

Commonly Overlooked Relationship Mistakes

The main thing that stands in the way of relationship change is *blame*. Relationship studies suggest that if you believe your partner is more to blame for your relationship problems than you are, chances are slim that your partner will be able to care consistently about your feelings, even if he's trying to. If he's like most people who are blamed by their partners, his natural defenses will be aroused to the point where he'll be unable to respond to your requests for change.

If you're hoping that your partner will lower his defenses and care about the things are important to you, first you'll need to lower your weapon. Your weapon is the belief that that he's mostly to blame. The belief that one's partner is mostly "the bad guy" is like a nuclear weapon, but most people don't realize it. Few people are able to change when their partners believe that they are the root cause of the relationship problems. When the villainizing of one's partner persists, relationships rarely survive.

Of course, if it's really true that your partner's attitude or actions have been more damaging than yours, there isn't much you can do about it. You can't sugar-coat your own thinking or pull the wool over your own eyes. But relationship studies suggest that when relationships are distressed, usually both partners have habits that are equally responsible for the depleted condition of the relationship. It's likely that you've done things that are just as destructive as your partner, and that you just can't see it -- your perceptions are biased. If you're like most people who are dissatisfied with their partners, it's likely that you have often believed your partner's actions were wrong when they weren't, and it's also likely that you've been blind to the destructiveness of your attitude or actions at important moments in your relationship. These have probably been honest mistakes in perception, more likely due to an inaccurate or incomplete understanding about the range of attitudes and actions that are destructive to relationships than a desire to frame your partner as the bad guy. Studies suggest that the average person has serious gaps in their knowledge of the kinds of habits that are harmful to relationships. When asked about things that are harmful to relationships, most people identify *lying, sexual unfaithfulness, failing to keep agreements, badmouthing or undermining one's partner, violations of privacy, making unilateral decisions, being selfish, controlling, inconsiderate, self-centered, unrealistic, critical, cold or uncaring*. Researchers who study relationships have found that these things are indeed harmful. But researchers have identified additional behaviors and attitudes that are equally destructive, yet often go unrecognized.

The pages that follow summarize twelve of the most commonly overlooked things that people do that are destructive to relationships. A review of these pages may help you develop a more realistic view of the role you've played in bringing about the present condition of your relationship. If you honestly believe that your partner is more to blame than you, it's unlikely that he'll be able to change, even if he wants to. If you're still hoping that things will change and that your partner will come to care more about how you feel -- you owe it to yourself to consider the possibility that you've been biased in your assignment of blame. The pages that follow will help you identify your own mistakes, which can help you accept mutual responsibility for the condition of your relationship, thus opening the door to the possibility of change.

If you're like most people, overlooked or unrecognized mistakes you've made over the course of your relationship most likely will have involved *your reactions* to upsetting things that your partner has said or done. More specifically, they will involve 1) your reactions when your partner did something that seemed selfish, uncaring, misguided or just plain wrong, 2) your reactions when you approached your partner with a flexible and open mind about something that bothered you, but he was defensive, dismissive and/or inflexible, and/or 3) your reactions when your partner became upset or expressed a dissatisfaction with you. The following pages will help you review your reactions in each of these situations, and will also outline the elements of how people who are effective react at such moments. You can read more about the *Sequence* of reactions that characterize effective people in the articles, "*Reacting Effectively When Upsets Happen Between You and Your Partner (Developing Habits for Relationship Success Addendum Readings, pp. 2-21)*," and "*Understanding the Sequence*" (*Developing Habits for Relationship Success, pp. 23-33*). In pages 2-4 of this article, numbers in brackets [] refer to steps of the Sequence detailed more fully in the other articles.

Type I Mistakes

You have committed *Type I* mistakes if your partner acted in ways that seemed selfish, uncaring, misguided or just plain wrong, and you reacted in one or more of the ways summarized in the shaded areas below.

Required Skill: In order to avoid making Type I mistakes, you would have needed to be aware that just because your partner said or did something you didn't like didn't mean that it was wrong. You would have needed to know the difference between situations where your partner was doing things that were *truly* wrong versus situations where your priorities or expectations were just at cross purposes with his. Mistakes can be made in either situation, but they are somewhat different, depending on which of these situations happened.

Your partner's actions were different than what you wanted, but they weren't necessarily wrong

(There are plenty of people who would have been fine with his priorities or actions in these situations; your partner probably wouldn't have had a problem with you if you acted this way.)

Crucial Mistakes
(Predictive of Relationship Failure)

Mistake # 1: You believed your partner was selfish, uncaring, misguided or just plain wrong in situations that really weren't about right/wrong but rather legitimately different opinions, priorities or ways of navigating life (See the article, *Core Differences in Ways of Maintaining Emotional Stability*).

Mistake # 2: Rather than offering to try to find a way to meet in the middle, you insisted that your partner shape up and fly right.

Effective Alternatives
(Predictive of Relationship Success)

- You assumed there must be a reason for his thinking or actions that you didn't fully understand yet. [2] (← *numbers in brackets refer to steps of the Sequence*)
- You avoided jumping to conclusions and with an open mind, asked him why he was acting (or acted) that way. [3]
- You heard him out and refrained from disputing or debating what he was saying before he was able to explain fully. [2]
- Rather than criticizing him, you asked him to work with you to find a solution that took both of your perspectives into account. [6]

Your partner did something that was truly wrong.

(see "Is Your Partner's Conduct Wrong?" on p. 5)

(Pretty much anyone in your shoes would have felt the way you did)

Crucial Mistakes
(Predictive of Relationship Failure)

Mistake # 3: You became disgusted, indignant, or condescending, and you made a big deal of how stupid, irresponsible, selfish or uncaring he was for doing something like that.

Mistake # 4: If the bad behavior continued, you complained and criticized, but failed to "draw a line" and follow through with it (see the article, "Taking a Firm Stand," in *Developing Habits for Relationship success*).

Effective Alternatives
(Predictive of Relationship Success)

- You avoided getting on the "high horse," making a big deal of how stupid, irresponsible, selfish or uncaring he was for acting that way.
- You asked him to stop doing the objectionable things.
- If he wouldn't stop, you refused to continue "business as usual" (see the article, "Taking a Firm Stand," in *Developing Habits for Relationship success*).
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Type II Mistakes

You have committed *Type II* mistakes if 1) you approached your partner with a flexible and open mind about something that bothered you, 2) he was defensive, dismissive and/or inflexible, and 3) you reacted in one or more of the following ways:

Crucial Mistakes

(Predictive of Relationship Failure)

Mistake # 5: You felt disgusted or indignant, and in your mind you made a big deal about how awful your partner was for being so defensive or dismissive.

Mistake # 6: You accused him of being controlling or selfish.

Mistake # 7: You dropped the issue in order to keep the peace.

Effective Alternatives

(Predictive of Relationship Success)

- In your mind, you avoided making a big deal of his defensive, dismissive and/or inflexible behavior. (You reminded yourself something like: "It's not a crime to act that way." "It's normal enough to want to have one's own way.") [7]
- You assumed that your partner was defensive or dismissive because he thought you were judging him, or that you were saying that he was out of line and needed to shape up. [2]
- You assured him that you were trying to keep an open mind, and that if he felt differently than you, you weren't going to try to trump his feelings or priorities with your own. [5]
- If he was still defensive or inflexible, you expressed irritation at his attitude. You let him know that you didn't expect him to agree with you, but you did expect him to respect your feelings and be willing to give and take. You offered to do the same. [8]
- If he was still defensive or inflexible, you proceed through steps 9-12 of the *Sequence* as needed. [9-12]

Type III Mistakes

You have committed *Type III* mistakes if your partner communicated dissatisfaction with or disapproval of your thinking or actions, and you reacted in one or more of the following ways:

Crucial Mistakes

(Predictive of Relationship Failure)

Mistake #8: You concluded that your partner's expectations or viewpoint were unreasonable, stupid, short sighted, or self-serving.

Mistake #9: Because you believed his feelings or expectations were unreasonable, stupid, short sighted or self-serving, you were unwilling to consider them as important or valid as yours, and you said or implied that he should "drop it," and stop trying to get you to change.

Mistake #10: You felt disgusted or indignant, and in your mind you made a big deal about how awful your partner was for being so closed-minded or inflexible.

Mistake #11: You tried to justify your actions and get him to see how unreasonable his expectations were.

Mistake #12: You silently endured the criticism (battening down the hatches and hoping it would blow over), or you made insincere apologies or agreements in order to get him off your back.

Effective Alternatives

(Predictive of Relationship Success)

- You avoided thinking that his expectations or viewpoint were unreasonable, stupid, short sighted, or self-serving, and you reminded yourself something like, "Just because I might not feel the same way if I were in his shoes doesn't mean his feelings are unwarranted."**[2]**
- You assumed there must be a reason for his feelings that you didn't fully understand yet.**[2]**
- You asked him to explain until you were able to find and acknowledge something at-least-partly understandable about his feelings or viewpoint. **[3]**
- If you had a different perspective or wanted things to be different than he did, you explained your feelings or perspective while validating his at the same time. You suggested a way to "meet in the middle."

If your partner seemed to have his mind made up and had already decided that you were wrong, you also did the following:

- You avoided hitting the panic button. You reminded yourself that his critical attitude was probably just temporary. **[7]**
- You expressed irritation at his seemingly inflexible or closed minded attitude. You let him know that you were trying to be open to what he's saying, but you expected him to be open to your point of view, too. **[8]**
- Let him know that even though you might not agree with him, you weren't going to just disregard his feelings. **[5]**
- If he continued to criticize and was unwilling to give any credence to your perspective, you proceeded through steps 7 – 12 of the Sequence as needed. **[7-12]**

Is Your Partner's Conduct Wrong?

During a Disagreement

The way your partner treats you during arguments seems wrong.

When you voice a complaint, your partner is defensive, dismissive, closed-minded, inflexible or he tunes you out.

When your partner voices a complaint, he's accusatory, critical, condescending, inflexible or indirect.

If your partner lies to you, or becomes violent

It's wrong for him to treat you this way, but if he has persisted in treating you this way over time, chances are very high that, unless he has become physically or verbally violent, your interactions during disagreements have been just as wrong as his (i.e., you've been making just as many of the mistakes summarized on the preceding pages of this article as he has). Attempts to point out that he is wrong will likely fail unless you're also making just as big a deal about how off track your conduct or attitude has been during disagreements (See the article, Reacting Effectively When Upsets Happen Between You and Your Partner, pp. 2-21 for more detail).

These actions are clearly wrong, and the "meet in the middle" rule doesn't apply. You need to ask him to stop, and if he doesn't stop, you need to refuse to continue business as usual until he does (see the article, "Taking a Firm Stand," in Developing Habits for Relationship Success). However, the odds that he will indeed stop and feel remorse for his actions are directly related to the attitude you have as you draw the line with him. The more time you spend feeling disgust, indignation, superiority, and/or the more you have a condescending attitude, the less likely it is that he will be able to truly care about your feelings. People who are effective at "getting through" to their partners when their partners have done harmful or destructive things stand up powerfully for themselves, but in their heads, they avoid making a big deal of how awful their partners are for doing things that require them to stand up and draw the line (See the article, Reacting Effectively When Upsets Happen Between You and Your Partner, pp. 2-3, 13-16, 20).

Before a Disagreement

Your partner does something that seems wrong, and that's what leads to an argument in the first place.

When your partner engages In:

- Deliberate deception
- Sexual unfaithfulness
- Failure to keep an agreement
- Badmouthing
- Undermining
- Violation of Privacy or Personal Space
- Unilateral decision-making

When your partner Seems

- Selfish
- Lazy
- Irresponsible
- Inconsiderate
- Self-Centered
- Unrealistic
- Misguided
- Short-Sighted
- Uncaring
- Clueless
- Inappropriate

Studies indicate that most of the times when partners believe that their mates are behaving in ways that are selfish, lazy, inconsiderate, self-centered, unrealistic, misguided, short-sighted, uncaring, clueless or inappropriate, their mates actually aren't doing things that are inherently harmful to relationships. Because your priorities at the moment seem so obvious and logical to you, it's easy to assume that your partner's conduct is out of line if his priorities don't match up. Relationship studies suggest that believing your partner is wrong when he really isn't is a mistake that you do not want to make! If you make this mistake repeatedly, you'll put yourself squarely in the company of people who rarely get the kind of love and respect from their partner's they'd like to have. There's nothing more demoralizing than being accused of being guilty when you believe you're innocent. If your partner is like most people, being accused will arouse his natural defenses and make it almost impossible for him to truly care about your feelings (See articles: Core Differences in Ways of Maintaining Emotional Stability, and Reacting Effectively When Upsets Happen Between You and Your Partner, pp. 2-3, 13-16, 20).