

Is Your Partner Really More to Blame?

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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 he will be able to care consistently about your feelings, even if he's trying to care. 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 that are important to you, first you'll need to lower your weapon. Your weapon is the belief 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 one partner inaccurately assesses who is more to blame for relationship problems, relationships rarely survive. The erroneous belief that one's partner is more to blame is an offense that has direct impact on the odds that one's relationship will survive over time. In dozens of relationship studies, it has emerged as the single most damaging thing that people do in relationships.

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 most people have serious gaps in their knowledge of the kinds of habits that are harmful to relationships. When asked about things that are harmful, most people identify the most obvious relationship offenses: *lying, sexual unfaithfulness, failing to keep a clear agreement without good reason, badmouthing or undermining one's partner, violations of privacy, and making unilateral decisions*. Researchers who study relationships have found that these things are indeed harmful. But researchers have identified an additional class of behaviors and attitudes that are equally destructive, yet often go unrecognized—the Disagreement-Related Offenses. A steady diet of Disagreement-Related Offenses can be as damaging as any of the Obvious Offenses (See *The Relationship Offenses*, on page 2).

Eight commonly overlooked (but deadly) offenses are summarized on page 3. Each of them has been found to be predictive of poor relationship outcomes. A review of these offenses may help you develop a more realistic view of the role you've played in bringing about the present condition of your relationship. Please remember that letting go of the idea that your partner is more to blame...

- doesn't mean that you need to believe that the way he treated you was OK.
- doesn't mean that you don't have the right to ask (or require, if needed) that he change his conduct in the future, even if he isn't doing anything wrong.

In fact, researchers have found that people who accept their share of the blame are actually *more* influential in their relationships than those who believe that their partners are mostly to blame. Studies suggest that the belief that one's partner is mostly to blame, whether verbalized directly or not, is usually experienced by the partner as injurious, and the partner will mostly likely protect him or herself by becoming more uncaring or unfeeling inside, even while apologizing or complying on the outside. This is why overall blame is so often the kiss of death to relationships.

The Relationship Offenses

Disagreement-Related Offenses

(More comprehensive descriptions can be found on page 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"
- Withdrawing prematurely
- 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 persisted in doing 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 s/he is also making just as big a deal about his/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
- ...unilaterally make irreversible 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 attitudes 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 big deals of how awful their partners are for doing things that require them to draw the lines.

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
- irrational
- short-sighted
- biased
- lazy
- inconsiderate
- self-absorbed
- unrealistic
- unfeeling or uncaring
- needy
- controlling
- 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.

The Disagreement-Related Offenses*

- Offense # 1:** ***Erroneous Fault-Finding.*** You believe that your partner's opinions, actions or priorities are misguided, immature or out-of-line when they're really not (instead of recognizing that you have legitimate differences—see *Core Differences* article). You have difficulty realizing that there are many different ways of making sense of things and of navigating life that can work, and that just because your priorities, opinions or actions clearly seem better to you doesn't mean they really are.
- Offense # 2:** ***Defensiveness.*** You fail to acknowledge any part of your partner's complaint as valid or understandable. You may object so strongly to his attitude or delivery that you close yourself off to the content of what he is saying. In other words, you "throw out the baby with the bathwater." Understandably, you don't like his attitude or delivery (which may seem harsh or closed-minded), but you make the mistake of discrediting his perspective altogether.
- Offense # 3:** ***Dismissiveness.*** You discount your partner's perceptions, interpretations or recollections if they differ from yours. You have a hard time being genuinely open to the possibility that your partner's perceptions could be as valid as (or even more valid than) yours. Particularly if his perceptions or interpretations seem exaggerated or extreme, you tend to dismiss them altogether, rather than looking for a less extreme version that could be valid. When he complains, you have a tendency to believe that his wants, needs, or expectations are unreasonable, excessive or short-sighted when they're actually legitimate—just different than yours.
- Offense # 4:** ***Putting your partner down.*** You call your partner derogatory names (jerk, idiot, asshole, bitch, bastard, etc), put him down (e.g., "I should have known better than to expect anything different from someone who has been divorced two times!" "Leave it to you to screw things up again!"), or you avoid saying these things but talk to him with the same attitude or tone that you would have if you were actually saying the words.
- Offense # 5:** ***Unwillingness to compromise.*** You are unwilling to "meet your partner in the middle" or give your partner's preferences or priorities equal regard unless they make sense to you.
- Offense #6:** ***Acting "high and mighty."*** When your partner makes mistakes or does things that are wrong, you make a big deal of it. You think badly of him and act like he's committed a stupid act or unforgivable crime. You fail to look for the understandable reasons that might be driving his actions. You act like you have never done anything as bad as what your partner has done.
- Offense #7:** ***Shutting down, walking away prematurely, or unwillingness to talk about an issue.*** You break off communication prematurely without first communicating openness and willingness to consider the merit of your partner's viewpoint while also asking him for the same.
- Offense #8:** ***Failing to stand up for yourself and instead blaming Xx for being selfish or controlling.*** You excuse yourself from the responsibility of standing up for yourself; instead, you blame your partner for being selfish or controlling. You let your partner have his way, and then you think less of him for it. You are unwilling or unable to "rock the boat" by requiring that he give your viewpoints and preferences equal regard. On the occasions when you try standing up for yourself, you have difficulty doing it without committing one or more of the other offenses in the process.

*The number (variety) of these types of offenses committed is less relevant than the total frequency of offenses committed.

Read about how skillful people avoid these offenses and elicit flexibility and open-mindedness from their partners in the articles, *Habits of People Who Know How to Get their Partners to Treat Them Well*, and *Reacting Effectively When Your Partner Says or Does Something That You Don't Like or Agree With*.