary of the different relationship offenses on page 13 of the article, *When Your Partner’s Thinking or Actions Seem Wrong*). These gaps lead to predictable mistakes. Below are three of the most common mistakes that lead to misplaced overall blame.
Mistaken Assumption #1: Obvious Offenses are more damaging than Disagreement-Related Offenses

When asked about things that are harmful to relationships, most people identify the Obvious Offenses: lying, sexual unfaithfulness, failing to keep a clear agreement without good reason, badmouthing or undermining one’s partner, violations of privacy, and making irreversible unilateral decisions regarding things about which one’s partner has strong feelings. Researchers who study relationships have found that these things are indeed harmful. But researchers have identified an additional class of behaviors and attitudes that are equally destructive, yet often go unrecognized—the Disagreement-Related Offenses. A steady diet of Disagreement-Related Offenses can be as damaging as any of the Obvious Offenses (See the article, When Your Partner’s Thinking or Actions Seem Wrong).

Nine commonly overlooked (but deadly) Disagreement-Related Offenses are summarized below. Each of them, when regularly committed, has been found to be predictive of poor relationship outcomes. A review of these offenses may help you develop a more realistic view of the role you’ve played in bringing about the present condition of your relationship. Disagreement-Related Offenses occur at much higher rates than the Obvious Offenses. Day after day, year after year, they erode the fabric of relationships. If your partner has committed one or more of the Obvious Offenses, it can be easy for you to believe that she is more to blame for the present condition of your relationship than you are – and most people would agree with you. But if you commit Disagreement-Related Offenses with any regularity, your claim that your partner is more to blame is likely false. As you read through the list of Disagreement-Related Offenses below, keep in mind that you needn’t commit them all to damage your relationship. Any single Disagreement-Related Offense, if committed repeatedly, can be destructive to a relationship.

Offense # 1: **Erroneous Fault-Finding.** You believe that your partner’s opinions, actions or priorities are misguided, immature or out-of-line when they’re really not (instead of recognizing that you have legitimate differences (See the article, Core Differences in Ways of Maintaining Emotional Stability - Legitimately Different Ways of Navigating Life). You have difficulty realizing that there are many different ways of making sense of things and of navigating life that can work in relationships, and that just because your priorities, opinions or actions clearly seem better to you doesn’t mean they really are.

Offense # 2: **Defensiveness.** You fail to acknowledge any part of your partner’s complaint as valid or understandable. You may object so strongly to her attitude or delivery that you close yourself off to the content of what she is saying. In other words, you “throw out the baby with the bathwater.” Understandably, you don’t like her attitude or delivery (which may seem harsh or closed-minded), but you make the mistake of discrediting her perspective altogether.
Offense # 3: Jumping to Negative Conclusions; Failing to Give Your Partner the Benefit of the Doubt. You jump to the conclusion that her behavior is due to selfishness, immaturity, or some other bad personality trait rather than assuming that there is an understandable explanation for her behavior -- and looking for it.

Offense # 4: Dismissiveness. You discount your partner’s perceptions, interpretations or recollections if they differ from yours. You have a hard time being genuinely open to the possibility that her perceptions could be as valid as (or even more valid than) yours. Particularly if her perceptions or interpretations seem exaggerated or extreme, you tend to dismiss them altogether, rather than looking for a less extreme version that could be valid. When she complains, you have a tendency to believe that her wants, needs, or expectations are unreasonable, excessive or short-sighted when they’re actually legitimate—just different than yours.

Offense # 5: Putting Your Partner Down. You call her derogatory names, put her down, or you avoid saying derogatory things but talk to her with the same attitude or tone that you would have if you were actually saying the words.

Offense # 6: Unwillingness to Compromise. You are unwilling to “meet your partner in the middle” or give her preferences or priorities equal regard unless they make sense to you.

Offense # 7: Acting “High and Mighty.” When your partner makes mistakes or does things that are wrong, you make a big deal of it. You think badly of her and act like she’s committed a stupid act or unforgivable crime. You fail to look for the understandable reasons that might be driving her actions. You act like you have never done anything as bad as what she has done.

Offense # 8: Shutting Down, Walking Away Prematurely, or Unwillingness to Talk About an Issue. You break off communication prematurely without first communicating openness and willingness to consider the merit of your partner’s viewpoint while also asking her for the same.

Offense # 9: Failing to Stand Up for Yourself and Instead Blaming Your Partner for Being Selfish or Controlling. You excuse yourself from the responsibility of standing up for yourself; instead, you blame her for being selfish or controlling. You let her have her way, and then you think less of her for it. You are unwilling or unable to “rock the boat” by requiring that she give your viewpoints and preferences equal regard. On the occasions when you try standing up for yourself, you have difficulty doing it without committing one or more of the other offenses in the process.

Disagreement-Related Offenses are most often committed by people at moments when they don’t like the ways that their partners are thinking or acting. While Disagreement-Related
Offenses sometimes do produce momentary partner changes, partners often feel coerced, and they tend to respond with Disagreement-Related Offenses of their own. The overall fabric of relationships erodes as Disagreement-Related Offenses increase. People who are good at getting their partners to treat them well avoid Disagreement-Related Offenses and instead use The Sequence (detailed in the book, Developing Habits for Relationship Success – www.thecouplesclinic.com/resources/books).

Mistaken Assumption #2: Some Disagreement-Related Offenses are More Harmful than Others

Disagreement-Related Offenses can be divided into two groups – those that are usually committed when a person is in the act of delivering a complaint (erroneous fault-finding; unwillingness to compromise; acting “high and mighty”; putting one’s partner down), and those that are most often committed by people who are responding to complaints (defensiveness; dismissiveness; shutting down; walking away prematurely; unwillingness to talk about an Issue; failing to stand up for oneself and instead, blaming one’s partner for being selfish or controlling). In most relationships, one partner commits more delivery-type offenses while the other commits more responding-type offenses. If you are like most people, you will be prone to believe that the type of offenses that your partner most often commits are much worse than the type of offenses you tend to commit. There are two probable reasons for your bias. The first reason is that you’ve experienced -- over and over again -- how bad it feels to be on the receiving end of the type of offenses that your partner regularly commits. You understand much less about how bad it feels to be on the receiving end of the type of offenses that you commit -- because your partner doesn’t commit them nearly as often as you do. Put another way, you don’t know how bad it feels to be on the receiving end of the type of misbehavior that you dish out, because your partner doesn’t do the same type thing to you. She does different things, and you’re much more aware of how bad these other things feel. It’s natural for you to believe that the things that have felt bad to you are more harmful than things that you don’t have as much experience with.

The second reason for your bias may be rooted in the structure of your nervous system. People who frequently “rock the boat” tend to have nervous systems that are less aggravated by negative emotional intensity. Their nervous systems are built to withstand conflict. To them, it’s not such a big deal when people (including themselves) express negative emotion. Because of this, they are prone to minimize or underestimate the harmfulness of delivery-type offenses, which often involve expression of negative emotion. They are more bothered by responding-type offenses in which their partners shut down, become defensive or dismissive, or withdraw. Because they find responding-type offenses more unsettling than delivery-type offenses, it’s easy for them to make the mistake of believing that responding-type offenses are more damaging to relationships.

Other people have nervous systems that are much more affected by negative emotional intensity. Conflict is punishing to their nervous systems. This makes them prone to make the mistake of believing that aggressive offenses which involve venting anger are the worst kind. Such individuals may be prone to minimize the harmfulness of responding-type offenses which involve the diffusion of emotional intensity. For these people, shutting down, walking away,
and refusing to discuss an issue may actually feel like the right thing to do when emotional
intensity is high.  

While each of these biases are understandable and unavoidable at least to some degree,
existing evidence suggests that they are indeed biases, and each of the nine Disagreement-
Related Offenses are damaging to relationships. There is no scientific evidence that justifies
rank-ordering the offenses in terms of relative degrees of damage they cause.  

If you have been uncritically accepting the biases of your nervous system, you could
easily have come to the conclusion over time that your partner’s offenses have been more
damaging or hurtful than yours. If you’re hoping that she will become more caring and
respectful, you will need to correct your biases and develop a more accurate understanding of
the degree of damage that your Disagreement-Related Offenses have caused.

Mistaken Assumption #3: One Shouldn’t Need to Stand Up for Oneself Because One’s Partner
Shouldn’t be Selfish or Controlling in the First Place

A special problem is encountered by people who commit relatively few Obvious or
Disagreement-Related Offenses when compared to their partners. There are indeed
relationships where one partner is generally reasonable and the other isn’t. In these
relationships, one partner is usually willing to compromise; the other is not. One partner is
willing to stretch him/herself to see the other’s point of view; the other is not. One partner
doesn’t necessarily think that his/her opinions or priorities are better than the other’s; the
other is convinced that his/her opinions or priorities are right and his/her partner’s are wrong.
In such relationships, one partner is open-minded and flexible while the other is selfish,
demanding, accusatory, critical, uncompromising, aggressive, or just plain mean. In the eyes of
many people, one partner looks like a saint; the other looks like an ogre. People have often said
tings to the “saint” partner like, “I don’t know how you put up with her!” or “I feel sorry for
you!”

If you have been clearly more open and flexible than your partner, how could you be as
much to blame for the present condition of your relationship? You’re not the one who is
constantly critical, defensive or dismissive – she is! You’re not uncompromising – she is! She is
continuously unreasonable, dishing out criticism and regularly disregarding your feelings while
you faithfully try to treat her respectfully and are often willing to let her have her own way at
your expense. How can you possibly be equally to blame?

One of the most important findings in the field of relationship science in the last thirty
years is this: The ability to stand up for oneself effectively is every bit as crucial to health of
relationships as is the ability to avoid being selfish or controlling. Indeed, the ability to stand up
effectively for oneself is on the list of required skills for making relationships work. If you want
to have a satisfying relationship, this skill is not optional. Researchers found that healthy
people don’t allow themselves to be taken advantage of. They stand up for themselves – and
they do it without making a big deal of the fact that they had to. They require that their
partners treat them with respect, and they also make it easy for their partners to do so. People
who are unsuccessful in relationships lack these skills. They allow themselves to be taken
advantage of – and they do something else that’s even more harmful: Instead of standing up
for themselves, they think badly of their partners. They begin believing that their partners are
“the main problem.” They see themselves as more emotionally mature or morally responsible
than their partners. Instead of getting down off their high horses and having good old fashioned confrontations, they stay above the fray and then blame their partners for being selfish and controlling.

Often, such people avoid engaging forcefully with their partners because they’ve been told things like, “Don’t stoop to her level!” “Be the bigger person,” or “Take the high road!” Scientific evidence suggests that admonitions such as these are prescriptions for disaster. You can’t “be the bigger person” without putting yourself on a higher plane than your partner. The act of doing so breeds what researchers call “contempt.” As we discussed in the articles, Habits of People Who Know How to Get their Partners to Treat them Well: Dealing with Differences, and When Your Partner’s Thinking or Actions Seem Wrong, contempt is the single strongest predictor of relationship demise that has been found to date. The belief that one is more emotionally mature or morally responsible than one’s partner has been found to be much more destructive than selfishness or inflexibility.

There are two parts to the skill, Standing Up for Yourself without Making a Big Deal about the Fact that You Had To. The first part involves a willingness to rock the boat. The second part involves not resenting one’s partner for creating the conditions that put one in the position of having to rock the boat. For people who are emotionally healthy, rocking the boat isn’t that big of a deal. They have accepted the fact that life sometimes requires it, and they don’t think badly of their partners when they have to “put their partners in their place.” They believe it’s normal for their partners to be selfish and to “cross the line” at times, and rather than “crying foul,” they simply “stick out their elbows and make room for themselves.” They don’t blame their partners for attempting to disregard their opinions or preferences; they simply don’t allow them to do it – at least not for long. For them, “standing up” is all in a day’s work. It’s no big deal. Less skilled people lack this attitude. They stand up for themselves resentfully. Because they feel that they shouldn’t have to stand up for themselves, they do it with an attitude of indignation or disgust. This only fuels more closed-mindedness and rigidity in their partners.

Consider for a moment that there are two kinds of people in the world: Expanders and Collaborators. Expanders tend to have “Type A” personalities. They are often spirited individuals and successful leaders who accomplish much in their lifetimes. They are usually decisive, and they have a lot of confidence in their decisions. They usually think they’re right – and they often are right.” The defining characteristic of Expanders is that they will keep expanding to fill up any space that is available to them. They tend to “go” until somebody says “stop.” They don’t ask for the opinions of preferences of others; they expect others to assert their own opinions and preferences, and they rarely yield to the preferences of others without first trying to persuade others to come over to their side. In the end, many Expanders are quite willing to compromise – but only when others feel strongly enough to stand up firmly for their opinions or preferences. The willingness to compromise when others stand up effectively that separates healthy Expanders from unhealthy ones.

Collaborators operate very differently. They are often ready to “meet in the middle” before a discussion even occurs. They anticipate the needs of others, and frequently ask about others’ opinions and preferences before deciding what to do. They are careful not to “take up too much space” with their own ideas and preferences. Collaborators can be good in relationships as long as they avoid believing that everyone should be like them. Some Collaborators believe that Expanders are selfish or controlling, and that the world would be a
better place without them. These Collaborators are *not* good in relationships. In fact, they have difficulty cultivating satisfying relationships.

Not all Collaborators have this belief. Some Collaborators believe that an initial inclination to expand is just as valid as an initial inclination to collaborate. Researchers have found that, indeed, both styles can work equally well in relationships. Many relationship scholars believe that the expander style is healthier, because Expanders don’t expect people to read their minds. One needn’t guess what Expanders want or believe — they will tell you! When Expanders find themselves together in relationships with other Expanders, they begin bumping to each other and engage in a process where each tries to have his or her own way. But in a fairly short period of time, they negotiate compromises and function collaboratively.

Expanders are capable of and willing to compromise — they just rarely *volunteer* for it. They compromise only when they know that their partners feel strongly enough to rock the boat if their feelings are not given equal consideration.

Collaborators are often attracted to the energy, decisiveness and confidence of Expanders, and Collaborators often choose Expanders as spouses or life partners. Collaborators who have good relationships with Expanders understand the old adage, “If you’re going to run with the wolves, you need to get in touch with your own inner wolf!” While Collaborators have fewer arguments with fellow Collaborators, they find Expanders more exciting and are willing to endure the discomfort of having to hold their ground with their Expander mates.

Expanders who are paired with healthy Collaborators get the benefit of having partners who don’t think badly of their tendencies to expand, and who will throw cold water in their faces when needed. Not all Expanders get this benefit. Some have the misfortune of pairing with Collaborators who stand up for themselves while resenting that fact that they had to — or they fail to stand up for themselves and then blame the Expanders for being selfish or controlling.

Some Collaborators who feel controlled or victimized by their Expander mates have tried standing up for themselves, but believe that it doesn’t make any difference because in the end, their Expander mates always win. But a closer look at these situations usually reveals that the Collaborators have engaged in just *part* of the standing up process (described in the articles, *Habits of People Who Know How to Get their Partners to Treat them Well: Dealing with Differences*, and *When Your Partner’s Thinking or Actions Seem Wrong*). Asking for compromise is the first step of the standing up process; effective people use up to *six distinct skills*, the last of which may involve respectfully drawing a line in the sand, refusing to continue their relationship normally until they feel more respected by their partners.

If your partner has the heart of an Expander, the correctness of her point of view will often seem so self-evident to her that it will be hard for her to believe that you could really feel as strongly about the validity of your point of view. For this reason, she may not become flexible and receptive until you show the strength of your conviction by respectfully drawing a line with her and making it clear that you won’t tolerate being disregarded. Sometimes the only way to do this is to *Refuse to Continue Business as Usual* -- the final step of the six-step standing up process.

The bottom line is this: If your partner is an Expansive-type person who will compromise only if you stand up firmly and draw a line with her, this does not mean that she’s a relationally-impaired person. The world is full of people like her who have good relationships. The partners of these Expanders are willing and able to stand up for themselves without
resenting the fact that they had to. If your partner is an Expander, for your relationship to be healthy it’s likely that somewhere along the line you have needed to refuse to continue your relationship normally until she was willing to respect your feelings and opinions and compromise with you. Many Collaborators Refuse to Continue Business as Usual with their Expander mates early in their relationships. Once an Expander’s mate has shown that she will withdraw from the relationship before allowing himself to be dismissed, in most cases the Expander will begin compromising before his mate has to draw lines with her.

You may feel that you have already Refused to Continue Business as Usual, and yet your partner still has continued to disrespect or disregard your feelings or preferences. If this is the case, it’s likely that there were important components of the skill that were missing. The most common condition that renders Refusing to Continue Business as Usual ineffective involves an inability to escape feelings of anger, resentment, indignation or disgust. Skillful people draw lines with their partners with a spirit of resignation rather than resentment (see the articles, Habits of People Who Know How to Get their Partners to Treat them Well: Dealing with Differences, and When Your Partner’s Thinking or Actions Seem Wrong). As they are Refusing to Continue Business as Usual, they treat their partners respectfully, preferring to believe that there may be understandable, yet unknown (or unknowable) reasons for their partners’ inflexible attitudes rather than believing that their partners are selfish or emotionally-impaired.

Summary and Conclusion

The mistaken belief that one’s partner is more to blame is no small matter. If you believe that your partner is more responsible than you are for the problems that have arisen in your relationship, you need to understand that the odds are very slim that she will be able to lower her guard and genuinely care about you. Villainizing beliefs are among the most toxic things that happen in relationships. If you want Xx to genuinely care about you, first you’ll need to release her from the role of relationship villain. Of course, you can’t do this if you’re convinced that she really is more culpable than you. But if there’s a chance that you’ve been biased in your assessment of overall blame – and that you may actually have contributed just as powerfully to the depleted condition of your relationship as your partner has – you owe it to yourself to give this possibility full consideration. If you go on believing that she is the main problem when in fact your actions have been just as damaging as hers, you are the one who is sinking your relationship – not her.

Please remember that letting go of the idea that your partner is more to blame...

- doesn’t mean that you need to believe that the way she has treated you has been okay.
- doesn’t mean that you don’t have the right to ask (or require, if needed) that she change her conduct in the future.

Researchers have found that people who accept their share of the blame are more influential in their relationships than those who believe that their partners are mostly to blame. Still, many people are reluctant to acknowledge mutual responsibility. They’re worried that if they “let their partners off the hook,” their partners will take advantage of the situation and use it as a free pass to do whatever they want. People often believe that the only thing that keeps their partners in check is the fact that they are “in the doghouse.” But the fact is -- few people truly
believe that they should be in the doghouse in the first place. While some people outwardly accept the blame, inwardly they resent it.

It is certainly possible that if you let your partner off the hook she will no longer be on her best behavior, and you may begin to feel taken advantage of. In order to take this risk, you will need to feel confident that you know how to stand up for yourself more effectively than you have in the past. However, if you fail to take the risk and continue believing that your relationship problems are more your partner fault than yours, there is little chance that your relationship will improve. You won’t even get out of the starting gate. To create the possibility that your partner can care more about you, you must first release the choke-hold you have on her.

Of course, it’s likely that you’re not the only one who has been assigning overall blame. If you have been villainizing your partner, she has probably been villainizing you, too. Don’t let that stop you from assuming your share of responsibility. Do it, and then ask her to do the same. If she doesn’t, that’s her decision but at least then you will know that you’ve done what you could to create the possibility that she could respond to you. However, our experience working with couples over the past few decades is that when one person lays down his or her weapon, the other usually follows. Maybe you and your partner can engage in a mutual disarmament.

If the information in this article has made sense to you, the next step is for you to take concrete action. Step-by-step guidance can be found in the book, Developing Habits for Relationship Success (www.thecouplesclinic.com).