

## Reacting Effectively When Upsets Happen Between You and Your Partner\*

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*This article discusses, step-by-step, how you can use the Sequence steps in each of the two main types of situations where they're needed:*

- 1. When your partner says or does something you don't like and you feel upset or dissatisfied with her.*
- 2. When you do something that your partner doesn't like, and she feels upset or dissatisfied with you.*

*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're launching complaints or on the receiving end of complaints. This article is to be read in conjunction with the Developing Habits for Relationship Success Addendum Charts 1-3 (shown on pp. 18-21).*

In the books, *Developing Habits for Relationship Success* and *Emotional Intelligence in Couples Therapy*, I summarized scientific evidence suggesting that if you want to have a satisfying relationship, there are certain specific abilities you need to have, and among those abilities, one of the most important ones is the ability to react effectively at moments when you become upset or dissatisfied with how your partner is thinking or acting. For most of us the problem is that these tend to be moments when -- especially if the things our partners are doing seem offensive or if we feel mistreated -- we're least likely to be paying attention to how we're reacting and most likely to be paying attention to how out of line our partner's are thinking or acting. In these situations, common sense would seem to suggest, “What needs to happen for my relationship to be more satisfying is that my partner needs to stop doing things that aren't right.” However, evidence from relationship studies suggests that this just won't happen. If you're in a long term intimate relationship, sooner or later you are going to feel like your partner's thinking or actions are out of line or misguided in some way, and not necessarily because your partner is doing something wrong. In fact, relationship studies suggest that most of the time when partners feel upset with each other, there isn't anything wrong with either of their expectations. Usually, it's not a matter of right or wrong, it's a matter of being at cross purposes. There are a variety of different ways of prioritizing things in relationships that can work, and of course we don't like it when our partner's priorities are different than ours, so we tend to feel that our partners' priorities are misguided. This will happen no matter who your partner is. Evidence suggests that if you don't know how to distinguish when your partner is really wrong from when you're just at cross purposes, your relationship is going to go downhill.

Of course, there are some things that people do that really are misguided, or deficient, or wrong in some way, and those things need to be addressed head on. I'll discuss these later, and I'll describe what we know about how effective people go about getting their partners to realize they've been wrong and be willing to change. But here,

I'm writing about situations where the first task is to avoid making the monumental mistake of believing your partner is misguided or wrong when she's not.

In *Developing Habits for Relationship Success*, I described a sequence of twelve things that people who know how to get their partners to treat them well do differently than people who don't know how. The reader may want to refer to a summary of these twelve steps of the Sequence while reading this article (See the chart titled "[Sequence 12 Step Summary](#)," p. 18). In the pages that follow, I want to talk about how to use the Sequence steps in each of the two main types of situations where they're needed. The first situation is when your partner says or does something you don't like and you feel upset or dissatisfied with her. The second situation is when the reverse happens. You do something that your partner doesn't like, and she feels upset or dissatisfied with you. 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're launching complaints or are on the receiving end of complaints.

Take a minute right now and think about a recent situation where you or your partner expressed dissatisfaction or became upset with each other. The first thing I'd like you to think about is, "Did you express the dissatisfaction or become upset with her first, or did she express a dissatisfaction or become upset with you first?" It turns out to be an important question because the way that you react may need to be different depending on which of these situations it is.

## **When You Get Upset First**

Let's start by thinking about times when you're the one who gets upset first. Your partner might do something that you don't like and it might strike you, at least at first, as insensitive, uncaring, controlling, short sided, misguided, irresponsible, or something like that. It's upsetting to you, and you want her to care about the fact that you don't like what just happened. If this is true and you want your partner to care about how you feel, there are some things that evidence suggests you absolutely must be able to do. You can visually follow the progression of steps I'm about to describe by reviewing [Chart 1- When You Get Upset or Express Dissatisfaction with Your Partner First](#) (p. 19). In this chart, as well as in the body of this article, the numbers in brackets indicate which step of the Sequence (summarized in the chart titled [Sequence 12 Step Summary](#) p. 18) is being implemented.

In a nutshell, here's what you need to do. First, keep an open mind [2]. Check that first knee jerk reaction to jump to conclusions, and instead consider there may be reasons she's acting this way that you don't understand yet. You can't fake an open mind...your partner will know if you have one or not by the look on your face. It won't work to bite your tongue because you'll convey your attitude even if you don't say a thing. If she senses you've made your mind up, the odds that she'll be able to care about how you feel will be dramatically lower.

<b>Is Your Partner Wrong?</b>
An important component of keeping an open mind involves reminding yourself that just because you're upset doesn't necessarily mean your

partner did something 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 she's doing things, but that doesn't necessarily make them wrong. Researchers have discovered that the majority of the time when people feel that their partners have done something wrong, they really haven't. They have legitimately different wants, needs, priorities or expectations at the moment. Neither partner's priorities nor actions are wrong.

Concluding that your partner is wrong when she really isn't is a mistake you do not want to make. It's one of the most damaging things that people do in relationships. What's more, it will lower the odds that she'll be able to see your needs or expectations as legitimate, care about how you feel, and be willing to make sincere changes. Such an accusation will arouse her natural defenses and make it very hard for her to keep an open mind. You'll breed ill will in her 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 her if they were in my shoes? (If the answer is "yes," then it's a mistake to classify your partner's thoughts or actions as *wrong*)
- "Would she be as upset with me as I am with her 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.)

Remember that letting go of the idea that she'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 her do whatever she wants. There's probably nothing wrong with your wants or needs either, and your feelings need to count as much as hers. Finally, letting go of the idea that she's wrong doesn't mean that you don't have the right to ask her to make some changes. It just means that the *reason* why she needs to be willing to change isn't because she's wrong but rather because your priorities or expectations are just as legitimate as hers, and when you two disagree, she needs to be willing to meet you in the middle.)

[6]

While misclassifying your partner's behavior as wrong when it isn't is a mistake, it's also a mistake to pretend that her behavior isn't wrong when it is. There are some things that almost everybody recognizes as wrong, and these include:

- dishonesty
- sexual disloyalty
- physical aggression
- failing to keep an agreement
- badmouthing
- undermining

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 your partner will be able to see that what she did was wrong and be willing to make it right. If she has done something recently that you believe fits the classification as "wrong," you might want to skip to the last section of this article, "When Your Partner's Thoughts or Actions Really Are Wrong," p. 13.

Whether your initial impression is that your partner's thinking or actions are wrong or, not you'll get more cooperation if you can approach her with an open mind yourself. You might say something like, "OK, so far this is kind of upsetting to me, but what's going on? What are you thinking? Why did you do that?" At this point, your partner will respond in one of two (see Chart 1-When You Get Upset or Express Dissatisfaction with Your Partner First p. 19). The first way is that she'll just explain, non-defensively. She won't be defensive because she'll sense you have an open mind. If she proceeds to just explain, you'll need to listen to her and hear her out without disputing details or countering everything she says. What you want at this point is to get her perception of things... not to establish the truth about what has happened. You'll get a chance to give your perception in a minute. This is hard to do, but the evidence is clear. People who are good at listening to their partners without trying to correct them get more cooperation from their partners. There's nothing that'll arouse your partner's defenses more quickly than if when she starts to explain, you begin disputing every little detail.

As she explains, you'll need to ask clarifying questions and look for the logic behind her thinking or actions until you can get to a point where you say "OK, well, that makes a little bit more sense to me [3]." You might not ultimately agree with what she did, but you can still find something that is at least partly understandable about her thinking or motivations, and if you want your partner to care about how you feel, this is what you need to do.

Once you've done this, go ahead and explain your own point of view. When you do, try to explain not just what you're upset about, but why this is upsetting to you. Many times, a particular situation will be upsetting to you for reasons that are bigger than just the present situation. There will be some bigger need or worry at stake. For example, you may be upset because your partner told her friends she'd go to a concert with them on Saturday without checking with you first. At first blush, you may think you're mad because she was being inconsiderate. If you go with your first reaction and accuse her of being inconsiderate, she'll probably be defensive. But if you can suspend your judgment for a minute, you might realize that this bothers you because you feel excluded from her life...it seems like she's keeping you at arms length. If you realize this you might be able to drop the critical attitude and say something like, "I like it better when we check with each other about things like this. It makes me feel bad when it seems like I'm not part of the equation. I'm not saying you have to check with me before every little thing you do, but when it comes to something like deciding how you're gonna spend a whole evening, would you mind checking with me first?"

If you have a flexible attitude, your partner will likely be able to care about your feelings. But it might not happen that way, at least not at first. In spite of your good attitude she might seem defensive, or she might seem to be implying that you shouldn't be upset about something like this and you should just drop it because there's nothing wrong with what she did. If this happens, you'll need to do a couple of things.

First, avoid hitting the panic button [7] and instead propose to yourself that her defensiveness is probably just temporary. Keep in mind that researchers have found that the reason why people get defensive is usually is because they feel judged. Your partner will be defensive if she thinks you're saying that she's out of line in some way. If you've been making the attitude adjustments that we've been talking about so far, that

won't really be the case and then it's simply a matter of offering an assurance [5]. When she seems defensive, you can say something like, "Wait a minute... what do you think I'm saying?" Then you can clarify that you're upset, but you're not saying that therefore she needs to just do whatever you want. You realize that she may see things differently and if she does you'll be willing to try to give and take.

If you can do this, it's likely that she will relax her seemingly defensive attitude. If she does, then you just return to some of the things I've already described and usually the conversation will turn out well. Each of you will see the other's point of view, and be willing to be flexible and open-minded.

But it's also possible that in spite of your assurances, she'll continue to be dismissive or defensive. She'll continue to say or imply that your feelings are stupid or unwarranted, or you don't have any basis for feeling the way that you do and that you should just back off. Researchers found that how you respond precisely at moments like these will dramatically influence the odds that your partner's attitude will get better or worse over time.

This is often the point where, if you're like many people you'll go one of two ways: You'll either give up and think, "She's impossible! There's no point in even talking about this!" or you might go in the opposite direction. You might go from 0 to 60 in three seconds and take her head off! Both of these reactions would put you squarely in the company of people who rarely get their partners to care about how they feel.

But there's a combination of some other reactions that will raise the odds that your partner will change her attitude. What are they? On one hand, you'd express irritation at her apparent dismissal of your feelings, and on the other hand, you'd reiterate your willingness to be flexible, but you clarify that you expect her to do the same. In the twelve-step sequence described in *Developing Habits for Relationship Success*, this is step number eight, "Ask and Offer." [8] You're basically *asking* your partner to reconsider her attitude while *offering* her assurance that you're still willing to be flexible and keep an open mind. There are a lot of ways you can get this dual message across to her, but often it sounds something like, "See, now you're beginning to bug me. Don't do that, alright? Don't act like there's something wrong with me! Look, I'm not saying that because you're doing something I don't like means you have to change. I'm willing to try and be flexible here, but don't do that thing where you're acting like I'm crazy, and I'll try not do that thing where I'm acting like you're insensitive, OK?" Reactions that effective always have a note of something that sounds like, "I'm just about ready to be pissed...but I'm still OK, because maybe you're not really saying what I'm thinking you're saying. If you are, we're gonna have a problem!" The attitude conveyed at this point in the conversation is like a friendly warning shot. It gives her a sense of the impending storm before the lightning actually strikes. It'll often have the effect, sometimes for the first time in the conversation, of getting your partner's attention while there's still room to salvage the situation. Over the decades in my couples therapy practice, I find that when people acquire this ability, they almost always get more cooperation from their partners.

If you're able to do what I've described, the odds are good that your partner will say something like, "Ok fine! You don't have to get all worked up about it!" and suddenly she'll become a little more willing to be flexible and open minded. If this happens, you need to just return to the things I described earlier...you hear her out, listen with an

open mind, express your willingness to give and take, try and understand the main things that are behind each of your feelings, and in the end, strike up a compromise if needed.

But let's go back to the situation where, in spite of your good attitude, your partner continues to be defensive or dismissive and then you express your irritation while assuring her you're still trying to be flexible. You fire a friendly warning shot, but she doesn't take heed. She continues dismissing your feelings. At this point you'll have basically been bending over backwards to try and assure her you're not trying to have your own way. You don't think that she's necessarily wrong, you're just asking for a little mutual consideration – but she continues to dismiss you.

This is the point where you need to get pissed! The way you do this is up to you, but basically this is the point where your attitude is, "OK, all bets are off!" You stop trying to get your partner's cooperation and instead you make it clear, "Hey, I'm every bit as willing as you seem to be for this to go really bad! You've crossed a line and I've had it with your attitude, and now you've pissed me off!" At this point, you need to go toe-to-toe with her and become every bit as willing as she is to escalate [9].

As you do this it's entirely possible that here, for the first time she will back up a little. Now you've not only given her a sense of the impending storm, but the lighting has actually struck, and she may begin thinking, "OK, this is not going well" and she may sense that you're really not gonna back down. She might realize that you may go the full distance, and she might begin thinking, "Is it really worth it?" If she shows any signs of backing up and giving regard for your feelings, you'd be wise to back up a bit, too, and gradually return to those things that I talked about earlier. If you do, you might get the conversation back on track.

But it's also possible at this point that your partner may be so riled up that she's willing to go toe-to-toe...and you're willing to go toe-to-toe...and so you go toe-to-toe for a while. Your basic point is something like this, "Who do you think you are? I don't expect you to agree with me, but I do expect you to be respectful of my feelings. If you want a fight, let's go! I've got nothing better to do at this moment!" If indeed you guys go at it verbally for a while, at a certain point, you'll want to take a break, and you should. Just break it off by making it clear you don't want to be around her [10]. There are a variety of ways to do this, ranging from the provocative, "Ya know what? Get outta my sight, I can't stand to see you!" to a little bit more gentle, "Ya know what? I've had it! Maybe later ok? I'm outta here!" In either case, you issue a rejection to her which actually, she needs to feel. If she continues trying to trump your feelings with her own, in spite of your willingness to care about how she feels, she needs a good firm rejection. It doesn't make her a criminal or anything...she'd hardly be the first one to want to have her own way, but someone needs to throw a little cold water in her face. (One qualification needs to be given here. If you fear that standing up verbally to your partner may result in her becoming physically abusive to you, I don't recommend it. But neither do I recommend doing nothing or just caving. If you don't feel that you can stand up for yourself without her becoming physically violent, then you probably need to consider physically separating from her.)

So let's back up. If you've been on track, when you first got upset you avoided jumping to conclusions and you kept an open mind. You considered that your partner might have a legitimately different perspective about this thing that bothers you, and you

tried to understand and respect her feelings. You might have suggested some way of meeting in the middle. If you did this, she was probably receptive and willing to be flexible and consider making some changes. But let's say she was having a bad day, and she wasn't receptive. As a matter of fact, she flat out dismissed your feelings as being stupid, or misguided, or she accused you of being too negative and not accepting enough, or something like that. And for the sake of argument, let's say you did a nice job of firing a friendly warning shot. Usually, this would change the course of things, but this time she was still dismissive. So, you went toe-to-toe with her, but still she was unwilling to respect your feelings and give them equal regard. And so you rejected her.

You may have done all of these things perfectly so far, but if you can't follow through with the things I'm about to describe, all of your work will probably be to no avail. With many of us, what happens if we have to work ourselves up to the point where we're going toe-to-toe with our partners is, we start ruminating in our heads, saying things like "I can't believe she did that!" "What kind of a person does that?" "It's just my luck to be stuck with a control freak!" A certain amount of this putting her down in your head may be inevitable especially right after a blow up, but people who get their partners to treat them better and better as time goes on have a way of talking themselves down fairly quickly. They begin shifting to another attitude, one where they're not making such a big deal of how awful their partners were [11]. They begin saying things to themselves like, "Ah, whatever, you know it's not exactly a crime she wants to have her way. Maybe on another day she wouldn't have been this way, but whatever -- she crossed the line, I let her have it. No harm. No foul."

Of course, it's very difficult to have this attitude if you haven't stood up firmly for yourself when you needed to. If you feel like you've been taking it on the chin over and over again, you'll feel resentful. But if you get more effective at standing up, squaring off and going toe-to-toe when you need to, it'll be much easier to let go of the anger and get to a place where you're ready to start fresh. Then, you can, and you should begin a fresh conversation. Since you're the one who broke it off and ultimately rejected your partner, it's up to you to come back. It might not be till the next day, or it might be fifteen, twenty minutes, half hour later, or it might be later in the evening, but when you come back, you don't have an attitude. You don't come in demanding an apology, trying to get her to see how awful she was, you just go back to the original issue that you tried to talk about in the first place [12].

People who are effective usually begin by offering an assurance. They'll come back in and say, "Well that didn't really go very well did it? What do you think I was saying? You know, all I was saying was..." and then they reiterate their assurances and ask that their partner hear them out and care about their feelings, too.

If you develop the ability to stand up when you need to, and then let it go, you'll probably find that your partner is shocked, because what she expects in the aftermath of a blowup is that you're gonna keep your attitude and be pissy about it. Your change in attitude... not making a big deal of her stubbornness, will likely create a much more willing attitude on her part. But, of course it might not, and if it doesn't, you follow the same sequence. You go through the same progression including standing up for yourself if you need to, but not until you need to, and not until you've offered the kind of assurances that I described before. But if you are willing to do this, and you are able to

do it, you will find that she will become much more flexible and willing to cooperate as time goes by.

## **When Your Partner Gets Upset First**

So far we've been talking about how you can react effectively when your partner does something that you don't like...situations where you become upset or dissatisfied with her. Now I'd like to talk about when the shoe is on the other foot. I'd like to talk about situations where she becomes upset with you, and you don't like that. You can visually follow the progression of steps I'm about to describe in *Chart 2-When Your Partner Gets Upset or Expresses Dissatisfaction First*, (p. 20). In this chart as well as in the body of this article, the numbers in brackets indicate which step of the Sequence (See the chart titled *Sequence 12 Step Summary*, p. 18) is being implemented. The steps of the Sequence are described in more detail in the book, *Developing Habits for Relationship Success*.

When your partner gets upset with you, it may seem to you that she's being too picky or too demanding, or that her expectations are unreasonable. But there is something else that'll be going on inside of you at moments like this, and this "something else" turns out to be very important. It involves your sense of the extent to which she is saying that she's right and you're wrong. She'll probably be somewhere on a continuum... on one end of the continuum she may be upset, but you can tell by her attitude that she has some perspective -- she realizes that you may not see things the way she does and she'll approach you with at least somewhat of an open mind. But if your partner is closer to the other end of the continuum, you'll feel attacked, or pre-judged. It'll seem like she's already made up her mind, and her conclusion is that you're wrong or out of line in some way. If she's down on this end of the continuum, you'll feel criticized. If she's closer to the other end of the continuum, you won't. It's crucial that you pay attention to that feeling inside of you, because your next move needs to depend on whether you feel criticized or not.

Let's take each case separately, starting with the situation where it seems that your partner is upset but she seems to have at least somewhat of an open mind, and seems willing to listen to you too. Your first challenge will be to avoid thinking critically of her. [2] Your first reaction might be that she's over reacting or that her expectations are unrealistic, or something like that. You'll need to notice if this reaction is coming up inside of you or not. If it does, she'll be able to tell right away from the look on your face. The thoughts you're having inside will be accompanied by a sigh or a slight rolling of the eyes or an even-more-subtle nonverbal cue. You may not realize it, but subtle nonverbal reactions like this can really escalate her upset. And frankly, I don't blame her. If immediately you're assuming that there is no legitimate basis for her complaint, that's fairly provocative! You don't have to actually say anything to your partner to communicate a critical attitude. If you're having critical thoughts inside, it'll be written on your face. So again, the first thing you need to be able to do is catch yourself in the act of having a critical reaction. If you do, you'll need to be able to shift it. You might need to say things to yourself like, "It seems at first blush like she's overreacting or her expectations are unrealistic, but I don't have all the facts yet. And just because I might not feel the same way if I were in her shoes doesn't mean that she shouldn't feel that

way.” It might also be good to add, “Just because she feels that way doesn’t necessarily mean that I need to just do whatever she wants. If we see things differently, I’ll ask her to be flexible, too. Anyway, I can afford to relax and hear her out. In the end, I’m not going to allow myself to get bulldozed, but if I invalidate her right from the very beginning... well that’s not going to work.” So in a nutshell, if she’s upset but seems to have somewhat of an open mind, you basically do the same [2]. You keep an open mind and you hear her out. Listen carefully to the logic behind her feelings until you come to the point where you can identify something that is at least partly understandable about why she feels the way she does. When you find the logic behind her feelings, acknowledge it, saying something like, “OK, I can sort of see why you feel the way you do.” If you locate the understandable basis for her feelings, you may actually find you’re willing to make the changes that she’s wanting.

But it also might happen that although you can see the potentially legitimate logic behind her feelings, you just don’t agree with her, or you don’t want to do things the way that she wants you to. If that’s the case, you’ll need to try to explain your feelings to her. And if you want her to care about how you feel, there are a couple more things you’ll need to be able to do. As you explain your feelings, try to explain not just that you don’t want to make the change that she wants, but tell her why. It might seem to you that it’s self-evident why you wouldn’t want to do what she’s asking, but it’s probably not. Remind yourself that there are probably other people who would have no problem doing what she’s asking. That doesn’t mean you also should have no problem, it just means that it’s a good idea for you to ask yourself, “Really, why can’t I just go along with what she wants? Why does it matter that much to me?” Many times, you’ll be reluctant to do what she wants because doing so would put something that’s important to you at risk...a need or value that’s bigger than just the present situation [4]. For example, let’s say she wants you to spend the afternoon organizing the garage. At first, it might seem that the reason you don’t want to do what she wants is because the garage is already organized enough. Besides, you don’t live in the garage...it shouldn’t be that much of a priority. But if you dig a little deeper and think about the bigger needs that drive your feelings about cleaning the garage, you may realize that you don’t want to spend the afternoon on the garage because you want some time to yourself to just go to a movie or something, which you *never* get to do. It’s not that the garage idea is a waste of time... it’s that you want something else *more*... time by yourself to just do whatever you want. You have more of a need for time to yourself than your partner does. And if you also think about what may be driving your partner’s opinion that you guys should spend the afternoon organizing the garage, you may realize that structure and organization are calming to her nervous system and it raises her anxiety when things are out of place.

Unless you realize the deeper needs that drive each of your opinions about how the afternoon should be spent, you guys might get locked into a debate about whether the garage really needs to be organized or not, rather than coming to grips with the fact that you have legitimately different needs, and trying to figure out how you can meet in the middle.

As you explain your feelings, you’ll need to assure her [5] that just because you have an important need that conflicts with what she wants from you in this situation

doesn't mean that you intend to trump her feelings with yours. You'll need to assure her that you're willing to be flexible and suggest a way to meet in the middle [6].

Up to this point, I've been describing how you can respond effectively in situations where your partner is upset, but she seems to be flexible and willing to listen to your point of view, too. If you do what I've been talking about so far, the odds are pretty good that the conversation will go well, and you'll both emerge satisfied. But she might not be so open-minded. Somewhere along the way it may become clear to you that her attitude is shifting, and she is digging in and becoming critical or inflexible. This may happen at the first moment when she realizes that you have hesitations about doing whatever she's asking for. Other times, she'll seem critical or close-minded from the very beginning. Whichever is the case, the first thing for you is just to avoid hitting the panic button. Remind yourself that her critical attitude or inflexibility is probably just temporary. Then, you need to do two things and you need to do them almost in the same breath. On one hand you need to ask her to knock it off with the attitude, and on the other hand you need to let her know that you can see that she's upset and you're trying to keep an open mind [8]. A lot of times you can accomplish this just by saying something like, "Stop it! I'm listening!"

The important thing at this point is that you don't make too big of a deal about her critical attitude [7]. Just ask her to stop it, and then make it clear you're trying to listen with an open mind [8]. At this point, if you make too big of a deal about the way she's talking to you, she'll think you're trying to change the subject away from her complaint and turn the tables on her. Just briefly ask her to adjust her attitude, and then move back with an open mind to hear what she's upset about.

I can't emphasize this enough. At this point, your request for her to adjust her attitude can't be the main thing. It's just a short detour before you return to the main thing... hearing her out. This is why it usually works best to just make a short comment about her attitude, like "Stop it!" Of course she might not know what you mean when you say "Stop it!", and she might respond, "Stop what?" If this happens, you need to be precise: "Stop jumping to conclusions! We haven't even started talking and it seems like you've already made your mind up!" Again, if you're smart, you'll assure her that you're willing to listen and you're trying to keep an open mind about what she's saying.

If you're able to communicate in this way, the odds are pretty good that your partner will back up a little bit and become less critical. On the other hand if she hears you just criticizing her attitude, ("Don't talk to me that way!") and you forget to offer an assurance ("Believe it or not, I'm listening!"), the odds she'll drop the critical attitude are dramatically lower. But even if you're doing a pretty good job of asking her to shift her attitude and assuring her that you're going to try to listen with an open mind, she may continue with a close-mind. This is the point where you need to let her know you're getting irritated. Let her know that you're trying to keep an open mind and listen but it doesn't seem like she's willing to return the favor and if this is really the case, things are not going to turn out very well. At the Couples Research Institute, we call this part of the conversation "firing a friendly warning shot." For the first time, she needs to feel a bit of your irritation. You're letting her know where this may be going if she doesn't change her attitude. You're getting irritated, but you're still more or less OK. You communicate something like, "Look we can do this one of two ways. We can each be flexible and open-minded, or we can be inflexible and close-minded, but one thing

certainly isn't going to happen. I'm not going to continue to be flexible and open-minded if you're not. It's your choice, which way is it gonna be?"

A lot of times you'll find that she's able to heed this kind of friendly warning shot and change her attitude a bit. If she does, or actually at any point along the way if she's able to pull back and be a bit more open minded, then you need to return the favor and do the things I discussed previously. But it's also possible that she won't heed the warning shot and she'll continue barreling down that road, keeping a close-mind, criticizing you all the way. At this point you will have gone to some lengths to continue trying to be open minded in spite of the fact that she has been critical of you. Now you're at the point where you need to stop trying to get her to be more cooperative and you need to just let her have it! You need to make it clear if she wants a fight you're more than willing to give it [9]. The words you use here are more or less up to you...it's more the spirit of it. You're making it clear: "Hey, I'm willing for this to go every bit as badly as you seem for it to be willing to go. You wanna go? Let's go!"

Sometimes couples get into an arguing style where one partner seems to always assume the role of trying to be reasonable at times when the other has no intention of returning the favor. The continuous willingness to be flexible in response to a critical attitude will keep a relationship stuck forever. Squaring off and going toe-to-toe is a natural and often necessary part of a relationship. It doesn't have to be a big deal. And you'll find that if you have the ability to do it when it's needed, you actually won't have to do it very often.

Anyway, things will likely not have gone this far if you've been on track all the way along. Somewhere along the way, your partner probably will have become more cooperative. But if not, now you're dishing it back, and as she experiences your willingness to stand up and square off, it's likely that she'll back up a bit. She didn't really know you'd push it this far, but now she can tell -- you're really not going to back down. This might lead her to question her attitude for the first time, and she might wonder if it's really worth the stand she's taking. When this happens, if you're smart, you'll notice, and offer another assurance about being flexible, and the conversation might take a more productive turn.

But it's also possible on any given day that your partner may continue on the attack. At this point, it's really important that you're able to connect fully with your anger because she may need to feel the full brunt of it. It's the combination of the power of your anger at moments like this and your willingness to let by-gones be by-gones later that creates the conditions for change. If she has continued to judge you or put you down in spite of your clear willingness to hear her out and be open-minded, I can't emphasize enough how important it is for her to feel the dramatic shift in your attitude. Before, you were really trying to keep an open mind, now you could care less. Before, she was engaging in a verbal assault, now you're dishing out the pain. As a matter of fact, if the escalation continues, it's important that she feels rejected by you [10]. There's a natural emotional consequence for being close-minded and critical, and that consequence is the pain of being temporarily rejected. It's nice when people can stop being critical or judgmental without having to feel the pain of rejection, but sometimes that pain is a necessary part of the process. A strong form of rejection would sound something like, "You know what? Get out of my sight! I can't stand be around you!" It

doesn't have to be that dramatic, but if your partner continues to be critical or judgmental, she does need to feel rejected at a certain point.

You might be reluctant to do this because you worry it may really send your partner into orbit, and you might have to deal with the fall out for weeks. All I can say about this is that people who are able to complete the whole sequence I'm describing rarely experience fall out for weeks. But even if there is some fall out, consider the alternative. If you're not able to stand up to your partner when you need to, she may never become more respectful of your feelings. (One qualification needs to be given here. If you fear that standing up verbally to her may result in her becoming physically abusive to you, I don't recommend it. But neither do I recommend doing nothing or just caving. If you don't feel that you can stand up for yourself without her becoming physically violent, then you probably need to consider physically separating from her.)

So let's back up, if you've been on track, you've responded to your partner's initial complaint with a good attitude, you've been open-minded, you've been flexible, and she's probably softened. But let's say she's having a bad day, and she hasn't softened. And for the sake of argument, let's say you've fired a friendly warning shot, and she's still critical and inflexible. Let's take it a step further. You've decided to square off and go toe-to-toe, but still she hasn't become more respectful. So, you've rejected her.

You may have done all of these things perfectly so far, but if you can't follow through with the things I'm about to describe, all of your work will probably be to no avail. With many of us, what happens if we have to work ourselves up to the point where we're going toe-to-toe with our partners is that we start ruminating in our heads, thinking thoughts like, "She is such a control freak! She's not happy unless she finds something to be upset about! Little miss perfect is never wrong!" A certain amount of putting her down in your head may be inevitable, especially right after a blow up, but what we find is that people who get their partners to treat them better and better as time goes on have a way of talking themselves down fairly quickly. They begin shifting to another attitude [11] where they're not making such a big deal of how awful their partners were. They begin saying things to themselves like, "Ah, whatever, you know it's not exactly a crime that my partner wants to have her way. Maybe on another day she wouldn't have been this way. It's not that big of a deal. She crossed the line, and I let her have it. No harm. No foul." Any time you've persisted in trying to have a good attitude, then had to switch and stand up firmly for yourself, this sort of "letting go" is the next thing that needs to happen if you're gonna be truly powerful in getting your partner to care about how you feel.

Of course it's very difficult to have this attitude if you haven't stood up firmly for yourself when you needed to. If you feel like you've been taking it on the chin over and over again, you feel resentful. But if you get more effective at standing up and squaring off and going toe-to-toe when you need to, you'll find that it'll be much easier to let go of the anger and get to a place where you're ready to start fresh. Then, you can, and you should begin a fresh conversation about the subject [12]. Since you're the one who broke it off and ultimately rejected your partner, it's up to you to come back. It might not be till the next day, or it might be fifteen, twenty minutes, half hour later, or it might be later in the evening, but you come back, and when you do, you don't have an attitude. You don't come in demanding an apology, trying to get her to see how stubborn she

was being. You just go back to the original issue that she was trying to talk to you about in the first place. People who are effective usually begin by offering an assurance. They'll come back in and they'll say something like, "Well that didn't really go very well, did it? Believe it or not, I do care that you were upset and I'm willing to listen and keep an open mind. I was just having a hard time with the way you were talking to me. But whatever, I know you were just upset. You wanna try it again?" If you develop the ability to stand up for yourself without making a big deal of it in the hours that follow, you'll probably find that she is shocked, because what she expects in the aftermath of a blowup is that you're gonna keep your attitude and be pissy about it. Your change in attitude where you're coming in, not making a big deal of how awful she was, will likely create a much more willing attitude on her part. But, of course it might not, and if it doesn't, you just follow the same sequence. You go through the same progression including standing up for yourself if you need to, but not until you need to, and not until you've offered the assurances and so on that I talked about before. But if you are willing to do this, and you are able to do it, you will find that your partner will become much more flexible and willing to cooperate as time goes by.

Let me remind you that I've taken you through the full Sequence here, and some of you may never even have to go through the whole thing. Simply shifting your attitude, and maybe firing some warning shots may be enough. But many of you will need to go through the whole process a few times with your partners. If you need to, and if you're able, you'll find that you need to do it less and less as time goes by. Your partner won't really want to escalate once she knows what a hassle it is, and once she comes to know that you're willing to be reasonable and flexible at any point along the way.

## **When Your Partner's Thoughts or Actions *Really* Are Wrong**

If you've skipped ahead to read this section, please be sure that you've read the table, **Is Your Partner Wrong?** on page 2 before you read any further. You may have skipped to this section thinking that your partner's thoughts or actions are wrong, but they really aren't, and I don't want you to make this mistake. The table **Is Your Partner Wrong?** will help you avoid this mistake. The principles I'll describe in the section only apply when her thoughts and actions *truly are* wrong.

The types of things that your partner may do that are wrong can be divided into two categories:

1. **During Disagreements:** When the way she treats you during a disagreement is wrong, and
2. **At Times Other than During Disagreements:** When she does something wrong, and that's what triggers a disagreement in the first place

**During disagreements.** In general, when people do things that are wrong in relationships, they most often happen during disagreements. It's not what they disagree about, but rather how they are interacting during the disagreement. They treat each other disrespectfully during the disagreements. In recent decades, researchers have identified specific kinds of actions during disagreements that are clearly destructive, and

they found that the rate of destructive behaviors that each partner does during disagreements is generally similar. What varies is not the frequency, but the types of destructive things that each partner does.

If your partner does harmful or destructive things during disagreements, this will happen in one of two ways (see *Figure 1 on the following page*). She'll either

1. respond to your complaint by being defensive, dismissive, close-minded, inflexible or tuning you out, or
2. voice a complaint in an accusatory, critical, condescending, inflexible or indirect way.

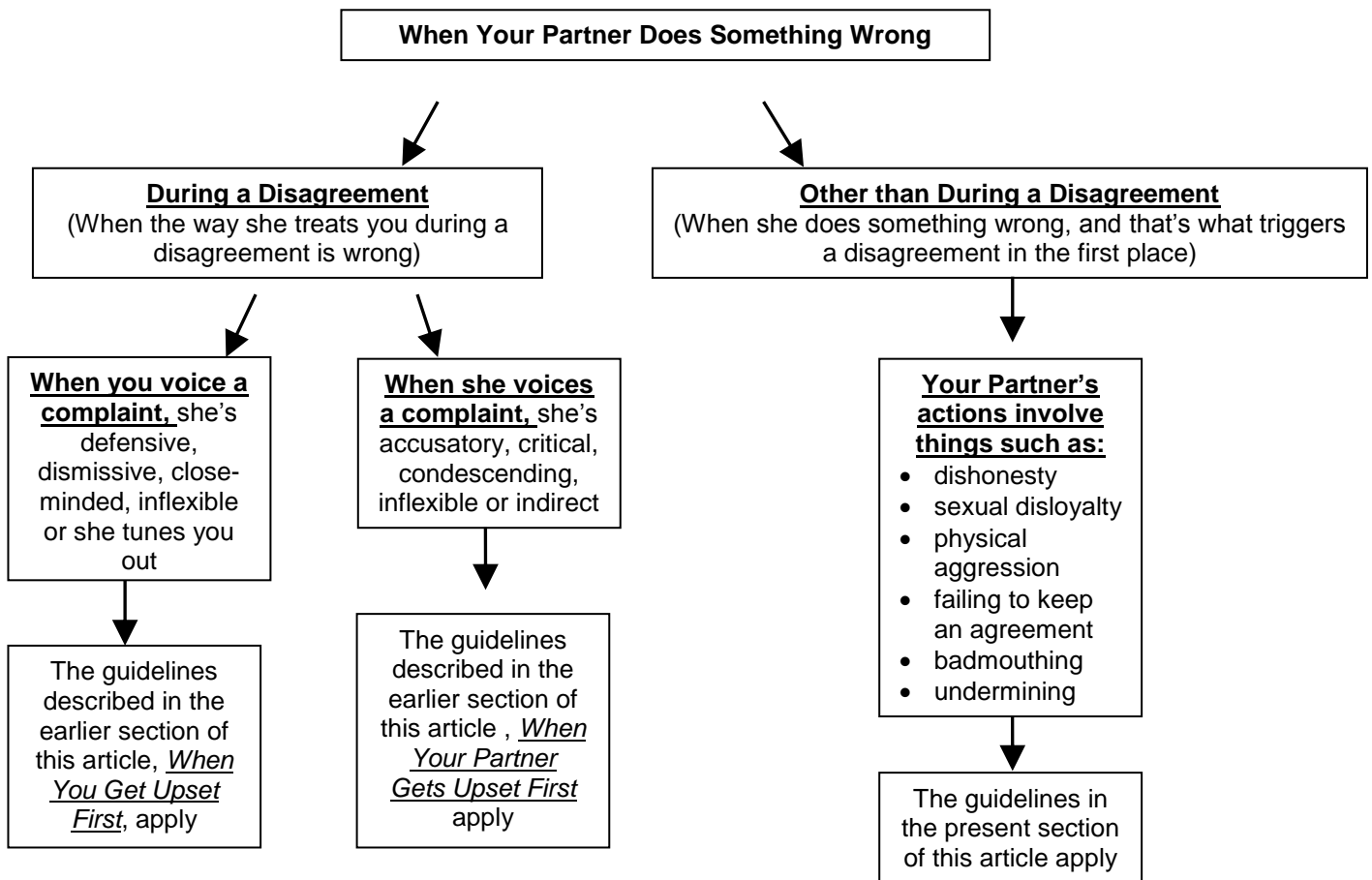
If she engages in either of these types of destructive behavior during a disagreement, it will be unfolding in real time right in front of your eyes, and if you want to be effective, you'll learn to handle it skillfully *as it's happening*, rather than complain about it later. People who are effective when their partners are disrespectful during disagreements follow the procedures I've already described in each of the previous two sections of this paper. Skilled people do things like firing friendly warning shots, not making a big deal of the temporary disrespectful behavior, and other ways I've already described. There is nothing more in the rest of this article that is applicable to situations where partners do destructive things *during arguments*. If you've read this article up to this point, you already have the knowledge you need.

**At times other than during disagreements.** The second type of destructive actions that people do in relationships don't involve things that happen during arguments, but rather involve destructive actions taken by a partner during non-argument times. "Non-argument" destructive behaviors include things such as dishonesty, infidelity, physical aggression, failing to keep an agreement, badmouthing one's partner to others, and undermining one's partner. If she does one of these things, you'll want her to realize that she's done something wrong, admit it and not do it again. Studies show that your reaction at moments like these is crucial. People who are effective in getting their partners to realize that what they've done is wrong react very differently than those who are less effective. In the remainder of this section, I'll describe what we know about how effective people operate. The reactions of effective people are also summarized in [Chart #3: When Your Partner's Thinking or Actions are Wrong](#) (p. 21)

Up to this point I've gone to some lengths to describe how people who are effective combine a generous attitude with an absolute requirement that their partners be willing to give and take. But in situation where your partner is doing (or has done) something that's clearly harmful, disrespectful or destructive, meeting in the middle isn't good enough. If your partner keeps lying to you, you don't ask her to cut back on the lying, you ask her to stop. If your partner gets physically aggressive with you, you don't ask her to meet you in the middle and be half as violent. No, you ask her to stop.

Many people find it really hard to draw the line with their partners when they need to. Other people have no problem standing up for themselves but they don't know how to do it without an attitude of indignation, outrage or disgust. As they're requiring that their partner stop doing the harmful things, they're also saying or acting like their

**Figure 1**



partners have done some despicable unthinkable crime, some unforgivable sin. It might not be this dramatic, but in one way or another they're making a big deal of how awful their partners are for doing these things. People like this are rarely successful in getting their partners to feel bad about what they did and be willing to change.

If you feel like she is doing things that are harmful or clearly wrong, you might be saying to yourself, "If I don't get her to see how awful she is for doing these things, she might just keep doing them!" This is the most common mistake people make when it comes to trying to get their partners to change. When you make a big deal of how awful your partner is when she does something wrong, it'll feel to her like you're saying she's more awful than you, or that the things she's doing are more despicable than the things you've done. You might be thinking, "Well, what if the things she's doing are more awful than anything I've done?" If you believe this is true, you should know that empirical evidence suggests that the odds that you are more innocent than your partner are slim. Studies suggest that most people who believe that they have done less harm to their relationships than their partners are usually mistaken. In most situations, partners are relatively equal contributors to relationships problems, although the ways they contribute may be very different. If you adopt the belief that your partner is more to

blame for your relationship problems but the truth is that you've been just as off track, guess who just put a chokehold on your relationship? It's you, not her!

I'll have much more to say about this in a forthcoming article. Right now I'd just like to be clear that there's nothing that will erode your partner's motivation and goodwill more than the feeling that you think you're somehow better or less to blame for your relationship problems. Of all the things that researchers have found to date, attitudes of superiority like this are most destructive to relationships. In fact, the belief that you're a better person to be a in a relationship with than your partner is (i.e., more mature, more stable, more responsible, etc.) is the single most toxic thing identified by researchers. It's more toxic than lying. It's more toxic than cheating or self-centeredness. Evidence suggests that an attitude of superiority when your partner does something wrong could be far more destructive than the wrong thing that your partner did in the first place.

The truth is, few people can avoid looking down on their partners when their partners do things that are hurtful or destructive. Fortunately, what you do in the minutes or hours following your partner's harmful words or actions are more important than your immediate reaction. People who are good at getting their partners to stop doing things that are clearly wrong manage to let feelings of disgust and superiority go in the minutes and hours that follow an incident. Rather than ruminating on thoughts that fuel their disgust, like "I would never do that to her!" or "It's just my luck to be stuck with a person whose incapable of thinking about anyone but herself!" they tend to think about things that help them shift to a less condescending attitude. For example, they take a deep breath and say to themselves things like

"I need to make it clear that this is wrong and it's not gonna fly with me, but whatever, it's not like I necessarily have any room to talk, I've done plenty of dysfunctional things too. I'm not really in a position to act all high and mighty. That doesn't mean I'm gonna just let this slide, it just means I don't have to get all indignant or act like she's a horrible person."

One of the most common mistakes we make when we feel mistreated is try over and over again to explain how outrageous is was for our partners to treat us this way. We do this because we think if we can somehow get our partners to realize how awful they've been, they'll own up and change. But our brains don't work that way. When you make a big deal of how awful your partner is, it'll arouse her natural defenses and make her far less open to understanding how you feel. The ability to avoid a high horse attitude doesn't lessen the determination that successful people have to stand up for themselves. In fact, the combination of the right action (standing up for yourself) and the right attitude (not making a big deal of how out of line your partner is) is the most powerful combination that has been identified. Once the right action and attitude are in place, you will likely find that she will become more respectful.

Let's sum up. People who react effectively when their partners' actions are clearly wrong combine a generous attitude with a firm bottom line. They do two things.

1. They require that their partner stop doing these things, and
2. They avoid getting on their high horses, making a big deal of their partners offensive behavior.

But there's one more thing they do if needed, and that is -- they're unwilling to continue business as usual if their partners keep doing the harmful things. Most of the time you won't have to do this third step if you've been able to do the first two, but there may be times when you'll need to take a firm stand. I've described how and when successful people do this in *Developing Habits for Relationship Success*, pp. 60-62.

\*For more articles about relationships, go to [www.thecouplesclinic.com](http://www.thecouplesclinic.com).  
Click on "resources," then "articles"

# Sequence 12-Step Summary

## The First Steps

### 1. Self-Reminder: Do Something Different

Remember to shift your focus from how irritating or upsetting your partner's behavior or attitude is to your own reactions to it. Remind yourself that you don't want to react in ways that never work for anybody, in any relationship. If you can respond effectively in situations like these, your partner will become more understanding and cooperative.

### 2. Give the Benefit of the Doubt

- Avoid jumping to conclusions, and with an open mind, ask your partner why she acted as she did, or is thinking the way she is.
- Consider that this situation might not be about right/wrong, but rather about legitimately different wants, needs, priorities or standards.
- Hear your partner out before explaining your point of view or defending yourself.

### 3. Find the Understandable Part

Become determined to find any at-least-partly-understandable reasons for her thinking or actions, and acknowledge them.

### 4. What's the Bigger Thing that's at Stake?

Tell her why you're upset, or why you're having trouble acting or thinking the way she wants. Explain the bigger thing that's at stake for you. Look for the bigger thing at stake for her, too.

### 5. Offer Assurance

Assure your partner that you're trying to be flexible and keep an open mind, and that you realize that you may have legitimately different wants, needs, priorities or expectations that come to play in situations like these. Let her know that there's no reason why your feelings should count more than hers.

### 6. Work With Me?

Let your partner know that you're willing to make some changes and to work with her to find a mutually acceptable solution. Ask her to do the same.

**If, in spite of your good attitude, your partner disregards your viewpoint or criticizes you...**

### 7. Maintain Your Cool:

Don't hit the panic button. Remind yourself that her defensive, dismissive or critical attitude is probably just temporary. Maybe she just needs a "friendly warning."

### 8. Fire a Friendly Warning Shot (Ask and Offer)

Express irritation at her attitude and clarify your willingness to be flexible and keep an open mind. Let her know that you expect her to do the same.

### 9. Stand Up/Engage (only if your partner keeps criticizing you or dismissing your viewpoint)

Get angry and let her know if she wants a fight, you're willing to give it! Let her know that you don't expect her to agree with you, but you do expect her to be willing to work with you. Make it clear that her attitude is not OK with you. Don't back down. Stay engaged and demand that she explain why she thinks it's OK to dismiss your viewpoint.

### 10. Reject your partner (only if she keeps criticizing you or dismissing your viewpoint)

If she continues to criticize or disregard you, let her know she's pissing you off and you don't want to be around her!

### 11. Don't make a big deal of it

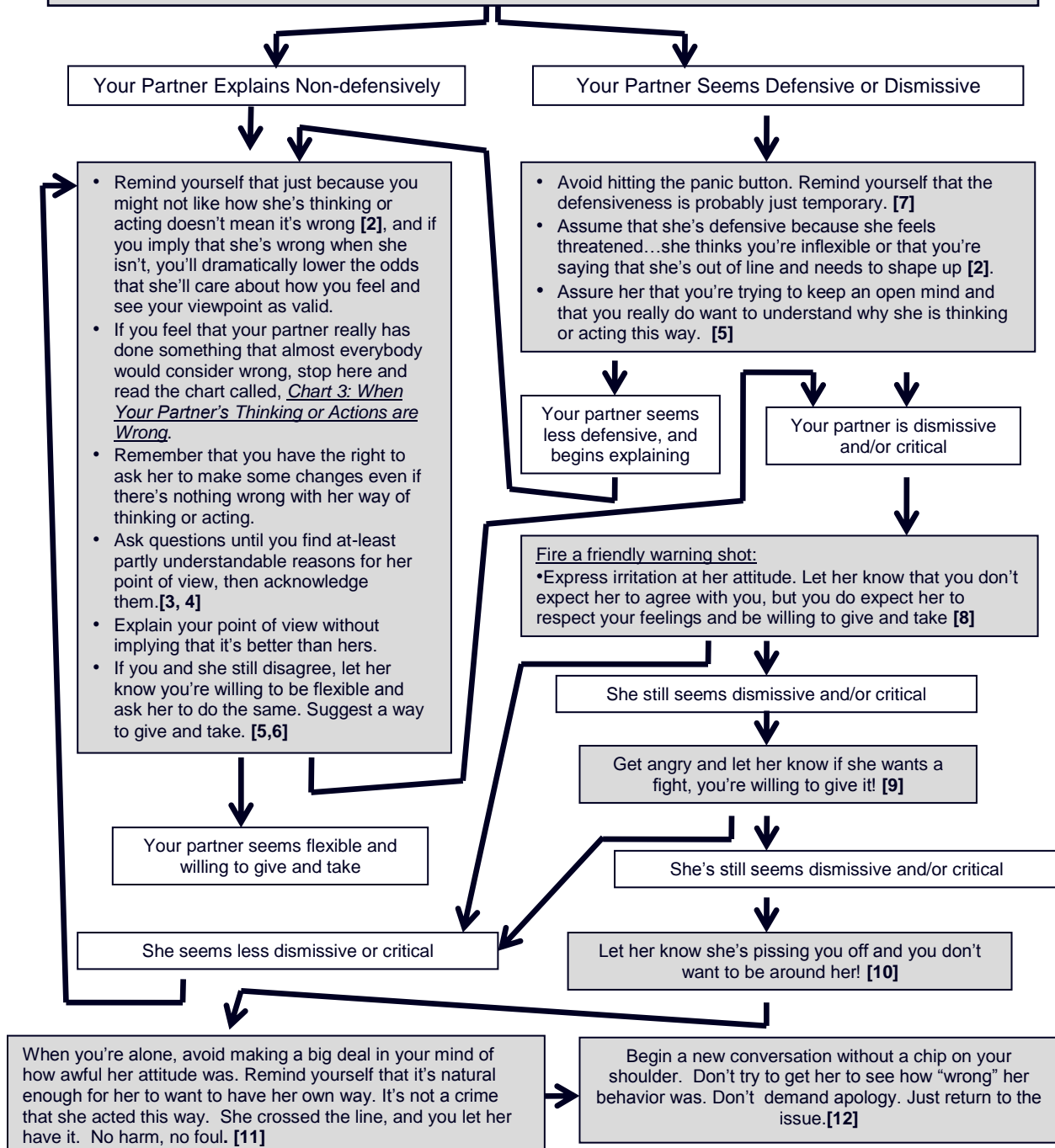
When you're by yourself, let go of the anger, feeling good that you stood up well for yourself. Promise yourself that you'll do it again, if needed. Remind yourself that it's natural enough for your partner to want to have her own way. You don't have to make a big deal of her stubborn or selfish behavior. It's not a crime that she acted this way. She crossed the line, and you "let her have it." No big deal.

### 12. Try again later

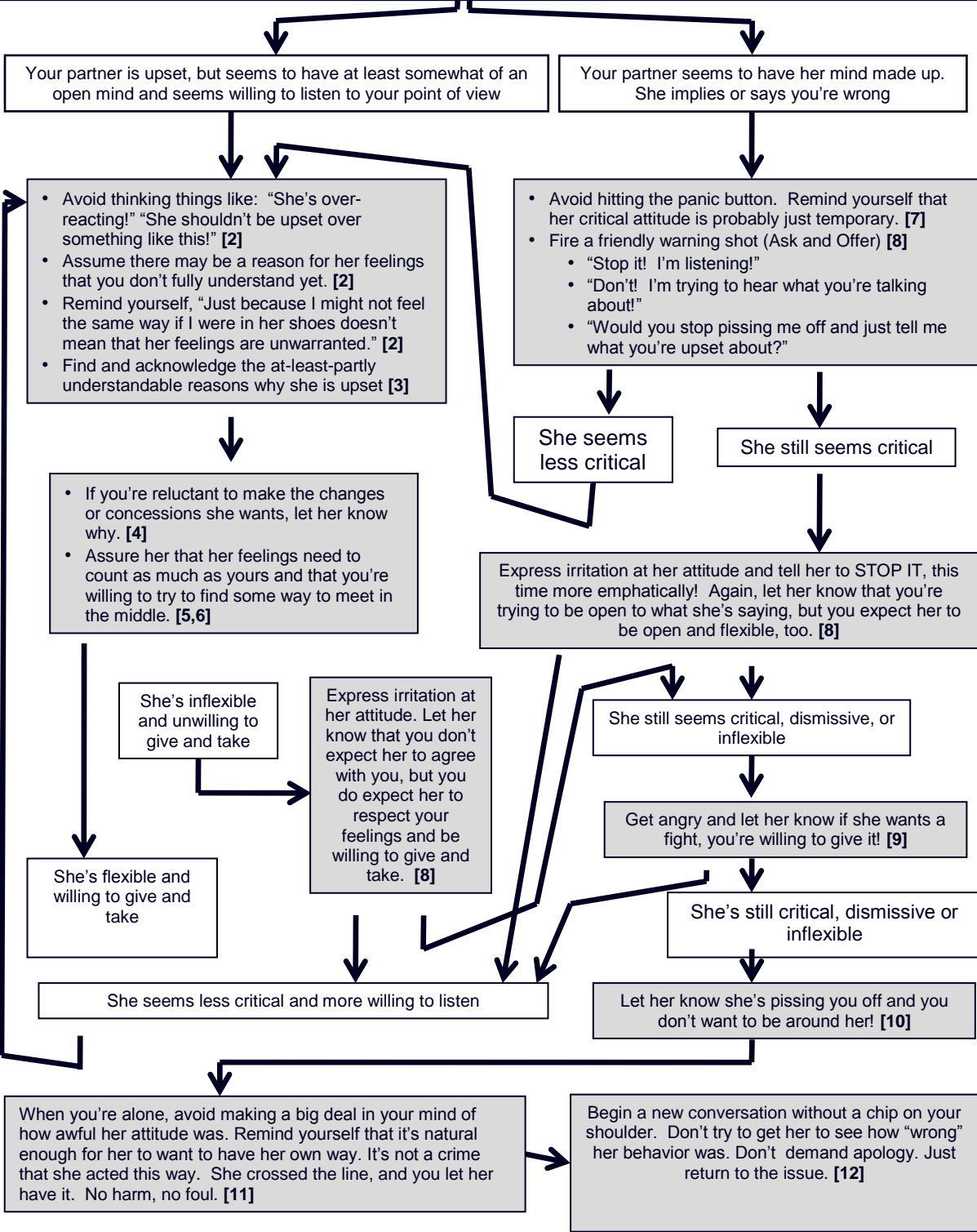
- "That didn't go very well, did it? You want to try again?"
- Don't try to get your partner to see how "wrong" her stubborn behavior was. Don't demand an apology. Go back to "The First Steps" again. Be ready to stand up again, if needed.

## Chart 1: When You Get Upset or Express Dissatisfaction First

- Assume there must be a reason for your partner's thinking or actions that you don't fully understand yet. [2]
- Avoid jumping to conclusions and with an open mind, ask your partner why she is acting (or acted) that way. [3]
- Hear her out and refrain from disputing or debating what she is saying before she's able to explain fully. [2]



# Chart 2: When Your Partner Gets Upset or Expresses Dissatisfaction First



## Chart 3: When Your Partner's Thinking or Actions are Wrong

