

Reacting Effectively When Your Partner Says or Does Something That You Don't Like or Agree With

Brent J. Atkinson, Ph.D.

In the articles *Why Do Intimate Relationships Succeed or Fail?* and *Habits of People Who Know How to Get their Partners to Treat them Well: Part I—Dealing with Differences*, I summarized scientific evidence suggesting that if you want to have a satisfying, long-term love relationship, there are certain, specific abilities you need to have. Among these abilities, one of the most important is the ability to react effectively at moments when you become dissatisfied with or disapproving of your partner's viewpoints or actions. For most of us, the problem is that these tend to be moments when—especially if we feel offended or mistreated—we're least likely to pay attention to how we're reacting, and most likely to think all of the reasons why our partners' viewpoints or actions are out of line. In situations like these, we tend to feel that the most important thing that needs to happen is for our partners to realize that they're thinking or acting badly and that they should shape up and fly right. However, evidence from relationship studies suggests that the most potent predictor of the success or failure of relationships involves how we react when our partners say or do things that we don't like. If you're in a long-term, intimate relationship, sooner or later you are going to feel that your partner's thinking or actions are out of line or misguided in some way, and this is not necessarily because there's anything wrong with your partner's way of thinking or behaving. In fact, relationship studies suggest that most of the time when partners feel upset with each other, there isn't anything wrong with either of their expectations. Usually, it's not a matter of right or wrong—it's a matter of being at cross-purposes. There are a variety of perfectly valid ways to prioritize things in relationships. When we don't like our partners' priorities, we tend to assume that our partners' priorities are misguided, even when they really aren't. This happens no matter who one's partner is. Yet, evidence suggests that if you don't know how to distinguish when your partner is really wrong from when you're just at cross-purposes, your relationship is going to go downhill.

Of course, there are some things that people do that *really are* misguided, damaging or wrong in some way, and those things need to be addressed head-on. In the article, *When Your Partner's Thinking or Actions Seem Wrong*, I discuss what we know about how effective people go about getting their partners to realize when they're wrong and need to change. Below, I'm writing about situations where the first task is to avoid making the mistake of believing your partner is misguided or wrong when he's not.

Implementing The Sequence

In *Habits of People Who Know How to Get their Partners to Treat them Well: Part I—Dealing with Differences*, I described six habits that distinguish people who know how to get their partners to treat them well from people who don't. I also introduced *The Sequence*, a guide for how and when each of the predictive habits can be effectively implemented. You may want to refer to a summary of the twelve components of the Sequence while reading this article (see

the chart titled *Sequence 12 Step Summary*, p. 22). In the pages that follow, I'll describe how you can use the Sequence steps in each of the two main types of situations that you'll need them:

1. When you feel dissatisfied with or disapproving of his viewpoint or actions *first*.
2. When your partner feels dissatisfied with or disapproving of your viewpoint or actions *first*.

In most situations that don't go well, both partners usually become dissatisfied at some point. However, one partner usually becomes dissatisfied *before* the other partner does. Often, there is a general pattern between partners that begins with the same partner being the first to become dissatisfied. Studies suggest that, statistically, women in heterosexual relationship are most often the first to bring up complaints (this pattern is evident in both happy and unhappy relationships), but there are many exceptions to this general pattern. Some partners "take turns" expressing dissatisfaction first, and there are also relationships in which the male partner is usually the first to express dissatisfaction. Regardless of who is the first to bring up complaints, people who are effective use the same general methods of reacting in each of these situations. However, the way they do it varies depending on whether they're *launching* complaints or *receiving* them.

If you and your partner "take turns" bringing up complaints, each of the major sections of this article will be useful to you. But if you find yourself more often on one side of the "launching vs. receiving complaints" equation, one of the sections below will be more useful than the other. I suggest that you read first the section below that is most relevant to you. If you are usually the one who brings up complaints or dissatisfactions first, keep reading the section directly below (pp. 2-11). If you're most often on the receiving end of your partner's complaints, skip over the next section and read the section titled, *When Your Partner Conveys Dissatisfaction or Disapproval First* (pp. 11-21).

When You Feel Dissatisfied or Disapproving First

Let's start by thinking about times when you feel dissatisfied or disapproving first. Your partner might say or do something that seems selfish, insensitive, uncaring, controlling, or irresponsible. Or he might give an opinion or suggestion that seems wrong in some way—it might seem biased or short-sighted. At any rate, you don't like it or agree with it. Whether it's mildly annoying or really upsetting, if you'd like for him to be open and receptive to your point of view, there are some things that you must be able to do. In the next few pages, I'll walk you through a series of guidelines regarding how you can think and act effectively when situations like this come up with your partner. These guidelines are based on decades of studying how people who know how to get their partners to be flexible and open-minded react when their partners say or do things that they don't like or agree with. The guidelines draw upon the predictive habits summarized in the article, *Habits of People Who Know How to Get their Partners to Treat them Well: Part I—Dealing with Differences*. **Note:** If your partner lies, engages in deliberate deception, is sexually unfaithful or physically aggressive, breaks a clear

agreement with no good reason, badmouths or undermines you, violates your privacy or personal space or makes an irreversible, unilateral decision regarding something about which he knows you have strong feelings, the guidelines below need to be modified somewhat. Use the guidelines offered in the article, *“When Your Partner’s Thinking or Actions Seem Wrong.”* For all other times when you felt dissatisfied or disapproving, use the above guidelines.

Using the Charts

When their partners say or do things they don’t like or agree with, skillful people implement the predictive habits in a very specific ordering which is shown in Charts 1A and 1B on pages 23 and 24. The same progression of reactions can be seen in both charts; Chart 1B is a simplified version of Chart 1A, suitable for quick reference. I suggest that you have these charts in front of you as you read so that you can follow the progression as various guidelines are discussed. Once you understand the flow of the charts, you’ll be able to use them as shorthand guides to remind yourself what you need to do to be more effective at any point in an unfolding conversation with your partner.

If you want your partner to care about your perspective and be open-minded and flexible when he says or does things you don’t like or agree with, here are the steps you need to take:

- **Remind yourself that you’ll be more effective if you are more concerned about delivering your viewpoint effectively than you are about getting your partner to recognize the validity of your viewpoint right away.**

People who are good at getting their partners to be responsive to their opinions are keenly aware of the folly of attempting to demand responsiveness from their partners. They know that responsiveness must be cultivated, and that there are skills involved in cultivating it. They focus on implementing the skills needed to cultivate responsiveness, trusting that their partner will indeed become responsive in due time.

- **If your initial gut reaction is that your partner’s thinking or actions are wrong or substandard, think twice before trusting your reaction.**

When your partner does something that you don’t like or agree with, it’s normal to have an internal reaction that tells you that his thinking or actions are off base or wrong in some way. People who are unsuccessful in their relationships accept these internal reactions blindly. They trust their gut reactions. People who are successful know better. They realize that their gut reactions may be biased by the preferences built into their own nervous systems (see the article, *Core Differences in Ways of Maintaining Emotional Stability*), and they are suspicious of gut feelings that tell them that they are right and their partners are wrong.

- **Remind yourself that just because you might not like how your partner is thinking or acting doesn't mean that it's wrong or substandard, and that if you conclude that his thinking or actions are wrong or substandard when they aren't, you'll be reacting exactly like people who rarely get the kind of respect and cooperation from their partners they'd like to have.**

Concluding that your partner is wrong when he's really not *is a mistake you do not want to make*. It's one of the most common, yet damaging things that people do in relationships. What's more, it will *lower* the odds that he will be able to see your viewpoint or expectations as legitimate, that he will care about how you feel, and that he will be willing to be flexible.

- **Suggest to yourself that this may be one of those situations where partners 1) have legitimately different opinions, priorities or expectations; 2) need to be open to the possibility that they could each be biased in favor of their own preferences; and 3) need to be willing to "give and take" when agreements need to be made.**

Relationship researchers found that the majority of the time when people feel upset with their partners, neither partner's priorities or expectations were inherently harmful to or unhealthy for relationships. If your partner says or does something you don't like, he probably isn't engaged in relationship behavior that's inherently bad or substandard, unless he

- intentionally lies to you or engages in deliberate deception,
- is sexually unfaithful or physically aggressive toward you,
- calls you derogatory names or puts you down,
- has broken a clear agreement without good reason,
- badmouths or undermines you,
- violates your privacy or personal space, or
- makes an irreversible, unilateral decision regarding something about which he knows you have strong feelings.

The reactions that skillful people have when their partners engage in these behaviors are detailed in the article, *When Your Partner's Thinking or Actions Seem Wrong*. The present article focuses on the more common situations where neither partners' priorities or expectations are inherently harmful for relationships.

- **Let him know that you don't like (or agree with) the way he's thinking or acting and explain why (if needed). Ask him to either adjust his behavior somewhat or explain why he's thinking or acting this way. Also let him know that you realize that there might be more than one way to look at situations like this, and that you want to know his perspective, too.**

If your partner is like most people, when you express dissatisfaction or disapproval he'll respond in one of three ways. First, he may see right away that you have a good point and make an adjustment in his behavior or viewpoint. Maybe he just didn't realize that you wouldn't like what he did, or maybe he just hadn't considered the points you made, but now

that you've brought them to his attention he's willing to make adjustments without the need for much discussion.

The second type of reaction your partner might have is to try to explain his viewpoint or actions. He may think that you don't understand why he acted as he did, or that you don't have all the facts. So, he'll just explain. If you aren't accusatory, he may be able to explain nondefensively.

- **If your first impression is that his explanations are just excuses or rationalizations that have no merit, think twice. Consider that there might be more than one legitimate way to look at situations or issues like this one.**
- **Remember that if you imply that his viewpoint is inferior when it arguably isn't, you'll be reacting exactly like people who rarely get the kind of respect and cooperation from their partners that they'd like to have.**
- **Remind yourself that letting go of the idea that his viewpoint is inferior doesn't mean that you have to back off and let him do whatever he wants. (There is likely nothing wrong with your viewpoint either, and yours needs to count as much as his.)**
- **Hear him out, and refrain from disputing or debating what he is saying before he is able to explain fully.**

At this point, you just need to get his viewpoint, not debate the accuracy or validity of it. You'll get a chance to give your viewpoint in a minute. This is hard to do, but the evidence is clear. People who are good at understanding their partners without trying to correct them get more cooperation from them. There are few things that will arouse your partner's defenses more quickly than if, when he starts to explain, you begin disputing every little detail.

- **Acknowledge *the part* of his explanation that you can understand or agree with, even if you can't agree with everything he's saying.**

As he explains, ask clarifying questions and look for the logic behind his thinking or actions until you can get to a point where you say, "OK, well, that makes a little bit more sense to me." You might not ultimately agree with what he did, but you can still find something that is at least partly understandable about his thinking or motives, and if you want him to care about how you feel, this is what you need to do.

- **If you can't agree fully with his perspective, or if you still feel that you want him to make some changes, tell him that you still prefer your point of view, but also let him know that you realize that there's a possibility that you could be biased, and that there is no reason why either of your viewpoints should prevail over the other. If a decision needs to be made, suggest a possible way to meet in the middle.**

When you explain your point of view, try to explain not just what you're upset about, but why this is upsetting to you. Many times, a particular situation will be upsetting to you for reasons that are bigger than just the present situation. There will be some bigger need or worry at stake. Try to explain this bigger need or worry to him. If you have a flexible attitude, your partner will likely be able to care about your feelings and be willing to make some adjustments. But it might not happen that way, at least not at first.

The third type of reaction your partner might have is to be defensive or dismissive. He might act like you shouldn't feel the way you do and that you should just drop the subject. You might feel this attitude as soon as you bring the subject up, or you might sense it later when you ask him to be flexible and willing to make some adjustments. Either way, defensive and/or dismissive reactions from partners are no problem for people who have the full set of habits needed to navigate relationships successfully.

Defensiveness and dismissiveness often occur at the same time, but they each involve a different focus. When people are defensive, they are focused on justifying their own actions. When they are dismissive, they are focused on invalidating their partners' expectations. In the hands of a skilled person, defensiveness is a relatively easy matter to resolve. Skillful people assume that when their partners are defensive, it's because they're feeling judged or controlled. A skillful response to defensiveness involves a straightforward assurance such as, "I realize that you may see things differently than me, and if so, I'm going to respect that. I'm not trying to win here. I just want you to tell me how you're seeing things so that we can figure out what to do." People who are less skilled in relationships rarely offer such assuring statements. Instead, they tend to get indignant and to criticize their partners for being defensive.

- **If your partner becomes defensive, remind yourself that defensiveness is a natural reaction to feeling criticized, and that if you want him to stop being defensive, you need to consider the possibility that you could be more critical than you realize, and/or you need to communicate your noncritical attitude in a more explicit way. Simply clarify your open-mindedness, assuring him that you realize there is probably more than one way to look at situations like this and that if he sees things differently than you, you intend to be respectful of his point of view.**

Clarifications like the one above are usually (but not always) sufficient to reduce defensiveness. Guidelines are given below for situations where partners continue to be defensive in spite of assurances.

Depending on the situation, your partner may be more dismissive than defensive. Dismissiveness is often communicated through attitude or tone rather than specific words. For example, your partner may respond to one of your complaints by saying, "What's the big deal?" The question by itself isn't necessarily dismissive, but the way he delivers it may seem to carry the unspoken message, "You shouldn't be upset over something like that!" The problem is that since attitudes are not explicitly verbalized, there's a high chance of misperception. When your partner asks, "What's the big deal?" he might not be critical of your expectations. He might simply be trying to understand why you feel the way you do, because if he were in your shoes

he wouldn't feel the same way. Of course, your initial reading of his critical tone might also be accurate. The only way to know for sure is to ask him.

- **If your partner goes beyond defending himself and criticizes you, saying or implying that your viewpoint (or what you want) is stupid or entirely unreasonable, check to be sure that you're reading him right. For example, say something like, "It seems like you feel that my opinion is completely without merit, and that I should just drop the subject. Do you see *anything* that possibly could be legitimate about my feelings at all?"**

Putting the question this way will tend to make your partner be more thoughtful about what indeed he really is saying, and it'll give him a chance to clarify or even change his attitude. For example, he might say something like, "No, I don't think you should just drop it. I'm just having a little trouble understanding, because I don't think I would feel that same way if the roles were reversed. But that doesn't mean that it shouldn't bother you. Try to explain it more to me." From there, the conversation will probably go in a more positive direction.

Of course, it's also possible that the response to your request for clarification will be something like, "Yes, I think you should drop it! I think you're blowing this thing way out of proportion!" In this case, you'll have the clarification you need. You *really are* being dismissed!

Whereas the guidelines offered up to this point have all been based on the first six steps of the Sequence (summarized on page 21), if your partner is really disregarding your viewpoint, you'll need to begin implementing the "standing up" steps (7-12). The guidelines below will help you stand up for yourself effectively when you need to. These guidelines are brief, highlighting some of the central components of the "standing up" process. A fuller description of the process can be found in the article, *Habits of People Who Know How to Get their Partners to Treat them Well: Part I—Dealing with Differences*.

- **If by his answer it's clear that, indeed, he believes that your viewpoint (or what you are wanting) is stupid or entirely unreasonable, ask him to stop acting that way. Say something like, "I'm trying to keep an open mind and be respectful of your point of view, but I need you to be respectful of mine, too. Would you just tell me what you're thinking without acting like my opinion or feelings are stupid?"**

There are a variety of ways to ask your partner to stop disregarding a complaint, but to be effective, your request needs to be accompanied by an assurance of your own willingness to be respectful of his feelings and opinions, too. If you make the statement "Stop disregarding my feelings!" without assuring him of your willingness to keep an open mind and make some adjustments, he may think you're saying, "Stop disregarding my feelings, *and just do what I say!*" If you add an explicit assurance to your request, you'll prevent such common misinterpretations from happening.

When your partner realizes that you're not criticizing or trying to control him, he may immediately become more flexible and willing to give and take, or he may begin explaining his actions or viewpoint without a tone of defensiveness. If he does, then just return to the "openness and flexibility" steps of the Sequence, and the conversation will probably turn out

well. Hopefully, each of you will see the other's point of view and be willing to be flexible and open-minded.

But it's also possible that in spite of your assurances, your partner will continue to be dismissive or defensive. He'll continue to say or imply that your feelings are stupid or unwarranted, or that you don't have any basis for feeling the way you do, and that you should just back off. This is the point where an attitude shift on your part is needed. Up to this point you've been trying to give him the benefit of the doubt, assuming that maybe he felt that you were judging or trying to control him. You've gone to some lengths to clear up misperceptions, and if he's still defensive or dismissive, you can be confident that his critical or dismissive attitude is intentional. If you're like most people, at this point you'll now be feeling irritated or upset with him. Most people who find themselves in situations like this lose their cool and either "go off" at their partners, or just back off. Skillful people don't do this. Before they break off communication, they "call the question," explicitly asking their partners if they intend to become more respectful of their differences or not.

- **"Look, I don't expect you to agree with me or to just blindly comply with my wishes, and I realize that your feelings need to count as much as mine, regardless of whether I agree with them or not. But I do need for you to stop acting like my feelings are stupid or unreasonable. I feel like I'm trying here, but I'm not getting anything back. Are you really going to just sit there and dismiss every single thing that I say?"**

With this sort of question, you give notification to your partner that your patience is wearing thin and that you're just about ready to walk away. Especially when feelings are strong, the correctness of his point of view will often seem so self-evident to your partner that it will be hard for him to believe that you could really believe in your point of view as strongly as he believes in his. For this reason, he may not become flexible and receptive until you draw a line with him and make it clear that you feel as strongly as he does, and that you are going to require that he respect your feelings as much as his own. By asking him a question like the one above, you give him an early warning that you're just about through trying to get him to be reasonable. At this point, your partner may finally become more open and flexible, and he may begin explaining his viewpoint nondefensively. If he does, just return to the "openness and flexibility" steps of the Sequence.

But it's also possible on any given day that he will ignore your question and continue to dismiss your viewpoint. If he does...

- **Let him know that you're feeling upset with him and that you don't want to be around him right now.**

The message you're sending is that you have no desire to be with him if he is going to blatantly dismiss your feelings or concerns. You've made it clear that you're not trying to force your will on him and that you're willing to work toward agreements that take both of your perspectives into account, but he's not willing to do the same. Enough said! Temporarily distance yourself from him. If possible, go to a different room in the house. Putting distance between the two of

you will be most impactful if you do it with an attitude of frustration rather than out of defiance or anger. You're distancing because you don't know what else to do, rather than to punish him, or "teach him a lesson."

For most of us, the ability to stay on track with the Sequence up to this point is a major accomplishment, and it can be discouraging to realize that our work is not yet done. But in fact, all of the work you've done up to this point will amount to very little unless you're able to follow through with the remaining steps of the Sequence. In order to draw a line with our partners and temporarily walk away from them, many of us literally shift internal gears and connect with an internal brain system that has evolved for self-protection. Once we connect with this internal state, it can be like flipping on a switch. Once the switch is on, it's not always easy to turn it off. Even when we're by ourselves and out of immediate danger, we can continue the anger process by dwelling on thoughts like, "He is such a control freak! He couldn't care less about anybody but himself!" Some people can let go of thoughts like these fairly quickly; for others it takes a lot longer. But one thing is clear: People who know how to get their partners to treat them well find a way of talking themselves down. They begin shifting to another attitude where they're not making such a big deal of how awful their partners were. They begin saying things to themselves like, "I suppose it's natural enough for my partner to be biased toward his own way of thinking and to want to have his own way. It's not that big of a deal. I just need to get the point across that if he wants our relationship to be harmonious, he is going to need to be respectful of my viewpoints and priorities, too. I think I got the point across in the situation that just happened. I can afford to relax now. If I need to get pointed with him again I'll do it, but for now there's no need to harbor a grudge."

- **When you are alone, avoid making a big deal in your mind of how awful his attitude was. Remind yourself of things like: "It's natural enough for him to have strong feelings about things that are important to him. I just need to be sure that he respects my feelings, too."**

If there's one thing that describes people who are good at getting their partners to treat them well, it's *emotional flexibility*. They can stay calm and unalarmed longer than most people, connect with anger in a more well-timed fashion, and then let go of anger more quickly. Individuals who begin second conversations carrying anger or resentment from failed first conversations dramatically lower the odds that their partners will be open-minded and flexible in the second conversations. Skillful people have a way of hitting an internal reset button. They enter second conversations assuming that these conversations will likely go better, now that both partners have experienced the discomfort that goes along with a breach in their relationship.

Though they are patient and don't rush into second conversations about topics that are unresolved after first discussions, neither do people who are skilled in relationships let issues drop. They're often the first to initiate second conversations. In fact, if their partners don't, they always do.

- **Try again, later. Begin a new conversation without a chip on your shoulder. Don't try to get him to see how "wrong" his attitude or actions were. Don't demand apology. Just return to the issue.**

People who are effective usually begin second conversations by offering assurance. They'll come back and say, "Well that didn't really go very well did it? What do you think I was saying? All I was saying was..." and then they reiterate their assurances and ask that their partners hear them out and care about their feelings too. They don't demand apologies. They don't try to get their partners to understand how badly they acted in previous arguments. They just start fresh discussions of the issues, anticipating that their partners might interact differently now that they understand that inflexibility will not be tolerated.

Most of the time, when people skillfully engage in the "standing up" processes described up to this point, their partners become more flexible and cooperative. However, situations sometimes arise where people communicate open-mindedness, flexibility and willingness to give and take in several rounds of conversation, yet their partners still refuse to do the same. In these situations, skillful people *refuse to continue business as usual* in their relationships.

- **If needed, refuse to continue business as usual.**

After several attempts, skillful people stop trying to get their partners to be reasonable with them, and they accept the reality that their partners have no intention of becoming more open and flexible. They let their partners know that they're giving up on the idea of trying to talk them into being more collaborative, and they communicate the sad conclusion that they need to put some distance between the two of them. They explain that they can't feel okay about their relationships as long as they feel disregarded. They let their partners know that they're not going to pretend everything is okay and just continue "business as usual."

In *refusing to continue business as usual*, people simply inform their partners that they don't want to be around them, and they arrange their lives as much as possible to avoid contact. If contact can't be avoided (for example, if they have children and must interface), they keep contact cordial. If their partners initiate unnecessary conversation or contact, they remind them that they're not interested in resuming their normal relationship when they've received no indication that their partners are willing to stretch themselves and to try to keep open minds and/or meet in the middle, when their priorities or viewpoints are at cross purposes.

Often, simply stating the intent to stop engaging in business as usual, particularly if it is made in a believable, non-critical, non-blaming way, will trigger a shift in one's partner toward more willingness to listen and cooperate, and actual disengagement will not be necessary. People who skillfully refuse to continue business as usual aren't asking for anything unreasonable. They're simply asking for the same level of mutual regard that they're willing to give in the relationship. They aren't interested in controlling their partners or in "winning" when they disagree. They're just asking for mutual respect. Further, they're asking for it in ways that make it easy for their partners to respond. They are open-minded, willing and flexible. All of these qualities contribute to their impact when they finally refuse to continue business as usual.

When their partners eventually do become more respectful and collaborative, skillful people refrain from “rubbing their partners’ noses in it.” They don’t “hold their partners transgressions over their heads.” Rather, they are happy and willing to give their partners fresh starts.

It’s important to recognize that skillful people only “refuse to continue business as usual” when they have attempted several conversations in which they have responded to their partners’ complaints with open minds, hopeful that their partners would do the same. But in these conversations their partners remained closed-minded and/or inflexible. If you feel that you need to take the step of refusing to continue business as usual, please first read the more detailed description of it in the article, *Habits of People Who Know How to Get their Partners to Treat them Well: Part I—Dealing with Differences*). If the process is implemented poorly, it can result in a worsening of your relationship. However, if you fail to implement it when needed, relationship outcomes are no better. For these reasons, the process of refusing to continue business as usual should not be started without consultation with a therapist who is knowledgeable about the process.

When Your Partner Conveys Dissatisfaction or Disapproval First

So far we’ve been talking about how you can react effectively when your partner says or does something that you don’t like, and you’re the one who becomes dissatisfied or disapproving *first*. Now I’d like to talk about when the shoe is on the other foot. I’d like to talk about situations where your partner becomes dissatisfied or disapproving first. Most of us don’t like it when our partners become dissatisfied with or disapproving of our opinions or viewpoints. When they do, sometimes it seems that they are jumping to conclusions or trying to control us, and it can be annoying. If you’d like for your partner to be open-minded and considerate of your viewpoint when he becomes upset or dissatisfied with you, there are some things that you must be able to do. In this section I’ll direct you through a series of guidelines regarding how you can think and act effectively when situations like this come up with your partner. Like the suggestions given previously, those in this section are based on decades of studying how people who know how to get their partners to be flexible and open-minded go about doing it. **Note:** If your partner become physically aggressive toward you or threatens physical harm, the guidelines below need to be modified. Use the guidelines offered in the article, *“When Your Partner’s Thinking or Actions Seem Wrong.”* For all other times when you felt dissatisfied or disapproving, use the above guidelines.

Using the Charts

When their partners express dissatisfaction or disapproval first, skillful people implement the predictive habits in a very specific ordering which is similar in many respects to the ordering discussed in the previous section, but also different in some important ways. This ordering is shown in Charts 2A and 2B on pages 25 and 26. The same progression of reactions can be seen in both charts; Chart 2B is a simplified version of Chart 2A, suitable for quick reference. I suggest that you have these charts in front of you as you read so that you can follow the progression as various guidelines are discussed. Once you understand the flow of the charts, you'll be able to use them as shorthand guides to remind yourself what you need to do to be more effective at any point in an unfolding conversation with your partner.

Your initial reactions need to vary depending on the harshness of your partner's attitude.

When your partner expresses dissatisfaction or disapproval, you'll get an immediate sense of the degree of *harshness* he's feeling toward you. On some occasions, he won't be harsh at all. He may be upset, but you'll sense some measure of open-mindedness in his approach. He'll ask you to explain why you were thinking or acting the way you did, and he'll seem interested in the answer. On other occasions, you may sense that he's already made up his mind and concluded that you're wrong or out of line in some way. You'll feel attacked. If he's *really* upset, he may use derogatory words, conveying an attitude of disgust or outrage, insisting that your viewpoint is ridiculous, or acting as if you've committed a crime. In these situations, if you're like most people you'll have a hard time being receptive to his point of view—even if it's legitimate.

Studies suggest that in general, people who are effective in getting their partners to be open-minded and flexible respond to their partners' complaints initially with the first six components of the Sequence (summarized on page 22). However, when they feel that their partners are judging them harshly or putting them down, they temporarily skip over the first half of the sequence and begin implementing the "standing up" steps (7-12), returning to the "openness and flexibility" steps only when their partners become more respectful. We'll discuss this process in detail in a later section titled, *When Your Partner Approaches You With A Harsh Attitude* (pp. 18-20). Right now, I want to focus on the situations where your partner expresses dissatisfaction or disapproval of your thinking or behavior, but he's *not* judging you harshly or putting you down.

When Your Partner Approaches You Without a Harsh Attitude

When our partners bring up complaints, the first reaction that many of us have is that something *bad* is happening. Often, we feel this even before we know what the complaints are about. Just the fact that our partners look dissatisfied or disapproving can trigger bad feelings and thoughts like, "Why does he always have to be upset about something?" or "He is such a negative person. He doesn't know how good he has it!" If you have a "This-is bad!" internal

reaction when your partner expresses dissatisfaction or disapproval, he will sense it immediately even if you don't say anything. Your internal attitude will register on your face, and it can have a huge effect on him, making it more likely that he'll complain or criticize more forcefully. Skillful people catch themselves having negative reactions to their partners' complaints, and find ways to lighten up and relax.

- **Remind yourself that it is *good* that he is talking to you about this, that he often has good points, and that he is saying something that you should seriously consider.**

People who do a poor job of getting their partners to be open and flexible fail to make efforts to welcome their partners' complaints, and they also fail to question another common gut reaction that happens when listening to one's partner's complaints. When our partners spell out their complaints or dislikes, it's normal for us to feel that our partners are overreacting, being too picky, or that their expectations or viewpoints are unreasonable or unrealistic. The difference between people who are skilled in relationships versus those who aren't is that whereas unskilled people blindly accept the validity of their gut reactions and allow them to go uncontested, skillful people "catch" themselves dismissing their partners' complaints and counter these dismissive reactions by reminding themselves to keep open minds.

- **If your first impression is that your partner's perceptions, reasoning or expectations are "off" (inaccurate, unrealistic, excessive, short-sighted or substandard), consider that he might have information you don't have, or that you could be biased and there might be more than one legitimate way to look at situations or issues like this one.**
- **Remember that if you imply that his perceptions, reasoning or expectations are "off" when they arguably aren't, you'll be reacting exactly like people who rarely get the kind of respect and cooperation from their partners that they'd like to have.**

When feeling upset with our partners, many of us are reluctant to let go of the idea that our partners' viewpoints or actions are wrong. We believe that unless we approach our partners from strong and unwavering positions (e.g., "God and everybody knows that you're wrong!"), our partners will dismiss our complaints. But the evidence suggests that when people approach their partners with strong, critical attitudes, usually the partners' natural defenses become triggered, and they are more defensive and less responsive than those whose partners approach them non-critically.

- **Remind yourself that letting go of the idea that his perceptions, reasoning or expectations are "off" doesn't mean that you have to agree or go along with them. (There is likely nothing wrong with yours either, and yours need to count as much as his.)**

Many people don't want to give their partners an inch of slack, because they worry that if they give an inch, their partners will take a mile. People who are skilled in relationships don't have

this worry. They know that if their partners try to “take a mile,” they will stand up for their own opinions, requiring that their partners become flexible and willing to “give and take.”

- **Hear him out, and refrain from disputing or debating what he is saying before he is able to explain fully.**
- **Acknowledge *any part* of his complaint that you can understand or agree with, even if you can't agree with everything he's saying.**
- **If you can't agree fully with his perspective, or you are reluctant to make the changes he wants...**
 - **Try to persuade him of the merits of your viewpoint without implying that his is wrong.**
 - **Assure him that although you still like your reasoning better, you realize that you could be biased, that you are willing to “count” his perspective much as yours, and that you are willing to try to find some way to meet in the middle.**
 - **Offer one possible way you are willing to make an adjustment in the present situation or in future situations that are similar to this one, in order to prevent him feeling the way he does.**
 - **If you feel it is needed, ask him to consider making an adjustment as well.**

If you are able to implement the guidelines offered up to this point, the odds are pretty good that the conversation will go well, and your partner will be flexible and open to your point of view. But it might not happen this way. If it becomes clear to him that you don't agree with him and that you're expecting him to meet you in the middle, he may become critical of you for the first time and say or imply that your viewpoint is wrong or misguided in some way.

- **Check to be sure that you're reading him correctly. Say something like, “It seems like you feel that my viewpoint is completely without merit and that I should just go along with whatever you want. Do you see *anything* that could be possibly legitimate about my viewpoint at all?”**

Putting the question this way will tend to make your partner be more thoughtful about what indeed he really is saying, and it'll give him a chance to clarify or even change his attitude. For example, he might say something like, “No, I don't think you should just go along with what I'm saying. I'm just having a little trouble understanding why my opinion doesn't make sense to you. But I don't think that you should just agree with me. If you see things differently, I'm going to respect that.” From there, the conversation will probably go in a more positive direction.

Of course, it's also possible that his response to your question will be something like, "Yes, I think you should go along with what I'm saying, because you're being selfish and you need to stop it!" In this case, you'll have the clarification you need. You *really are* being dismissed! While the guidelines offered up to this point have all been based on the first six steps of the Sequence (summarized on page 22), if your partner is really disregarding your viewpoint, you'll need to begin implementing the "standing up" steps (7-12). The guidelines below will help you stand up for yourself effectively when you need to. These guidelines are brief, highlighting only some of the central components of the "standing up" process. A fuller description of the process can be found in the article, *Habits of People Who Know How to Get their Partners to Treat them Well: Part I—Dealing with Differences*.

- **If it's clear that he's discounting your feelings, say something like, "I realize that we may see things differently here, and I'm trying to keep an open mind and be respectful of your point of view, but I'm not getting anything back. Are you really going to sit there and completely disregard my feelings?"**

Through this question, your partner should get the message that your patience is wearing thin and that you're just about ready to stop trying to reason with him. When delivered well, the question serves as a kind of friendly warning that will give him a chance to consider becoming more open and flexible one last time before you give up and walk away. Especially when feelings are strong, the correctness of his point of view will often seem so self-evident to your partner that it will be hard for him to believe that you could really believe in your point of view as strongly as he believes in his. For this reason, he may not become flexible and receptive until you draw a line with him and make it clear that you feel as strongly as he does, and that you are going to require that he respect your feelings as much as his own. With a statement like the one above, you let him know that you're just about through trying to get him to be reasonable. At this point, your partner may finally demonstrate more openness and flexibility. If he does, just return to the "openness and flexibility" steps of the Sequence.

But it's also possible on any given day that your partner will ignore your question and continue to dismiss your viewpoint. If he does...

- **Let him know that you're feeling upset with him and that you don't want to be around him right now.**

The message you're sending is that you have no desire to be with him if he is going to blatantly dismiss your feelings or concerns. You've made it clear that you're not trying to force your will on him and that you're willing to work toward agreements that take both of your perspectives into account, but he's not willing to do the same. Enough said! Temporarily distance yourself from him. If possible, go to a different room in the house. Putting distance between the two of you will be most impactful if you do it with an attitude of frustration rather than out of defiance or anger. You're distancing because you don't know what else to do rather than to punish him, or "teach him a lesson."

For most of us, the ability to stay on track with the Sequence up to this point is a major accomplishment, and it can be discouraging to realize that our work is not yet done. But in fact, all of the work you've done up to this point will amount to very little unless you're able to follow through with the remaining steps of the Sequence. In order to draw a line with our partners and temporarily walk away from them, many of us literally shift internal gears and connect with an internal brain system that has evolved for self-protection. Once we connect with this internal state, it can be like flipping on a switch. Once the switch is on, it's not always easy to turn it off. Even when we're by ourselves and out of immediate danger, we can continue the anger process by dwelling on thoughts like, "He is such a control freak! He couldn't care less about anybody but himself!" Some people can let go of thoughts like these fairly quickly; for others it takes a lot longer. But one thing is clear: People who know how to get their partners to treat them well find a way of talking themselves down. They begin shifting to another attitude where they're not making such a big deal of how awful their partners were. They begin saying things to themselves like, "I suppose it's natural enough for my partner to be biased toward his own way of thinking and to want to have his own way. It's not that big of a deal. I just need to get the point across that if he wants our relationship to be harmonious, he is going to need to be respectful of my viewpoints and priorities, too. I think I got the point across in the situation that just happened. I can afford to relax now. If I need to get pointed with him again I'll do it, but for now there's no need to harbor a grudge."

- **When you are alone, avoid making a big deal in your mind of how awful his attitude was. Remind yourself things like: "It's natural enough for him to have strong feelings about things that are important to him. I just need to be sure that he respects my feelings, too."**

If there's one thing that describes people who are good at getting their partners to treat them well, it's *emotional flexibility*. They can stay calm and unalarmed longer than most people, connect with anger in a more well-timed fashion, and then let go of anger more quickly. Individuals who begin second conversations carrying anger or resentment from failed first conversations dramatically lower the odds that their partners will be open-minded and flexible in the second conversations. Skillful people have a way of hitting an internal reset button. They enter second conversations assuming that these conversations will likely go better now that both partners have experienced the discomfort that goes along with a breach in their relationship.

Though they are patient and don't rush into second conversations about topics that are unresolved after first discussions, neither do people who are skilled in relationships let issues drop. They're often the first to initiate second conversations. In fact, if their partners don't, they always do.

- **Try again, later. Begin a new conversation without a chip on your shoulder. Don't try to get him to see how "wrong" his attitude or actions were. Don't demand apology. Just return to the issue.**

People who are effective usually begin second conversations by offering assurance. They'll come back and say, "Well that didn't really go very well did it? What do you think I was saying? All I was saying was..." and then they reiterate their assurances and ask that their partners hear them out and care about their feelings too. They don't demand apologies. They don't try to get their partners to understand how badly they acted in previous arguments. They just start fresh discussions of the issues, anticipating that their partners might interact differently now that they understand that inflexibility will not be tolerated.

Most of the time, when people skillfully engage in the "standing up" processes described up to this point, their partners become more flexible and cooperative. However, situations sometimes arise where people communicate open-mindedness, flexibility and willingness to give and take in several rounds of conversation, yet their partners still refuse to do the same. In these situations, skillful people *refuse to continue business as usual* in their relationships.

- **If needed, refuse to continue business as usual.**

After several attempts, skillful people stop trying to get their partners to be reasonable with them, and they accept the reality that their partners have no intention of becoming more open and flexible. They let their partners know that they're giving up on the idea of trying to talk them into being more collaborative, and they communicate the sad conclusion that they need to put some distance between the two of them. They explain that they can't feel okay about their relationships as long as they feel disregarded. They let their partners know that they're not going to pretend everything is okay and just continue "business as usual."

In *refusing to continue business as usual*, people simply inform their partners that they don't want to be around them, and they arrange their lives as much as possible to avoid contact. If contact can't be avoided (for example, if they have children and must interface), they keep contact cordial. If their partners initiate unnecessary conversation or contact, they remind their partners that they're not interested in resuming their normal relationship when they've received no indication that their partners are willing to stretch themselves and to try to keep open minds, and/or meet in the middle when their priorities or viewpoints are at cross purposes.

Often, simply stating the intent to stop engaging in business as usual, particularly if it is made in a believable, non-critical, non-blaming way, will trigger a shift in one's partner toward more willingness to listen and cooperate, and actual disengagement will not be necessary. People who skillfully refuse to continue business as usual aren't asking for anything unreasonable. They're simply asking for the level of mutual regard that they're willing to give in the relationship. They aren't interested in controlling their partners or in "winning" when they disagree. They're just asking for mutual respect. Further, they're asking for it in ways that make it easy for their partners to respond. They are open-minded, willing and flexible. All of these qualities contribute to their impact when they finally refuse to continue business as usual.

When their partners eventually do become more respectful and collaborative, skillful people refrain from "rubbing their partners' noses in it." They don't "hold their partners

transgressions over their heads.” Rather, they are happy and willing to give their partners fresh starts.

It’s important to recognize that skillful people only “refuse to continue business as usual” when they have attempted several conversations in which they have responded to their partners’ complaints with open minds, hopeful that their partners would do the same. But in these conversations their partners remained closed-minded and/or inflexible. If you feel that you need to take the step of refusing to continue business as usual, please first read the more detailed description of it in the article, *Habits of People Who Know How to Get their Partners to Treat them Well: Part I—Dealing with Differences*). If the process is implemented poorly, it can result in a worsening of your relationship. However, if you fail to implement it when needed, relationship outcomes are no better. For these reasons, the process of refusing to continue business as usual should not be started without consultation with a therapist who is knowledgeable about the process.

When Your Partner Approaches You With a Harsh Attitude

The guidelines in the section above describe how you can get your partner to be responsive to your viewpoint in situations where he becomes upset with you, but he’s able to approach you without putting you down. If your partner is like most people, however, on at least some occasions he won’t be able to approach you with an open-minded attitude. Especially if he feels threatened in some way, he may criticize you harshly or put you down. He may use pejorative words like “stupid,” “idiot,” “irresponsible,” “lazy,” “selfish,” “self-centered,” “clueless,” or “thoughtless” to describe your viewpoint or actions. He might seem disgusted or outraged, and he might insist that you’re viewpoint is ridiculous or act as if you’ve committed an unforgivable crime.

Skillful people react differently when criticized harshly than they do in situations where their partners complain in ways that aren’t overly harsh. Skillful reactions to harsh criticism both reduce the severity of and frequency of criticism received. If you want your partner to become more open-minded when he’s criticizing you harshly, here’s what you need to do.

- **Avoid hitting the panic button and simply say something like...**
 - **“Stop it! I’m listening!”**
 - **“Don’t put me down! I’m trying to hear what you’re talking about!”**

If you want to be effective, the important thing at this point is that you relax inside and that you don’t make too big of a deal in your own mind about how awful your partner is for having a harsh attitude. This isn’t easy to do. If you’re like most of us, it’s natural to feel indignant and to want to make a big stink when your partner judges you. This is especially true for those of us who are well-educated in the habits that are predictive of relationship success. Hasn’t harsh criticism been shown to be predictive of bad things in relationships? Why shouldn’t we make a big stink about it when our partners are acting this way? The answer is that relationship studies also suggest that sooner or later all of us feel unjustly judged by our partners. The evidence is clear: Those who pitch a fit when their partners judge them end up getting more harshly

criticized as time goes by. If you make a big deal of it when your partner judges you, you are behaving in a way that's just as destructive as is his critical behavior. In fact, your mishandling of his harsh criticism may be the very reason why he continues to criticize you. People who know how to get their partners to treat them well expect that a certain amount of harsh criticism from one's partner is inevitable—it's hardly a crime. When their partners criticize them, they don't make a big deal of it; they just ask (and eventually *require*, if necessary) that their partners stop, *and they also assure their partners that they are willing to listen with an open mind.*

Many of us are able to implement half of this equation—we know how to ask our partners to stop criticizing. But only the most skilled people have the wisdom to add assurances as well (e.g., "I'm listening!" "I'm trying to hear what you're talking about!").

- **Remind yourself that there may be a bigger worry or fear that is driving the intensity of his reaction in this situation.**
- **Say something like, "Why are you so mad at me?" Is it a combination of things? Honestly, I don't understand why you're so mad."**

People who are ineffective when harshly criticized get so fixated on the unjustness of the criticism that they aren't able to look past the criticism to consider the cause of it. People who criticize others harshly usually do so because they feel threatened in some way. If you're going to be effective when your partner criticizes you harshly, you need to assume that he must be upset about something that's bigger than just the present situation. Consider that he's probably worried or feels threatened about something that may be less than readily apparent. If you're wondering about this possibility, you'll look confused rather than defensive, and when you ask "Why are you so mad at me?" it's likely that your partner may stop his attack for a moment and give some thought to the question. He may back up a bit and explain what he's worried about. If he does, the remaining guidelines in this section don't apply. Instead, go back to the guidelines offered in the previous section, titled *When Your Partner Approaches You Without a Harsh Attitude* (pp. 12-18). You'll be most effective if you find and acknowledge the understandable reasons for his viewpoint or actions, assure him that you're willing to be flexible even if you don't see things the way he does, and so on.

If your partner continues criticizing you harshly:

- **Express distress, and let him know that you are trying to be open to what he is saying, but you are having hard time because you're feeling that he's putting you down. Again, ask him to please stop and just explain what is making him so upset.**

With this second request, your persistence in both showing an honest interest and asking him earnestly to stop putting you down will likely pay off, and your partner will likely stop putting you down and begin explaining what he's upset about. If he does, the remaining guidelines in this section don't apply. Instead, go back to the guidelines offered in the previous section, titled *When Your Partner Approaches You Without a Harsh Attitude* (pp. 12-18).

If he continues putting you down:

- **Let him know that you're feeling upset with him and that you don't want to be around him right now.**

The message you're sending is that you have no desire to be with him if he is going to continue putting you down. You've made it clear that you're not going to judge him for being harsh with you, that you're assuming that there must be good reasons for why he's so upset, and that you're willing to try to understand them. But he's less interested in explaining his reasons than in putting you down. Enough said! Temporarily distance yourself from him. If possible, go to a different room in the house.

Go to pages 16 – 18, and follow the guidelines:

- **When you are alone, avoid making a big deal in your mind of how awful his attitude was. Remind yourself things like: "It's natural enough for him to have strong feelings about things that are important to him. I just need to be sure that he respects my feelings, too."**
- **Try again, later. Begin a new conversation without a chip on your shoulder. Don't try to get him to see how "wrong" his attitude or actions were. Don't demand an apology. Just return to the issue.**
- **If needed, refuse to continue business as usual.**

As you are taking these actions, if your partner stops putting you down and begins explaining why he's so mad, shift to the guidelines given on pages 12-18.

Concluding Comments

This article has taken you through the full Sequence, showing how it can be applied both in situations where you feel dissatisfied or disapproving first and where your partner feels dissatisfied or disapproving first. People who are skillful in applying the Sequence are confident that they know how to get their partners to treat them well regardless of whether their partners are trying to treat them well or not. Their confidence is based on the fact that they know how to powerfully elicit respectful treatment through the combination of a flexible and open-minded attitude, willingness to get as tough as needed, and the ability to avoid holding on to anger beyond the point where it is useful.

Remember that it's possible that you may never even have to implement the whole Sequence in your relationship with your partner. Simply assuming an open-minded and flexible attitude and asking him for the same may be enough. However, realistically, the odds are high that you will need to go through the whole process at least a few times with your partner. If

you need to, and if you're able, you'll find that you need to do it less and less as time goes by. He won't really want to create a rift once he knows you're willing to be flexible and open and that you won't tolerate anything less from him.

The Sequence described in this paper is applicable primarily to situations when you or your partner become dissatisfied with or disapproving of the other's viewpoints or actions, but when the viewpoints or actions are not inherently wrong or harmful to relationships. Rather, you and your partner have legitimately different viewpoints or priorities. You're simply at cross-purposes. Nobody is right; nobody is wrong. Researchers have found that this is the case with most of the things that partners become dissatisfied with or disapproving of in relationships. However, sometimes partners do things that are truly wrong by almost any standard. For example, in most situations deliberately and intentionally lying or deceiving, being sexually unfaithful or physically aggressive, breaking a clear agreement without good reason, badmouthing or undermining, violating privacy or personal space, and making an irreversible, unilateral decision regarding something about which one's partner has strong feelings are actions that are considered to be harmful or wrong by almost all people who are surveyed. People who are effective in getting their partners to stop doing things that are clearly wrong or harmful use the Sequence of responses described in this paper, but there are some important variations that are detailed in the article, *When Your Partner's Thinking or Actions Seem Wrong*.

Sequence 12 Step Summary

The “Openness and Flexibility” Steps

1. Focus on Your Own Reactions

Remember to shift your focus from how irritating or upsetting your partner’s behavior or attitude is to your own reactions to it. Remind yourself that you don’t want to react in ways that never work for anybody, in any relationship. If you can respond effectively in situations like these, your partner will become more understanding and cooperative.

2. Avoid a Judgmental Attitude

Don’t jump to conclusions; give the benefit of the doubt; and with an open mind, ask your partner why he acted as he did, or is thinking the way he is. Consider that this situation might not be about right/wrong, but rather about legitimately different wants, needs, priorities or standards.

3. Find the Understandable Part

Become determined to find any at-least-partly-understandable reasons for his thinking or actions, and acknowledge them.

4. Identify and Explain What is at Stake

Tell him why you’re upset, or why you’re having trouble acting or thinking the way he wants. Explain the bigger thing that’s at stake for you. Look for the bigger thing at stake for him too.

5. Offer Assurance

Assure him that you’re trying to be flexible and keep an open mind, and that you realize that you may have legitimately different wants, needs, priorities or expectations that come to play in situations like these. Let him know that there’s no reason why your feelings should count more than his.

6. Give and Require Equal Regard

Let your partner know that you’re willing to make some changes and to work with him to find a mutually acceptable solution. Ask him to do the same.

The “Standing Up” Steps

7. Lighten Up

Don’t hit the panic button or get “trigger happy.” Give him the benefit of the doubt. He may not realize how inflexible or closed-minded he’s being, or he might not be thinking about how it makes you feel. His inflexible stance may change quickly if you’re able to avoid overreacting and simply “ask and offer” (step 8).

8. Ask and Offer

Let him know that you’re feeling upset. *Ask* him to adjust his attitude, while *offering* assurance that you don’t expect him to agree with you or to just blindly comply with your wishes—you’re just asking him to respect your feelings and be willing to give and take.

9. Call the Question; Temporarily Distance Yourself

If he continues to criticize or disregard you, *call the question* (“I feel like I’ve been trying here, but you’re not giving me anything back. Are you really going to sit there and dismiss every single thing that I say?”). If his critical or dismissive attitude persists, let him know that you don’t want to be around him right now.

10. Don’t Make a Big Deal of It

When you’re by yourself, lighten up, and let go of anger and resentment. You don’t have to make a big deal of his inflexible behavior or closed-minded attitude. It’s not a crime that he acted this way. It’s natural enough for him to want to have his own way or to be biased toward his own point of view.

11. Try Again Later

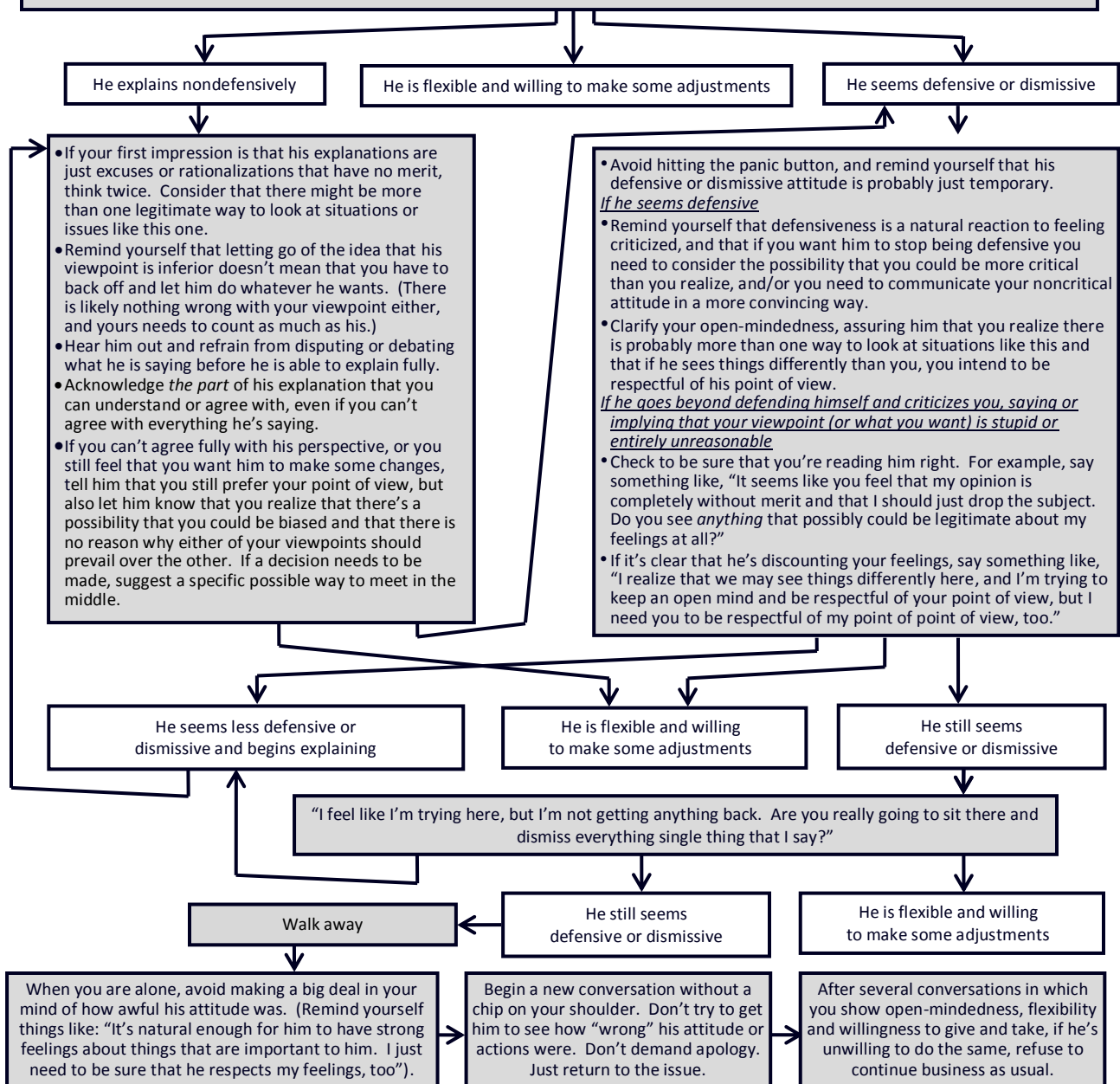
Begin a new conversation without a chip on your shoulder. Don’t try to get your partner to see how “wrong” his inflexible or closed-minded attitude was. Don’t demand an apology. Simply return to the issue that didn’t get resolved and try to resolve it again, beginning with the “openness and flexibility” steps.

12. Refuse to Continue “Business as Usual” (only if needed)

After several conversations in which you show open-mindedness, flexibility and willingness to give and take, and your partner refuses to do the same, make it clear that it doesn’t feel right to you to pretend everything is OK and to continue business as usual. Inform him of your intention to put some distance between the two of you.

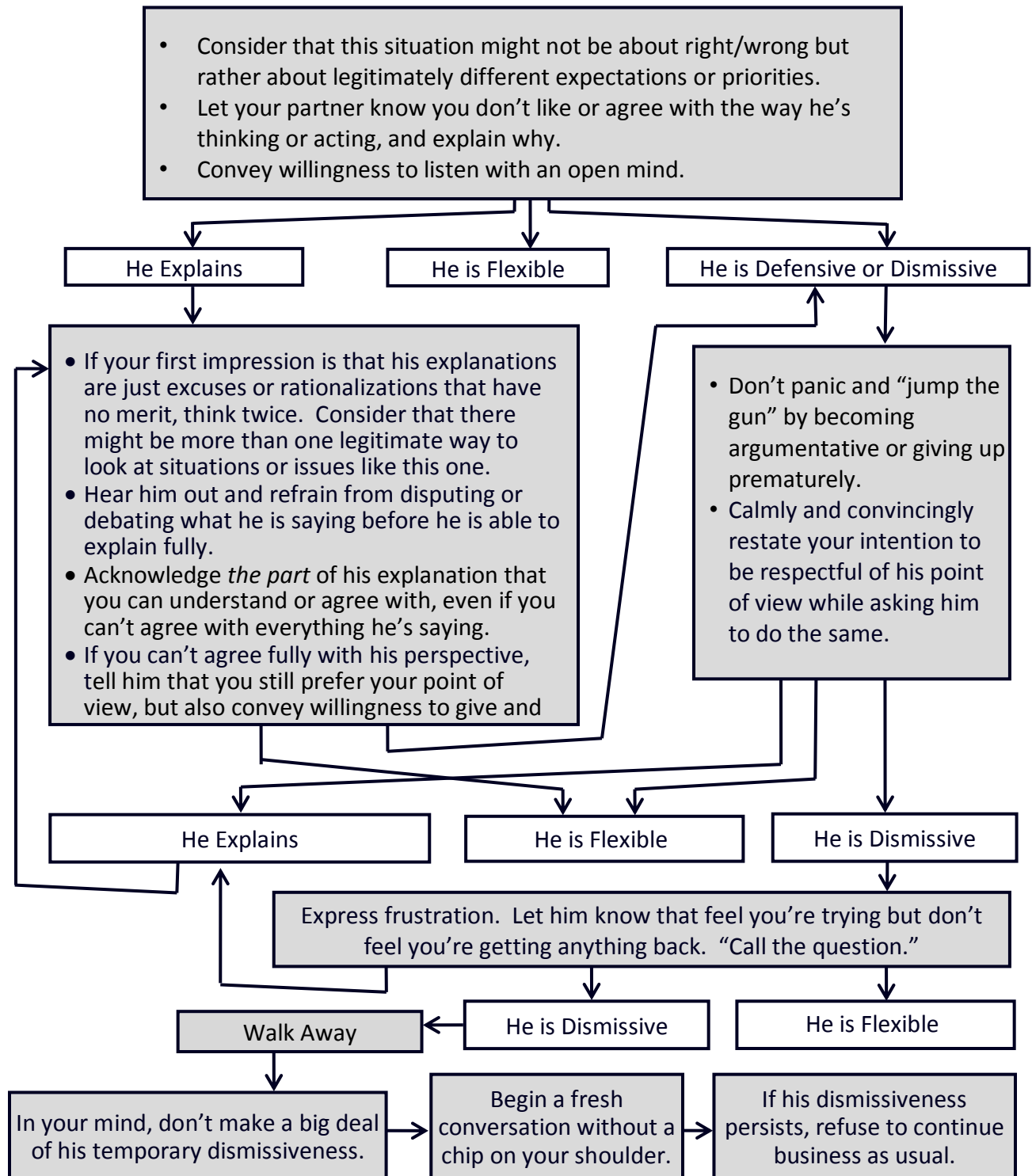
Chart 1A: When You Feel Dissatisfied or Disapproving First ^{***}

- If your initial gut reaction is that your partner's thinking or actions are wrong or substandard, think twice before trusting your reaction. Remind yourself that just because you might not like how he is thinking or acting doesn't mean it's wrong or substandard, and if you conclude that his thinking or actions are wrong or substandard when they aren't, you'll be reacting exactly like people who rarely get the kind of respect and cooperation from their partners they'd like to have.
- Suggest to yourself that this may be one of those situations where partners 1) have legitimately different opinions, priorities or expectations; 2) need to be open to the possibility that they could each be biased in favor of their own preferences; and 3) need to be willing to "give and take."
- Let him know that you don't like (or agree with) the way he's thinking or acting, and explain why (if needed). Ask him to either adjust his behavior somewhat or explain why he's thinking or acting this way. Convey willingness to be flexible and listen with an open mind.



*** **Note:** If your partner lies, engages in deliberate deception, is sexually unfaithful or physically aggressive, breaks a clear agreement with no good reason, badmouths or undermines you, violates your privacy or personal space or makes an irreversible, unilateral decision regarding something about which he knows you have strong feelings, a different chart applies (found in the article, "When Your Partner's Thinking or Actions seem Wrong." For all other times when you feel dissatisfied or disapproving, use the above guidelines.

Chart 1B: When You Feel Dissatisfied or Disapproving First ***



*** **Note:** If your partner lies, engages in deliberate deception, is sexually unfaithful or physically aggressive, breaks a clear agreement with no good reason, badmouths or undermines you, violates your privacy or personal space or makes an irreversible, unilateral decision regarding something about which he knows you have strong feelings, a different chart applies (found in the article, "When Your Partner's Thinking or Actions seem Wrong." For all other times when you feel dissatisfied or disapproving, use the above guidelines.

Chart 2A: When Your Partner Conveys Dissatisfaction or Disapproval First

(Note: If your partner becomes physically aggressive or threatening, use the guidelines offered in "When Your Partner's Thinking or Actions Seem Wrong" instead of those offered in this chart)

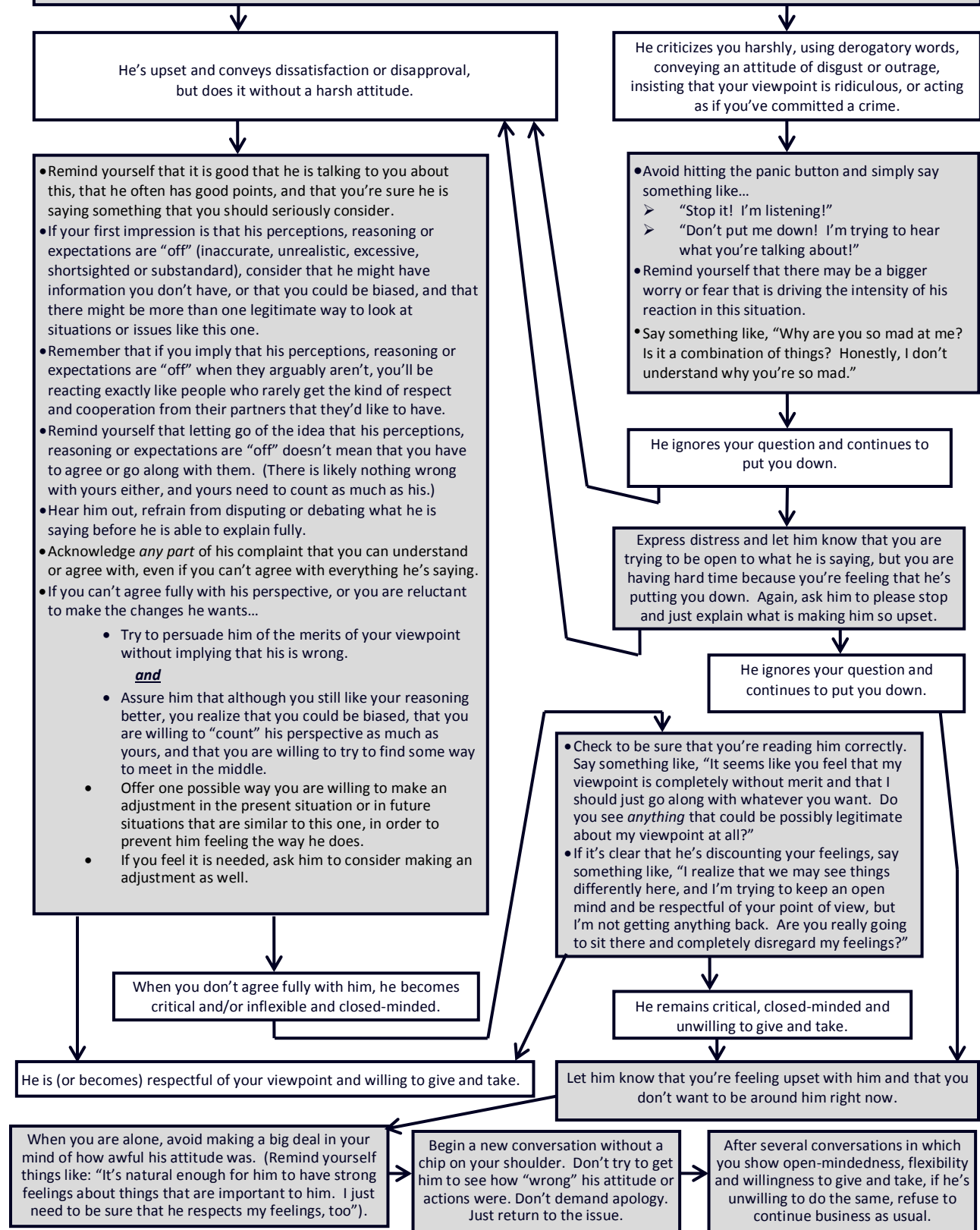


Chart 2B: When Your Partner Conveys Dissatisfaction or Disapproval First

(Note: If your partner becomes physically aggressive or threatening, use the guidelines offered in "When Your Partner's Thinking or Actions Seem Wrong" instead of those offered in this chart)

