

## When Your Partner's Thinking or Actions Seem Wrong

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If you're like most people, your partner's viewpoints or actions will often seem wrong to you when they're really not (See the articles, *Core Differences in Ways of Maintaining Emotional Stability: Legitimately Different Ways of Navigating Life*, and *Habits of People Who Know How to Get their Partners to Treat them Well: Part I—Dealing with Differences*). But sometimes your conclusions will be correct, and your partner's actions will truly be wrong. Studies suggest that sooner or later all people in long-term intimate relationships do things that are detrimental to their relationships, whether intentionally or not. If you're in a long-term relationship, the question is not *if* your partner is going to engage in objectionable relationship conduct, the question is, "*When* is it going to happen?" Studies suggest that if you want to be treated well by your partner, you must have the ability to react effectively when your partner says or does things that are unconstructive, inconsiderate, or just plain wrong. The ability to respond effectively is not optional. It's a requirement for anyone who hopes to have a partner who treats him or her well over the long haul.

In this article, we will discuss how you can react effectively when your partner does any of the things that have been empirically proven to be unhealthy for relationships. We'll begin by distinguishing three types of relationship offenses: Obvious Offenses, Disagreement-Related Offenses and the Offense of Misplaced Overall Blame (see page 18 for a summary chart).

### **Types of Relationship Misconduct**

#### **Obvious Offenses**

We'll start with the Obvious Relationship Offenses. It doesn't take a rocket scientist to figure out that things such as deliberate lying or deception are harmful to relationships. In fact, the near-universal agreement about the damaging effect of the relationship offenses described in this section is what separates them from the other types of offenses. The obvious offenses can be divided into two sub-types—physically aggressive actions or threats, and those that do not involve direct acts or threats of aggression.

#### **Physical Aggressiveness**

Physical aggressiveness includes pushing, shoving, hitting, slapping, throwing objects, blocking one's partner from leaving a room, and verbally or non-verbally threatening physical harm.

#### **Other Obvious Offenses**

In addition to the aggressive offenses which happen when partners are interacting with each other, there are obvious offenses that happen when partners are apart. These offenses often *trigger* arguments, but usually don't

happen *during* the actual arguments. Non-argument-related obvious offenses include...

- intentional lying or deliberate deception
- violating a mutually agreed upon standard of faithfulness in the area of sexual conduct
- breaking a clear agreement with no good reason
- badmouthing or undermining one's partner
- violating one's partner's privacy or personal space
- making an irreversible, unilateral decision regarding something about which one knows that one's partner has strong feelings.

Because they are universally recognized, most people assume that the obvious offenses are the most destructive things that people do in relationships. However, evidence from relationship studies suggests that a steady diet of disagreement-related offenses, which are much more common, can negatively impact relationships just as powerfully as the more obvious offenses.

### **Disagreement-Related Offenses**

When asked to describe the most destructive things that people do in relationships, most people identify the obvious offenses listed above. However, recent studies have identified a group of less obvious, higher frequency offenses which are also predictive of poor relationship outcomes. These common, often overlooked relationship offenses mostly involve the way people treat each other during disagreements, although some of the offending attitudes and beliefs may precede disagreements and/or linger after arguments are over. Your partner commits a disagreement-related offense each time she does one of the following:

#### ***She concludes you are wrong in situations where your wants, needs, opinions or priorities are just as legitimate as hers***

Your partner believes that your priorities, opinions, or actions are wrong when they're really not (instead of recognizing that you have legitimate differences). She has difficulty realizing that there are many different ways of navigating life that can work, and that just because her priorities, opinions or actions clearly seem better to her doesn't mean that they really are.

#### ***She is defensive***

Your partner fails to acknowledge any part of your complaint as valid or understandable. She tries to focus discussions away from the points you are making by harping on the fact that she doesn't like the way you are talking to her. She believes that you shouldn't ask her to make any changes or adjustments in her behavior unless she's doing something wrong.

### ***She is dismissive***

Your partner discounts your perceptions, interpretations or recollections if they differ from hers. She has a hard time being genuinely open to the possibility that your perceptions could be as valid as (or even more valid than) hers. Particularly if your perceptions or interpretations seem exaggerated or extreme, she tends to dismiss them altogether, rather than looking for a less extreme version that could be valid. When you complain, she has a tendency to believe that your wants, needs, or expectations are unreasonable, excessive or short-sighted when they're actually legitimate—just different than hers.

### ***She puts you down***

She calls you derogatory names (jerk, idiot, asshole, etc.), or puts you down (e.g., "I should have known better to expect anything different from someone who has been divorced two times!" "Leave it to you to screw things up again!")

### ***She won't compromise***

Your partner is unwilling to "meet you in the middle" or give your preferences or priorities equal regard unless she agrees with them.

### ***She acts high and mighty***

When you make a mistake, your partner makes a big deal of it. She acts like you're really stupid or like you've committed an unforgivable crime. She doesn't try to find the things that might make your actions more understandable. She acts like she has never done anything as bad as what you have done.

### ***She shuts down, walks away prematurely, or is unwilling to talk about an issue***

In spite of the fact that you have communicated open-mindedness and willingness to be flexible, she shuts down, walks away, or is unwilling to talk about an issue.

### ***She won't stand up for herself; instead, she acts like you're selfish or controlling***

She avoids taking responsibility for voicing her opinion or holding her ground in an argument; instead, she blames you for being selfish or controlling. She lets you have your way, and then thinks less of you for it. She is unwilling (or unable) to endure the temporary discomfort of an argument, so she gives in to "keep the peace."

## The Offense of Misplaced Overall Blame

Misplaced overall blame is the deadliest of all offenses that have been identified by relationship researchers to date. Most fundamentally, this offense occurs at the internal level, involving beliefs and attitudes rather than external behaviors. Whether expressed directly or not, the attitude involves what researchers call contempt—seeing oneself as being on a higher plane than one’s partner. Your partner engages in this offense if she mistakenly believes that...

- you are mostly to blame for your relationship problems
- she has more to complain about than you do
- you have treated her far worse than she has treated you
- she is more emotionally mature than you are
- you are more screwed up than she is.

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 your partner has done things that are just as destructive as you have. If she has a hard time seeing this, it’s probably due to honest mistakes in perception, more likely due to an inaccurate or incomplete understanding about the range of attitudes and actions that are destructive to relationships than to a desire to frame you 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. People who are dissatisfied with their partners often believe their partners’ actions are wrong when they aren’t, and they are also blind to the destructiveness of some of their own attitudes or actions at important moments in their relationships.

In a later section, we’ll discuss how you can react effectively if your partner thinks that you’re the main problem. If, on the other hand, *you* believe that *your partner* is mostly to blame, please read the article, “*Is Your Partner Really More to Blame?*”

## The Non-Offenses (often mistakenly believed to be offenses)

The above sections give a comprehensive summary of relationship offenses. But after reading this summary, some people feel that it is not comprehensive enough. “Aren’t there other behaviors that should be on the list? What about when my partner does things that are *selfish or irresponsible?*” Indeed, if your relationship is like most, there are times when it will seem to you that your partner is *inattentive, insensitive, immature, misguided, irrational, short-sighted, biased, lazy, inconsiderate, self-absorbed, unrealistic, unfeeling or uncaring, mean, negative, controlling, and/or needy*. Aren’t these things bad for relationships? Researchers have found that, in general, when people believe that their partners have done things that are deserving of one or more of these adjectives, in most of these instances their partners haven’t actually done things that are intrinsically bad for relationships—at least not by any empirically-supported standard. There are many different standards for defining, for example, what truly selfish behavior is. Researchers have found that what is “selfish” to one person often clearly isn’t to another. For example, a husband might consider his wife to be selfish and inattentive when she follows through with a planned outing with her friends even though the husband

decided to take a day off from work. But the wife feels that the husband is the one who is selfish—expecting her to cancel her plans just because he changed his schedule. Relationship studies suggest that there’s nothing wrong with either partner’s wants, needs, or priorities in this situation. Some wives would have no problem dropping their plans; some husbands would have no problem with their wives continuing with previously scheduled plans. There are many ways of prioritizing things and navigating relationships that can work. In most situations, there’s more than one legitimate way to make sense of things; there’s more than one correct way to prioritize things; and there’s more than one legitimate set of standards for determining acceptable conduct.

Mistakenly concluding that your partner is wrong (in situations where his/her wants, needs, opinions or priorities are just as legitimate as yours) can lead to dire consequences over time for a relationship. It’s one of the eight disagreement-related offenses described earlier. Evidence from relationship studies is clear: The flow of disagreement-related offenses must be reduced to a trickle, or relationships will eventually falter. Fortunately, the cycle of erroneous fault-finding that often creeps into relationships can be stopped by either partner (see the section below titled, *When Your Partner Commits a Disagreement-Related Offense*).

### **Reacting Effectively When Your Partner’s Thinking or Actions Seem Wrong**

#### **When Your Partner’s Priorities or Expectations Are Legitimately Different than Yours**

As we’ve discussed, concluding that your partner’s thinking or actions are wrong when they’re not is a mistake that you do not want to make—at least not if you want to have a partner who is responsive to your concerns. There will be plenty of times when your partner *really is* wrong, and at these times you’ll want your partner to take your complaint seriously. You don’t want to lower your credibility by “crying wolf” when there really is no wolf. Many people have a hard time distinguishing situations where their partners have legitimately different priorities or viewpoints from situations where their partners’ viewpoints or actions are truly off-base or out of line. There are a couple of simple questions that can be useful in helping you decide. If you think your partner’s thinking or conduct is wrong, try asking yourself:

“Would my partner be upset with me if the roles were reversed and I did something like this?”

“Would every sane, reasonable person I know (not just my friends) feel the same way as I do if they were in my situation?”

If you try to be unbiased in answering these questions, you may be able to see that your partner’s thinking or conduct may be upsetting to you because of the values and expectations you hold, and that your values or expectations aren’t universally shared.

Considering the risks of erroneous fault-finding, you would be wise to err on the side of caution when it comes to judging your partner. People who are good at getting their partners to treat them well are suspicious of their own tendencies to be biased in the assessment of blame. They know that false accusations weaken their influence by unnecessarily arousing

their partners' natural defenses. In our work at the *Couples Clinic and Research Institute*, we encourage partners to use the following rule of thumb: Assume that your partner's conduct is legitimately different (vs. "wrong") unless it is one of the offenses listed in the previous sections (e.g., an obvious offense, a disagreement-related offense, or the offense of overall misplaced blame). Any departures from this rule of thumb should be made with caution, due of the risks involved with erroneous fault-finding.

Letting go of the idea that your partner is wrong doesn't mean that you shouldn't be upset when she says or does things that you don't like or with which you don't agree. 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. 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 respect your viewpoint and/or meet you in the middle. If you want her to treat you this way, you must be willing to treat her this way as well. Rather than judging her and insisting that she act in accordance with your expectations, you must be willing to give her priorities and expectations equal regard, and simply ask her to meet you in the middle.

### **When Your Partner Commits a Disagreement-Related Offense**

Disagreement-related offenses (see pp. 2-3) happen with such regularity in distressed relationships that many researchers believe they are the main cause of relationship problems. Evidence from relationship studies suggests that partners tend to commit disagreement-related offenses at approximately the same rates, but most people underestimate the extent of their own offenses relative to their partners'. The reason for this bias may lie in the fact that there are many types of disagreement-related offenses, and often people don't commit the same types as do their partners. Consequently, most people are biased when judging the seriousness of their own offenses versus those of their partners. If you believe that your partner commits disagreement-related offenses more often than you, you're probably mistaken, and this mistake is actually quite serious. The erroneous belief that one's partner is more to blame than oneself is among the most powerful predictors of relationship demise out of all factors that have been studied to date. This "mother of all offenses" is discussed in the article, *Is Your Partner Really More to Blame?*

Disagreement-related offenses tend to beget disagreement-related offenses. Fortunately, the feedback process works in the opposite direction as well. When one partner breaks the cycle of responding to disagreement-related offenses with additional disagreement-related offenses, the overall rate of disagreement-related offenses made by both partners drops. If you want your partner to be less critical, defensive, dismissive, high and mighty, and more willing to interact with you in an open and flexible way, you simply need to learn how to react more effectively (engage in less of your own disagreement-related offenses) when she acts in these ways. One of the most frequent blunders people make when their partners commit disagreement-related offenses is to make a big deal of how awful their partners are for

doing these things. Making a big deal of how awful one's partner is for engaging in a disagreement-related offense is itself a disagreement-related offense (acting high and mighty). An attempt to correct one's partner's offensive behavior while engaging in offensive behavior oneself is hypocritical, and doomed to fail. This is why arguments about how "how badly you treated me during our previous argument" usually end up in stalemates or escalations. People who know how to skillfully implement the *Sequence* (See the article, *Reacting Effectively When Your Partner Says or Does Something That You Don't Like or Agree With*) don't panic when their partners commit disagreement-related offenses, because they're confident that they know how to get their partners to become more cooperative. The ability to skillfully implement the *Sequence* is all that is needed to neutralize disagreement-related escalations.

### **When Your Partner Commits an Obvious Offense**

The skills described in the articles, *Habits of People Who Know How to Get their Partners to Treat them Well: Part I—Dealing with Differences*, and *Reacting Effectively When Your Partner Says or Does Something That You Don't Like or Agree With* will be sufficient for you to be able to elicit respectful and cooperative behavior from your partner in almost all situations where you feel dissatisfied with or disapproving of her thinking or actions. The only circumstances that require a modification of these skills involve the Obvious Offenses: deliberate and intentional lying or deception; sexual unfaithfulness; physical aggression; breaking clear agreements without good reason; badmouthing or undermining; violation of privacy or personal space; and making irreversible, unilateral decisions regarding things about which you know your partner has strong feelings. When your partner does one of these things, if you want to maximize the odds that she will acknowledge her wrongdoing, feel bad about what she's done and be willing to take whatever steps are needed to prevent it from happening again, you'll need to make a minor—but important—adjustment to your application of the *Sequence*. In general, the *Sequence* involves combining a generous attitude with a requirement that your partner be willing to "meet you in the middle." But in situations where one's partner is doing (or has done) something that's clearly harmful, disrespectful or destructive (as is the case with the Obvious Offenses), 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.

**It's All About Attitude.** Many people have no problem insisting that their partner stop doing harmful or destructive things, but they don't know how to do this without conveying an attitude of indignation, outrage or disgust. As they ask their partners to acknowledge and take responsibility for their wrongdoings, they do it in a way that arouses their partners' natural defenses. Specifically, they "get on the high horse" and act "high and mighty," making a big deal of how awful their partners are for their misconduct. They act as if their partners have committed unforgivable crimes and imply (or directly claim) that they have never done anything remotely as bad as what their partners have done. In one way or another, they deliver the message, "Shame on you!" People who communicate disgust or messages of shame to their partners are rarely successful in getting their partners to feel genuinely bad about what they did and to become willing to change. If in your own mind you're making a big deal of how

awful your partner is for doing something wrong (regardless of whether you verbalize it or not), it'll feel to her like you're saying that she's more awful than you, or that the things she's doing are more harmful than the things you've done. If your partner has committed an obvious offense and you haven't, it's easy to make the mistake of thinking of her conduct as being the main thing that is harming your relationship. If you believe this is true, you should know that empirical evidence suggests that the odds that, overall, 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 (Remember that a steady diet of disagreement-related offenses is just as damaging to your relationship as is an obvious offense). In most situations, partners are relatively equal contributors to relationships problems, although the ways they contribute may be very different (see the article: *"Is Your Partner Really More to Blame?"*). 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 in different ways, guess who just put a chokehold on your relationship? It's you; not her! In fact, a person's mistaken belief that s/he is a "better" relationship partner (i.e., more mature, more stable, more responsible, etc.) is the single most toxic thing identified by researchers to date. It's more toxic than lying. It's more toxic than cheating or self-centeredness. Evidence suggests that a "high-horse" attitude when one's partner does something wrong could be far more destructive than the wrong thing that one's partner did in the first place.

The truth is that few people can avoid looking down on their partners when their partners do things that are hurtful or destructive. Fortunately, your continuing reactions 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 harmful things manage to let go of feelings of disgust and superiority 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 who's 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 that it's not going to fly with me, but I don't necessarily have any room to talk. I've done plenty of dysfunctional things too, and I'm not really in a position to act all high and mighty. That doesn't mean I'm going to just let this slide; it just means that I don't have to get all indignant or act like she's a horrible person."

One of the most common mistakes people make when they feel mistreated is to try over and over again to explain how outrageous it was for their partners to treat them this way. People do this because they think if they can somehow get their 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 it far more difficult for her to understand 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 ingredient in the skill set of

people who are good at getting their partners to treat them well. Once the right action and attitude are in place, you will likely find that your partner will become less defensive and more likely to acknowledge her wrongdoings.

Let's sum up. People who react effectively when their partners commit obvious offenses 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 behaviors.

But there's one more thing they do if needed; they refuse to continue business as usual as long as their partners keep doing the harmful things.

**Refusing to Continue "Business as Usual"**. You may need to refuse to continue business as usual with your partner if one of the following happens:

1. Your partner refuses to acknowledge wrongdoing, in spite of your non-high-horse attitude.
2. Your partner continues to repeat the offense (regardless of whether she apologizes or not).

Refusing to continue business as usual involves you communicating to your partner something like,

"I'm not going to sit here and pretend that everything is okay when you won't even recognize that you were wrong."

or

"I'm not going to sit here and pretend that everything is okay when you continue to do these things. I need to have some reason to believe that you're going to stop, other than just an apology and a promise that you'll stop."

In refusing to continue business as usual you inform your partner that you don't want to be around her, and you arrange your life as much as possible to avoid contact. If contact can't be avoided (for example, if you have children and must interface), you keep your contact cordial. If she initiates unnecessary conversation or contact, you remind her that you're not interested in resuming your normal relationship when you have no indication that she understands the harmfulness of what she's done and that it won't happen again. In the beginning, you organize your life to avoid contact with her on a day-to-day basis. In other words, don't make plans that completely exclude her for the next five weekends in a row. You plan from day to day as much as possible. Your non-hostile distancing may give your partner some time to think, and it's likely that she'll eventually acknowledge her wrongdoing, make an

agreement to change, and/or take the steps that you need for her to take in order to feel comfortable resuming your relationship normally.

It's important to recognize that unless refusing to continue business as usual is done without an attitude of disgust or hostility, it will have little effect on one's partner. To be effective, the refusal to continue business as usual must be accompanied with an attitude of resignation rather than from a determination to punish one's partner. An ineffective person refusing to continue business as usual might be heard saying something like, "I'm not going to let you treat me like that! I'll show you!" In contrast, an effective person might be heard saying something like, "I'm not under the illusion that anything I do is going to change your attitude. I'm doing this because it just doesn't seem right to pretend that everything is okay when it's not."

Stating one's intent to stop engaging in business as usual, particularly if it is made in a non-critical, non-blaming way, will frequently trigger a shift in one's partner toward more willingness to listen and cooperate, and actual disengagement may not be necessary. However, if your stated intention to disengage is made as an attempt to manipulate your partner into changing (rather than to prevent yourself from feeling taken advantage of), it will most likely fail. In these situations one of life's most profound paradoxes can be seen: Those individuals who genuinely stop trying to get their partners to "see the error of their ways," and instead focus on accepting the reality that their partners aren't changing and on reacting according to this reality often end up with partners who "see the error of their ways."

If and when their partners see the errors of their ways, show genuine remorse, and take steps to be sure they don't repeat the same offenses, skillful people refrain from "rubbing their partners' noses in it." They don't "hold their partners' transgressions over their heads." Rather, they forgive, and give their partners fresh starts.

### **A Step by Step Sequence for Effectively Responding When Your Partner Commits an Obvious Offense**

Scientific studies suggest that people vary widely in their abilities to get their partners to acknowledge relationship misconduct, feel bad about the harm they've caused and be willing to change. The following guidelines are based on how people who are most effective react when their partners do things that are clearly wrong. The guidelines are summarized in the flow chart on page 19.

#### **Your First Reactions**

- 1. *If your partner becomes physically aggressive or threatens physical harm***, get away from her as quickly as possible. If she tries to stop you or she follows you, tell her firmly to leave you alone. Refuse to argue or reason with her. If you feel that she might actually hurt you, do whatever you can to pacify her or protect yourself for the moment, and then try to get away from her as quickly as possible.
  - When you are alone, carefully consider what it would take for you to feel safe while having a conversation in which you let her know that, regardless of how

valid her complaints about you might be, you will not tolerate physical aggressiveness in your relationship. *Call your local domestic violence shelter for advice about how to keep yourself safe.* Once you are alone, prepare for a conversation with her in which you are ready to use guidelines 2A-H below (Engage in the subsequent conversation only if you feel safe while doing so.).

- If you find yourself thinking about how awful she was for becoming aggressive, try to keep perspective by saying things to yourself things like... "What she did was wrong, and I'm not going to continue our relationship normally unless she acknowledges it and takes steps to make sure it won't happen again. But I'm no angel myself, and I'm really not in a position to act all high and mighty. It isn't going to help if I get all indignant and act like she's a horrible person."
  - Remind yourself that if inside you continue to feel disgusted, outraged or indignant about her aggressive or threatening behavior, or if in your mind you make a big deal about how awful she was for doing it, chances are very slim that she will be able to really care about your feelings and feel bad about what she did.
  - Don't let the fact that her conduct is unacceptable distract you from the possibility that she might have frustrations that could be valid. Be prepared to discuss them, but only if she first acknowledges the seriousness of her aggressive actions or gestures and is willing to take steps to prevent them from occurring again.
  - Later, when you are in a safe position to talk to her, make it clear that...
    - Regardless of how valid her complaints about you might be, you will not tolerate physical aggressiveness in your relationship.
    - You are unwilling to continue your relationship normally unless she acknowledges the harmfulness of her actions and is willing to take steps that may be needed to prevent further acts of aggression from happening.
- and
- If she understands the seriousness of her actions or gestures and is willing to take steps that may be needed to prevent further acts of aggression from happening, you are willing to discuss whatever frustrations or complaints she has.

- If she understands why you are upset, acknowledges that she shouldn't have done the hurtful or inappropriate thing(s), and says that she will do things differently from now on, following the guidelines in section H1 below.
  - If she is defensive, dismissive, unapologetic, or tries to change the subject, follow the guidelines in section H2 below.
- 2. *If your partner intentionally lies to you or deceives you, is sexually unfaithful, fails to keep a clear agreement with admittedly no good reason, badmouths or undermines you, violates your privacy or personal space, or makes an irreversible, unilateral decision regarding something about which she knows you have strong feelings*, proceed with the following guidelines.**
- A. Relax and take your time. Assume that when you talk to her she will understand that what she did was wrong if you can avoid implying that she is an awful person for doing it.
  - B. After your initial reaction wears off, if you still have thoughts about how awful she is for doing what she did, try to temper them by reminding yourself things like...
 

"What she did was wrong, and I'm not going to continue our relationship normally unless she acknowledges it and takes steps to make sure it won't happen again. But I'm no angel myself, and I'm really not in a position to act all high and mighty. It isn't going to help if I get all indignant and act like she's a horrible person."
  - C. Remember that if inside you continue to feel disgusted, outraged or indignant about her behavior, or if in your mind you make a big deal about how awful she is for doing what she did, chances are very slim that she will be able to really care about your feelings and feel bad about what she did.
  - D. Keep in mind the possibility that, while there is no excuse for wrongful conduct, she might have frustrations or complaints that could be valid. Remind yourself that if she acknowledges the seriousness of her wrongful conduct and is willing to take steps to be sure it won't happen again, you need to be willing to discuss her frustrations or complaints.
  - E. Having adjusted your attitude, explain to her that...
    - Regardless of how valid her complaints about you might be, you will not tolerate the kind of harmful conduct she has engaged in.

- You are unwilling to consider continuing your relationship normally unless she acknowledges the harmfulness of her conduct and is willing to take steps that may be needed to prevent further such conduct from happening.
- F. Also let her know that if she understands the seriousness of her wrongful conduct and is willing to take steps that may be needed to prevent it from happening again, you are willing to discuss whatever frustrations or complaints she may have. (Don't let the fact that her conduct is wrong distract you from the possibility that she might have frustrations that could be valid.).
- G. If she talks about her frustrations or complaints, acknowledge aspects of her feelings that are at least partly understandable, and assure her that you are willing to have further discussions. *Also remind her that, regardless of how valid her complaints might be, her hurtful conduct cannot happen again if she wants to continue your relationship, and that you can't imagine feeling okay about your relationship unless she can see this and take steps to be sure it won't happen again.*
- H. Your next reactions need to depend upon your partner's response to your first reactions.

It's likely that your partner will react in one of two ways:

- She'll understand why you are upset, acknowledge that she shouldn't have done the hurtful or destructive thing(s), and/or say that she will do things differently from now on,

or

- She will be defensive, dismissive or unapologetic.

Separate guidelines for each of these situations are given below.

H1- She'll understand why you are upset, acknowledge that she shouldn't have done the hurtful or destructive thing(s), and/or say that she will do things differently from now on.

Guidelines:

- a. If this is the first time that she's done the thing you are upset about or that she's acknowledged that she shouldn't have done it:
  - Accept her acknowledgement and resume your normal relationship.

or

- Accept her acknowledgement and let her know that it might take some time before you can feel normal about your relationship again. Tell her things she can do that might help you get to a point where you can feel normal about your relationship again.
- b. If she's apologized before, and now she's done the same type of thing again, tell her that in order to feel confident that it won't continue to happen, you need to know that she is willing to take preventative steps. Ask her what she is willing to do to prevent the same thing from happening again. If she can't come up with anything right away, ask her to think it over and get back to you, because you don't think you can feel comfortable resuming your normal relationship until she has a plan in place and is executing it.
- If she assures you that she is sincere and explains a reasonable plan for change, accept it and move on. Or, let her know that you appreciate her willingness to take preventative steps, but it still might be a while before you can feel normal about your relationship, because you need to see her follow through.
  - If she is open to making a plan, but can't think of exactly what she should do, make a suggestion. If she's gone through several plans in the past and it hasn't helped, you might need to separate for a while, or refuse to continue business as usual until enough time has passed for you to feel more confident that the change will last.

A plan for change might involve willingness to begin personal therapy, or volunteering to self-impose a consequence for a period of time (e.g., "I'm willing to stop drinking altogether." or "You can have free access to all of my passwords."). Even a consequence that is unrelated to the type of offense committed can be helpful—not as punishment, but rather as a mechanism for prompting the offender to keep reform in the front of her mind. For example, an offending partner might offer to walk to work every day for the next 3 weeks even though it's the middle of winter, just as a concrete reminder to think about the importance of avoiding repeating the offensive behavior. A person who is truly remorseful will be perfectly willing to take such steps, while a less sincere person

may resent having to “prove herself.” If your partner has the latter attitude, you can be relatively sure that it’s time to refuse to continue business as usual. A truly remorseful person will be bending over backwards to “make it right,” and if you tell her that you need to see some concrete actions taken to prevent it from happening again, she’ll come up with her own ideas. You won’t even need to suggest them.

- If she is upset that you won’t just take her word for it, and she accuses you of being unwilling to accept an apology, let your anger subside, and then with an attitude of sadness or disappointment (rather than anger or hostility): Avoid arguing with her, and instead simply let her know that you can’t carry on as if everything is okay, if she can’t see why you need something more than words or good intentions from her. Let her know that you want some space (see “refusing to continue business as usual, p. 9).

H2- She’ll be defensive, dismissive, unapologetic, or try to change the subject.

#### Guidelines:

- When it becomes clear that trying to convince her of the harmfulness of her actions isn’t working, stop trying to convince her. Simply let her know that you can’t imagine continuing your relationship normally when you have no indication that she realizes the harmfulness of her actions, or that she is willing to take steps needed to prevent these actions from happening again. Let her know that you don’t want to be around her (see “Refusing to Continue “Business as Usual”, p. 9).

### **Reacting Effectively When Your Partner Believes that You are the Main Problem**

Studies suggest that if your partner mistakenly believes that you are mostly to blame for your relationship problems, your relationship is at serious risk, and you need to effectively challenge your partner’s perceptions. Most people try to challenge their partners when their partners project overall blame, but they do it ineffectively, often lowering their influence by making counter-accusations. If your partner thinks that you are mostly to blame, there are two things that you can do to effectively challenge your partner’s perceptions:

- A. Learn more fully how to implement the *Sequence* of habits that are characteristic of people who know how to get their partners to treat them well. People who develop the ability to implement the *Sequence* (described in the articles, *Habits of People Who Know How to Get their Partners to Treat them Well: Part I—*

*Dealing with Differences, and Reacting Effectively When Your Partner Says or Does Something That You Don't Like or Agree With*) rarely have partners who project overall blame on them.

B. Avoid common ineffective reactions:

Common ineffective reaction #1: Try to persuade your partner that your behavior hasn't been as bad as she believes it has. Dispute her interpretations and historical recollections about your behavior; accuse her of exaggerating, and insist that she's overlooking the amount of positive things that you've done.

Common ineffective reaction #2: Turn the tables on her, insisting that actually, she is more to blame than you. Accuse her of having a double-standard, and argue that the things she's done are worse than the things you've done.

**What to do instead:**

- Don't dispute her claim that you have sometimes behaved badly; simply suggest that she isn't adequately considering her own objectionable habits or actions.
- While you might not agree with the extent of your partner's accusations, acknowledge her basic point, which is that you have sometimes acted in objectionable ways. Go even further by acknowledging specific examples of your own wrongdoings or your bad habits.
- Simply suggest that she is ignoring or underweighing her own offensive actions, which are equally as objectionable as yours. Give specific details of her harmful habits or actions, *while continuing to acknowledge the validity of her complaints about you.*

In response to his partner's claim that he is mostly to blame, a skillful person might be heard saying something like, "I think you're right about me—at least to a degree, but I don't think you see yourself accurately. You do as many offensive things as I do—they're just different." The crucial ingredient in the responses of skillful people is their acknowledgement (rather than denial or minimizing) that their partners have legitimate complaints. They don't deny the truth of their partners' claims—they just add perspective. Then, they avoid forcing the issue. They don't try to debate with their partners. Their message is, "Hey, I understand that you have to call it the way you see it, but just so you know, while I'm with you on the idea that I screw up regularly, from where I stand, so do you." Skillful people are content to let the difference in perspective stand. Rather than trying to convince their partners, they just give their opinion about mutual culpability. They don't make a big deal about their partners' erroneous

attributions of overall blame. They just let their partners know that they believe that their partners are equally responsible for the condition of their relationship. Then they let it go. They don't sulk, simmer or make a big deal of their partners' mistaken attributions of overall blame. If needed, they may repeat the whole process somewhere down the line.

### **Conclusion**

Most parents have the goal of teaching their children to know the difference between right and wrong, but evidence suggests that parents need to give more attention to discerning the difference themselves. But parents aren't the only ones who need to be more discerning. Empirical evidence suggests that erroneous fault-finding is rampant in our culture—at least when it comes to conduct in relationships. Further, even when people are correct in their assessments of wrongful or unhealthy behaviors, relatively few people are equipped with the skills needed to react to wrongful acts in ways that result in repair and restoration. Thanks to some very good studies on relationships in the past three decades, we know the specific skills that are shared by people who are successful in getting their partners to acknowledge wrongful acts, feel bad about the harm they've caused, and take action to ensure they won't do these things again. If you are able to implement the habits described in this article, you will join the company of these people.

# The Relationship Offenses

## Disagreement-Related Offenses

*(More comprehensive descriptions can be found on pages 2-3)*

- Concluding that one's partner is wrong when s/he isn't
- Defensiveness
- Dismissiveness
- Calling one's partner names or putting one's partner down
- Unwillingness to compromise
- Acting "high and mighty"
- Shutting down, walking away or refusing to talk, in spite of one's partner's flexible and open-minded attitude
- Excusing oneself from the responsibility of standing up for oneself and instead blaming one's partner for being controlling

*It's wrong for people to act in these ways during disagreements, but if they have done so over time, chances are very high that their partners have done just as many of these things. Attempts of one partner to point out the other's faults will likely fail unless he or she is also making just as big a deal of his or her own faults. People who are successful in getting their partners to commit fewer of these offenses do it by reducing the frequency of their own offenses.*

## Obvious Offenses

When people ...

- are physically aggressive
- intentionally lie or deceive their partners
- are sexually unfaithful
- fail to keep clear-cut agreements without good reason
- badmouth or undermine their partners
- violate their partners' privacy or personal space
- make irreversible, unilateral decisions regarding things about which they know their partners have strong feelings.

*These actions are clearly wrong, and the "meet in the middle" rule doesn't apply. Effective people ask their partners to stop, and if their partners don't, they refuse to continue business as usual until their partners do. However, the odds that their partners will indeed stop and feel remorse are directly related to the attitude people have as they refuse to continue business as usual. People who are effective at "getting through" to their partners draw lines when they need to, but in their heads, they avoid making a big deal of how awful their partners are for doing things that require them to draw the line.*

## The Offense of Misplaced Overall Blame

When people consistently distort the degree of their own misbehavior relative to the degree and amount of their partners' to the point where they believe that...

- their partners are mostly to blame for their relationship problems
- overall, they have better relationship habits than their partners do.

*This offense is more serious than most people realize, and is the single most potent predictor of relationship dissolution found to date. If people continue to believe that their partners are the main villains, when in reality their own contributions have been just as destructive as their partners', their relationships usually end. When they are globally blamed by their partners, skillful people acknowledge that there is a degree of truth in their partners' claims that they have behaved badly at times. Then, they calmly state their beliefs that their partners have behaved just as badly as they have. They are prepared to give specific examples of their partners' destructive actions, while continuing to acknowledge the destructiveness of their own.*

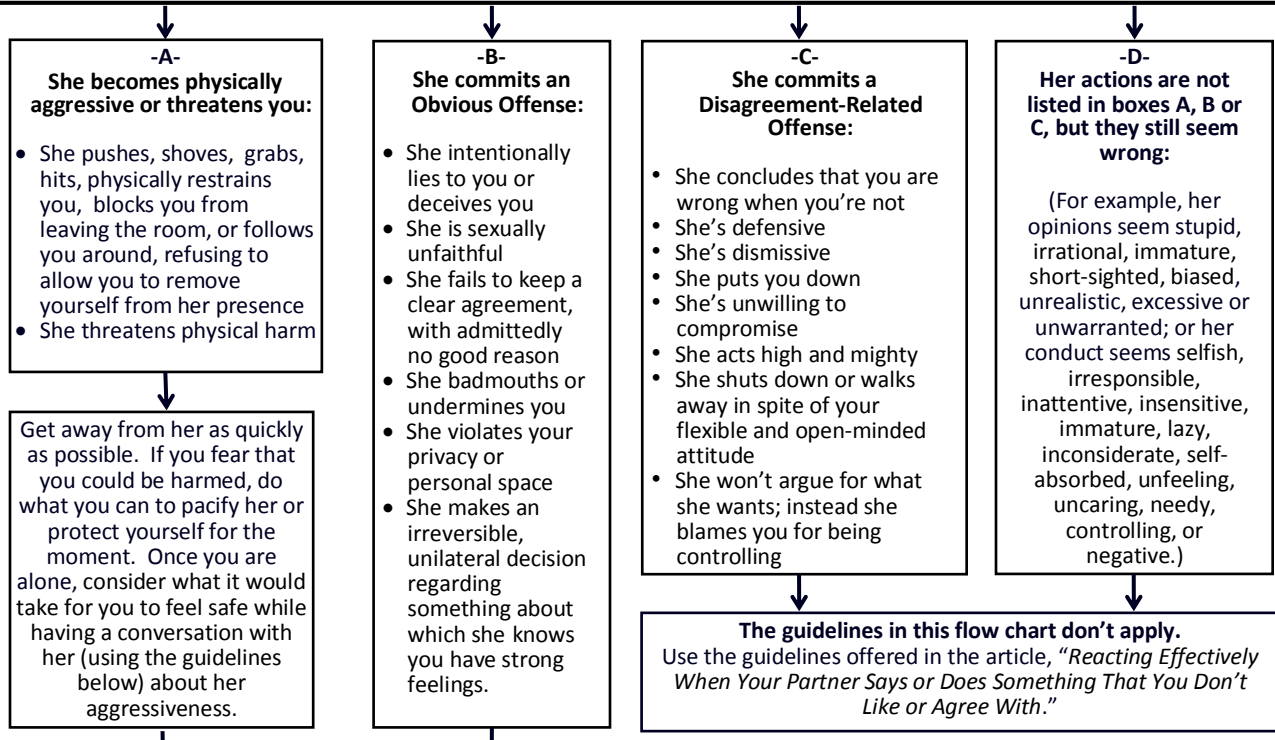
## Non-Offenses (Often mistakenly believed to be offenses)

When people mistakenly believe their partners are...

- selfish
- irresponsible
- inattentive
- insensitive
- immature
- misguided
- unrealistic
- irrational
- short-sighted
- biased
- lazy
- inconsiderate
- self-absorbed
- unfeeling or uncaring
- needy
- controlling
- mean
- negative
- over-reactive

*Studies indicate that, most often when people believe that their partners' conduct fits these descriptors, there isn't anything wrong with their partners' priorities, preferences or opinions. Because your priorities at the moment seem so obvious and logical to you, it's easy to assume that your partner's priorities are out of line, if they don't match up. If you make this mistake regularly, you'll dramatically lower the odds that you'll receive the kind of love and respect from your partner that you'd like to have.*

## When Your Partner's Thinking or Actions Seem Wrong



• Relax and take your time. Assume that when you talk to her she will understand that what she did was wrong, if you can avoid implying that she is an awful person for doing it.

• When you are alone, if you have thoughts about how awful your partner is for treating you the way she did, try to temper these thoughts by reminding yourself of things like: "What she did was wrong, and I'm not going to continue our relationship as usual unless she acknowledges it and takes steps to make sure it won't happen again. But I'm no angel myself, and I'm really not in a position to act all high and mighty. It isn't going to help if I get all indignant and act like she's a horrible person."

• Remember that if inside you continue to feel disgusted, outraged or indignant about what she did, or if you're making a big deal in your mind about how awful she was for doing it, chances are very slim that she'll be able to really care about your feelings and feel bad about what she did.

• Don't let the fact that her conduct is unacceptable distract you from the possibility that she might have frustrations that could be valid. Be prepared to discuss them, but only if she first acknowledges the seriousness of her aggressive actions or gestures and is willing to take steps to prevent them from occurring again.

• Explain to her that, 1) regardless of how valid her complaints about you might be, you will not tolerate the kind of harmful conduct she has engaged in, and 2) you are unwilling to consider continuing your relationship normally unless she acknowledges the harmfulness of her conduct and is willing to take steps needed to prevent further such conduct from happening. If she acknowledges the seriousness of wrongdoing and accepts full responsibility, be prepared to discuss any complaints or dissatisfactions that she may have with you.

