

The Bottom Line

Brent J. Atkinson, Ph.D.

The most fundamental difference between people who are good at getting their partners to treat them well and those who aren't involves their ability to recognize that most of the time, in most situations there's more than one legitimate way to do things. There's more than one legitimate way to make sense of things. There's more than one legitimate way to make life work. Not always. There are some things that are clearly harmful by most any standard, and I'll talk more about those things later. Right now, I want you to consider that most of the time when you and your partner disagree, there isn't anything intrinsically wrong with either of your priorities or expectations, and one of the most toxic things you can do in your relationship is assume she's is wrong when she isn't.

When you and your partner disagree, don't try to trump her feelings or priorities with your own. I believe there's a line you simply can't cross in relationships and get away with it, and that line involves winning at the expense of your partner. You also can't let your partner win at your expense. But right now let's look at your half of the equation. If you want her to care about how you feel, you have to be willing to count her feelings as much as your own. Even—actually, *especially* in situations where the stakes are high and you feel strongly about your positions. You can each argue persuasively and passionately for your points of view, but if you're not willing in the end to find a way to count your partner's feelings as much as your own, you're never going to have the kind of love and respect from her that you'd like to have. Willingness to give equal regard is a fundamental requirement for having a satisfying relationship. You don't have to give equal regard, but if you don't you're on your own. You'll be putting yourself squarely in the company of those who rarely get from their partners the kind of love and respect that they need. If you're not willing to give equal regard, you might as well save your self some time. Your plan will be fatally flawed from the beginning. All the time I see people trying to improve their relationships while hanging onto the idea that if their own way of thinking seems better than their partner's, they're going stick to their guns, and they're not going to change. If this is your attitude, there's probably not much point in trying to do the other things that have been found to be necessary for relationships to go well. It won't work.

But if you're willing to cut your losses and wrap your head around the idea of prioritizing your partner's feelings as much as your own (regardless of how much sense they make to you), I believe you'll save yourself years of the kind of trouble you don't really need to have. I say "cut your losses" because lets face it...when you disagree, you want your way. It seems better. In extreme situations where you and your partner want opposite things, if you prioritize her feelings as much as your own, you'll come away with only half of what you originally wanted. So will your partner. Of course, most of the time, you and your partner's needs won't be completely opposite, and compromise won't involve dramatic concessions. But the point is, regardless of whether the compromise involves large or small changes, people who are most successful at getting treated well by their partners are committed to equality. When they disagree with their partners, in so many words they say things like:

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

Has your partner been sensing this sort of attitude in you? What I’m saying is, if you can’t get to this attitude, none of the rest of the good things you may try to do in your relationship will really help much. Fundamentally you have a decision to make—which way is it going to be? Once you make a clear decision, and become willing to cut your losses and decide in theory how you’re going to approach your relationship, it’ll still be hard to do when you get upset. But if while you’re calmly sitting by yourself you’re less than fully committed to the principle of equality, there isn’t a chance you’ll be able to conduct yourself in this way when you’re actually feeling upset.