When Your Partner’s Actions Seem Selfish, Inconsiderate, Immature, Inappropriate, or Bad in Some Other Way

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In the article, Habits of People Who Know How to Get their Partners to Treat them Well: Building Connection, six habits that distinguish people who know how to get their partners to treat them well from people who don’t are detailed. The Sequence, a guide for how and when each of the habits can be effectively implemented, is also introduced. Here, we go a step further, translating The Sequence into specific guidelines that will help you react effectively when your partner says or does things seem selfish, inconsiderate, immature, inappropriate or bad in some other way.

Before You Begin

The guidelines offered in the chart below have been shown to powerfully increase partner open-mindedness and flexibility. However, three conditions will negate the effectiveness of the guidelines, and you should be aware of them before you proceed to the guidelines.

“Lip Service” or “Going through the Motions”

Most of the guidelines offered below are aimed at helping you develop new internal habits – the way you perceive, interpret and think about things that your partner says or does. This is because your internal habits shape your attitude – the most powerful factor in determining the quality of communication and interaction between you and your partner. But not all of the guidelines are aimed at internal habits. You’ll also receive specific suggestions regarding the way you speak to and interact with your partner. Here a word of caution is in order: Please remember that changes in the way you talk to or interact with your partner will be of little value unless your attitude is consistent with the things you say and do. In other words -- if you are trying to be diplomatic or “politically correct” and you don’t really mean what you are saying, or you are being nice to “butter your partner up” so that you can get what you want, your “correct” words and actions will have little effect. Decades of research confirm that, when actions and attitudes don’t match up, people nearly always trust the attitudes they sense rather than the words they hear or the actions they see. We all know that words can be just “lip service,” and actions can be less than genuine.

It’s also important for you to know that your partner’s brain is wired to be expert at picking up on your attitude whether you communicate it directly or not. In other words, you might not say directly to her that you think she’s being selfish, but she will pick up on your belief and corresponding attitude through nonverbal cues. Biting your tongue won’t work. That’s why relationship researchers often claim that attitude is more crucial than words or actions. “Correct” words and actions are useless unless supported by an attitude that makes the words and actions believable.

As you read specific suggestions about the kind of things that you need to say or do – try them on for size and see how they fit. In other words, imagine yourself saying or doing these things and see how it feels to you. Does something inside of you resist? If so, it probably means that you need to work more at examining your attitude. On any given occasion, your attitude will arise from the way you interpret your partner’s words or actions. Your interpretations will often arise from the general beliefs and assumptions you have about her and about what constitutes acceptable and unacceptable relationship conduct. If you’re like most people, increasing your relationship skills will need to begin
with examining and changing the automatic interpretive habits you have and the underlying beliefs you hold. The guidelines offered in this program can help you with this.

**Believing that Your Partner is More to Blame**

Deep down inside do you believe that overall...

- you have more to complain about than your partner does?
- your partner has treated you worse than you have treated her?
- your partner is more emotionally immature than you?

If you believe one or more of these statements to be true, you should know that chances are very slim that your partner will become more flexible and open-minded regardless of whether you implement the guidelines offered below or not. If she’s like most people who feel blamed by their partners for the overall condition of their relationships, her natural defenses will be aroused to the point where she’ll be unable to care consistently about your feelings, even if she’s really trying. Few people can swim upstream against the current of their partners’ messages of overall blame. If you want her to be open and responsive to your concerns, you can’t hold on to the belief that she’s more to blame. She’ll sense your belief whether you verbalize it or not. She’ll pick up on it through your nonverbal expressions and gestures, which you can’t completely control even if you’re trying really hard. If you believe that your partner is more to blame for the overall condition of your relationship, be sure that you read the article, *Is Your Partner Really More to Blame?*.

As you use the guidelines offered in this chapter, the most important thing for you to realize is that overall blame will seriously hinder your attempts get your partner to be more open-minded and flexible – even if you diligently follow the guidelines. If you believe that she is more to blame for your relationship problems, feel free to browse the guidelines offered below, but it is unlikely that your relationship will improve unless you are able to develop a different understanding of the history of your relationship – one that does not place her in the role of relationship villain. On the other hand, if you know that it’s likely that you have habits that have been just as unhealthy or damaging as your partner’s, the guidelines offered in this chapter can be a powerful tool in helping you change them. As you do, it’s very likely that she will become more open-minded and flexible.

**Poor Timing**

People who are good at getting their partners to treat them well can be identified not only by the relationship skills they have, but also by the *timing* with which they use particular skills. Different skills are needed at different points as disagreements unfold. For example, the ability to listen to and try to understand one’s partner is a skill that is crucial at specific moments during conversations, but the same skill can be counter-productive if implemented at other moments. The particular skill needed at any moment will depend upon the flow of interactions that have occurred in the conversation prior to the moment.

Many of the guidelines offered below build upon others and must be implemented in sequential fashion. The guidelines offered in the beginning of the flow charts set the stage for the effectiveness of the guidelines offered in later portions of the charts. In fact, if you are unable to implement the initial guidelines, implementing later guidelines will be of little value and may even be counter-productive.
Using the Guidelines

The flow chart below consists of guidelines for how to interact with your partner during disagreements in ways that will make it likely that she will respond in a respectful and cooperative way. You can use the flow chart to:

1. Take a break from an ongoing discussion that isn’t going very well, and consult the chart for guidance.
2. Prepare to talk to your partner for the first time about your dissatisfaction.
3. After an initial conversation that didn’t result in a satisfactory resolution, prepare for a second, more productive conversation.
4. Learn from your mistakes by analyzing where you got off track in a previous discussion and thinking clearly about how you could handle similar situations in the future more productively.

There are many different turns that disagreements can take as they unfold. Evidence suggests that you must be able to navigate each turn skillfully if you want to be among those who know how to get their partners to treat them well.

Each of the suggestions given in the chart are based on one or more of the twelve skills that have been found to be characteristic of people who know get their partners to treat them well. More information about the skills can be found in the article, Habits of People Who Know How to Get Their Partners to Treat Them Well (See summary chart on page 24 of the article).
When you are the one who feels dissatisfied or disapproving first

Your partner’s actions seem selfish, inconsiderate, immature, inappropriate, or bad in some other way

Skills 1 & 2: Focus on Your Own Reactions / Avoid a Judgmental Attitude

Don’t jump to conclusions.
Assume that there’s an understandable explanation for her behavior.
Consider that this situation might not be about right/wrong but rather involve legitimate differences.

(1)

Skill #3: Find the Understandable Part

Let her know that you don’t like or agree with the way she is thinking or acting, and explain why.
Also tell her that you realize that you might be operating on limited information, or you might be misinterpreting her motives or intentions – and even if you aren’t, there might be more than one way to look at situations like this, and you want to know her perspective, too.

(2)

Skills 3-6: Find the Understandable Part / Identify Underlying Needs, Values or Fears / Offer Assurance / Give and Ask for Equal Regard

Hear her out and don’t interrupt or debate before she is able to explain fully.
Acquire the part of her explanation that you can understand or agree with, even if you can’t agree with everything she’s saying.
If you still want her to make some adjustments in her behavior, tell her why. Let her know that you’re willing to try to find a way to meet in the middle.

(3)

Skill #7: Ask and Offer

Ask her to stop acting this way.
Tell her that you don’t expect her to agree with you, but you do expect her to be respectful of your feelings and to be willing to keep an open mind and work toward finding a middle ground.

(5)

If she starts explaining her point of view non-defensively...

If she is flexible and willing to make some changes...

If she seems defensive, acts like your viewpoint is stupid, or seems irritated that you are questioning her...

If she acts like your viewpoint is stupid or unreasonable, and/or is unwilling to make any compromises that take your preferences into account...

If she is flexible and willing to make some changes...

If she is flexible and willing to make some changes...

If she starts explaining her point of view non-defensively...

If she is flexible and willing to make some changes...

If she keeps acting like your viewpoint is stupid or unreasonable, or if she’s unwilling to make any compromises that take your preferences into account...

If she is flexible and willing to make some changes...

Note: Numbers that appear in the bottom right corner of boxes are for use in the worksheets, “Using the Past to Change the Future.”
Skills 1, 6 & 8: Avoid a Judgmental Attitude / Broaden the Scope / Ask for Equal Regard

Rather than assuming that her uncooperativeness is due to selfishness, immaturity or some other bad personality trait, consider that there might be something driving her rigidity that isn’t immediately apparent.

Say something like, “What’s going on here? I don’t get it. I don’t expect you to just do whatever I want if you don’t agree with it. I’m just asking you to work with me to find some kind of middle ground -- but it seems like you’re not willing to give an inch. Why won’t you compromise with me? Are you mad about something else?”

If she’s mad at you about something else, be willing to switch topics and talk about whatever is bothering her (switch over to the guidelines in the flow chart titled Situation 1 - Scenario 2A). Unless an immediate decision needs to be made, put your agenda on hold until her concern is resolved.

If she can’t (or doesn’t want to try to) identify any underlying reasons for her uncooperativeness, say something like, “It doesn’t feel okay that you seem unwilling to count my feelings as much as yours. I don’t expect you to just give in to appease me, but it feels like you’re unwilling to make any adjustments at all. Do you understand why that makes me feel disrespected?”

If she keeps acting like your viewpoint is stupid or unreasonable, and/or if she’s unwilling to make any compromises that take your preferences into account...

Skill 7: Ask and Offer

Say something like, “I’m not saying that you were wrong to act that way -- I’m just saying that I didn’t like it. Maybe we have different expectations. Help me understand your reasoning.”

If she continues to be defensive or if she acts like you should just back off and drop the subject, say something like, “You have just as much right to what you want as I do. Just because I might not like something doesn’t automatically mean I expect you to change. I just don’t think I understand your reasons for acting that way. Would you please talk about it without acting like there’s something wrong with me asking?”

If she continues to be closed-minded and inflexible...

Skills 1, 6 & 8: Avoid a Judgmental Attitude / Broaden the Scope / Ask for Equal Regard

If she is flexible and willing to make some changes...

Go to Box (4) on preceding page.

If she starts explaining her point of view non-defensively...

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(10) Go to Box (4) on the first page of this flow chart.

Skills 3-6: Find the Understandable Part / Identify Underlying Needs, Values or Fears / Offer Assurance / Give and Ask for Equal Regard

Hear her out and don’t interrupt or debate before she is able to explain fully.

Acknowledge the part of her explanation that you can understand or agree with, even if you can’t agree with everything she’s saying.

If you still want her to make some adjustments in her behavior, tell her why. Let her know that you’re willing to try to find a way to meet in the middle.

(9) Go to Box (4) on the first page of this flow chart.

If she acts like your viewpoint is stupid or unreasonable, and/or is unwilling to make any compromises that your preferences into account...

If she is flexible and willing to make some changes...

Go to Box (4) on the first page of this flow chart.

Skill 9: Temporarily Distance Yourself

Let her know that you don’t want to be around her.

Walk away (11)

Skill 10: Don’t Make a Big Deal of It

When you are alone, avoid making a big deal in your mind of how awful her attitude was. (Remind yourself of things like: “It’s natural for her to have strong feelings about things that are important to her. I just need to be sure that she respects my feelings, too”).

(12) Go to Box (4) on the first page of this flow chart.

If she keeps acting like your viewpoint is stupid or unreasonable, or if she’s unwilling to make any compromises that take your preferences into account...

If she is flexible and willing to make some changes...

Go to Box (4) on the first page of this flow chart.

Skill 11: Try Again Later

Later on, begin a new conversation without a chip on your shoulder. Don’t try to get her to see how “wrong” her attitude or actions were. Don’t demand an apology. Just return to the issue.  (13)

If you implement all of the needed skills as the conversation unfolds, and yet she is still closed minded in this second conversation...

If she seems open-minded and flexible in this conversation...

Go to Box (4) on the first page of this flow chart.

If you implement all of the needed skills in three separate conversations, and yet she is still closed-minded and inflexible...

Prepare to use Skill 12: “Refuse to Continue Business as Usual” (if needed in the next conversation) (14)

Skill 12: “Refuse to Continue Business as Usual” (15)