

Understanding THE SEQUENCE

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THE SEQUENCE has been used by thousands of partners to elicit more understanding and cooperation from their mates. If you can follow this sequence each time an upset occurs between you and _____, you'll find that _____ will become more caring and respectful of your feelings within a matter of weeks. Let's take a closer look at each step in the sequence

The First Steps

1. Remember: Do Something Different

When _____ does something that upsets you, the first thing you'll need to do is to remember to focus on making sure that you change your usual reactions, rather than dwelling on how offensive or uncaring _____'s behavior is. Three decades of research on relationships suggests you'll be more effective in getting _____ to understand and care about your feelings if you focus on your own reactions. Studies on couples show that how people react when they feel misunderstood or offended strongly predicts whether or not they'll get treated better by their partners in the future. These are the moments that "separate the women from the girls," psychologically speaking. If you learn how to react effectively in the moments when you're upset with _____, the odds are very, very good that you'll get more cooperation and respect from _____ in the future. Some ways of reacting virtually guarantee relationship failure. Remember that all people in long term relationships feel mistreated or offended at one time or another. Those who know how to react effectively get treated better in the future. If you want to get treated better by _____, first make sure you're reacting to him like people who almost always get treated better. Then you can decide what to do if _____ doesn't treat you better. However, if you develop the ability to respond effectively when you feel upset or offended, the odds are very, very good that you'll soon feel more respected and understood by _____. The reminders on page 14 (*Sample Self-Assurances*) might help you remember to give attention to your own reactions before concluding that _____ won't change. When an upset occurs between you and _____, try to develop the habit of instantly thinking something like,

- *My usual reactions won't work. They never work for anybody in any relationship.*
- *The single most effective thing I can do right now to get more of what I want from _____ is to develop the ability to react more effectively when I'm not getting what I want.*
- *First, I'll make sure I'm thinking and acting like people who usually get respect and cooperation from their partners. Then, if I'm still not getting it, I'll figure out what else I may need to do.*

2. Give the Benefit of the Doubt

This step draws heavily on Predictive Habit #1: Avoiding a Judgmental Attitude

Now that you've reminded yourself to do something different, let's focus on what you need to do. How do people who get understanding and cooperation from their partners go about getting it? There's nothing that shuts down a conversation faster than the feeling that the person you're talking to has already decided that you're guilty before even talking to you. People who are

good at influencing their partners avoid jumping to negative conclusions, and try to keep an open mind when their partners do things they don't like. They understand that if they assume the worst of their partners, they'll *get* the worst. People destined for relationship success give their partners the benefit of the doubt – that is, they assume that there is an understandable reason for their partner's words or actions, even if they don't know what it is yet. Beneath even seemingly provocative behavior on the part of their partners, they assume that there is a legitimate need, priority or dream that's driving their partner's actions. In contrast, when people who are destined to fail in their relationships are faced with words or actions from their partners that are upsetting to them, they assume that their partners are acting this way because they have misguided, priorities, reasoning, motivations, or intentions, or that their partners have faulty personality characteristics (e.g., "my partner is just lazy, controlling, irresponsible, insensitive, etc."). Use the *Attitude Check* sheet on page 15 to help you identify judgmental explanations you might often have for _____ actions. The sheet on the next page, *Giving the Benefit of the Doubt* (p. 16) will help you develop the ability to keep an open mind, at least temporarily.

It is totally to your advantage to give the benefit of the doubt. If _____ isn't willing to do the same, you can always stand up for yourself later (see steps 7-12). But if you decide in the beginning that he's done something "wrong," behaved badly, or that his thinking is "off," you'll join the company of those destined to fail in their relationships. Try thinking something like:

- *There are probably reasons why _____ is thinking or acting this way that I don't yet understand.*
- *Even if I can't yet find a legitimate reason for his attitude or actions, I'm still going to assume there is one.*
- *Just because I assume there is a legitimate reason for _____'s thinking or actions doesn't mean that I need to go along with what he wants. My viewpoints and needs are just as legitimate.*

3. Find the Understandable Part

This step involves putting into action predictive habit #3, Finding the Understandable Part)

If _____ does something upsetting to you, you might not at first see anything that could be understandable about his feelings or actions. However, if you can find any at-least-partly-understandable reasons for his thinking or actions, you'll dramatically increase the odds that _____ will also be able to understand the reasons for your own feelings or viewpoints as well. People who succeed in their relationships understand that they can increase the odds that they'll get understanding if they give it first. Hence, they become absolutely determined to understand the logic behind their partners' thoughts and actions. Because the understandable reasons for _____'s feelings, intentions or motivations will not always be obvious, it's to your advantage to become good at finding the reasons that are sometimes difficult to see at first. A list of possible reasons that might make _____'s thinking or actions more understandable to you can be found on the sheet, *Finding the Understandable Part: Common Hidden Reasons*, on page 24. Sometimes the reasons why your partner acts or thinks differently than you may be related to the fact that _____ may have legitimately different priorities or ways of maintaining emotional stability than you do. They're not necessarily better than yours, but neither are they worse. Some of the most common of these core differences are summarized on page 18.

4. What's Driving My Upset?

This step provides a way of implementing predictive habit #6: Identifying and Explaining What is at Stake

Many times, if you're able to keep an open mind and try to understand the logic behind _____'s thinking or actions, you'll find that you no longer have a problem with what he wants. However, there are other times when you'll still find that you see things differently, or that you have different priorities or expectations. In these situations, you'll need to explain why you feel the way you do. You'll be most effective if you can identify the bigger needs or worries that drive your feelings about the particular situation, then explain them

Arguments often fail because couples argue about the wrong things. People who are destined to succeed in their relationships realize that the reasons they are upset or have trouble doing what their partner wants sometimes run deeper than the present situation. Often, there is something bigger at stake. Your ability to explain the underlying reasons for being upset will help your partner become more cooperative and understanding. At some point during an argument people destined for success pause and take the conversation to a different level, saying something like, "OK, I think I just figured out why this bothers me so much... I'm worried that..." See page 19 for a list of underlying needs that often drive the feelings and actions of people in specific situations. Are any of these needs driving your upset feelings in the current situation? Unless you are able to identify what the bigger issues are that lie beneath your reactions in the present situation, you may end up arguing over superficial things and leave the real issues unaddressed. Try asking yourself the following questions:

- *Why is this such a big deal to me? Underneath it all, what's at stake for me?*
- *What am I worried about?*
- *Is this really about the present situation, or is there something bigger at stake?*

5. Offer Assurance

This step draws upon predictive habit #1 (Avoiding a Judgmental Attitude) and predictive habit #5 (Offering Assurances)

You may find that when you talk to _____ about a dissatisfaction you have, even though you're not feeling critical of him, he may react defensively – as if you've criticized him. Not realizing that his defensiveness is a reaction to feeling attacked, you might think that he's just being stubborn. There's a simple way to remedy this situation: Begin with the assumption that he's being defensive or dismissive of your feelings because he feels criticized or attacked, not because he's being uncooperative. Don't make a big deal of the fact that he has misinterpreted you -- simply say things to him that will help him understand that you're not feeling critical of him. For example, you might say something like,

- *I'm not saying that it was wrong for you to do that – It's just different than what I was hoping for (or, I just don't think I understand why you did it)*
- *I'm not saying that we have to do things the way I think they should be – I think your feelings should count too. I'm just trying to understand them.*
- *Look, I care about your feelings here too, and I'm going to respect them even if I don't agree.*

People destined for relationship success learn the following general rule:

*When your partner seems critical or defensive,
don't make a big deal of it – just offer an assurance.*

If _____ accuses you of having a critical "tone" or "attitude" or criticizes the way you're talking to

him, resist the urge to debate whether or not his perceptions are valid. Assume that there may be at least some truth in what he's feeling. No big deal. Just start over again, and this time be sure to add assurances that explicitly let him know you're willing to keep an open mind and be cooperative. For example, say something like,

- *OK, it's certainly possible that there's a part of me that wants to be critical of you, because I am upset, but I'm trying to keep an open mind.*

If you realize that maybe you do feel critical, you can say something like.

- *OK, maybe I am being critical, but that's not fair. I'm sure there are reasons why you did what you did that I probably just don't understand yet. Will you just talk to me about them?*

If _____'s defensiveness or dismissive attitude continues in spite of assuring him that you're trying to keep an open mind, and you're willing to try to understand and respect his feelings too, you'll need to move on to step #7 below and stand up firmly for yourself. But most of the time you'll likely find that if you avoid getting all indignant about his initial defensiveness and just assure him that you're trying to approach the conversation with an open mind, he'll become more cooperative.

6. Work with Me?

With this step, you'll begin to implement both predictive habit #4 (Giving Equal Regard) and predictive habit #2 (Standing Up for Yourself Without Putting Your Partner Down).

Dropping the idea that _____ is wrong doesn't mean that you have to give in. People who are destined to succeed in their relationships believe that their own opinions and expectations are just as important as their partners'. Rather than criticizing or trying to prove their partners wrong, people who are destined to succeed in their relationships simply ask their partners to "move over and make room for me." They ask their partners to meet them half way.

Ideally, when you and _____ have a difference of opinion, you'll refrain from assuming that you're right and he's wrong, keep an open mind, and become determined to understand his viewpoint or the logic behind his actions. If you do this, you might actually find that you agree with _____. However, if you still feel differently, you'll need to explain the logic behind your feelings, too, and try to help him understand the underlying needs and/or worries that drive your feelings on the issue. In the end, however, the two of you may still have different feelings on the issue. People destined to succeed show regard for their partners feelings, and are willing to work toward solutions that take both of their feelings into account. They simply ask the same of their partners. When people stop criticizing their partners or trying to prove them wrong, and instead simply ask their partners to work toward a compromise, they usually find that their partners are willing.

If, after giving the benefit of the doubt, finding and acknowledging the understandable reasons for _____'s feelings, offering assurances and explaining why you feel the way you do, you find that you and _____ still disagree, try saying something like,

- *OK, I guess we feel differently about this. Will you work with me? Maybe we can figure out a way of doing things that takes both of our feelings into account.*

**When, in spite of my good attitude,
_____ disregards my viewpoint or criticizes me**

The First Steps (described above) provide the soil from which increased respectfulness and cooperativeness from _____ will emerge. Many arguments can be avoided through the first steps alone. However, there are also times in the course of most relationships that further measures are necessary. Steps 7 and 8, and possibly steps 9-12 are needed in two situations:

- A. **When _____ criticizes or attacks you.** When _____ is upset with you, he'll either complain to you, or criticize you. If he complains, he'll simply tell you he's upset or dissatisfied with something, and he'll probably also tell you why, and what he wants. If _____ criticizes you, he'll go beyond complaining and imply that your viewpoint or actions are *wrong*, and his are *right*, or he'll imply that you've behaved badly. As a general rule, when _____ is complaining, your most effective responses will always involve "The First Steps" summarized on page 12. However, if _____ is criticizing you, "The First Steps" may actually be counterproductive. If _____ criticizes you, it will feel like an attack. He may seem disgusted, and show no interest in hearing your point of view. If you respond in an understanding way when _____ is in "attack mode," you'll make it more likely that he'll resort to attacking in the future when he gets upset with you. It does no good to persist in attempts to be reasonable with someone who isn't willing or able to be reasonable with you. When you feel attacked, skip over "The First Steps" temporarily and begin with step 7. Return to "The First Steps" only when _____ stops criticizing you and simply begins explaining why he's upset.

- B. **When _____ disregards your viewpoint.** These are situations in which you avoid criticizing _____ and instead ask him to move over and make room for you, but he won't! In spite of your most sincere attempts to explain your point of view without criticism or contempt, recognize and acknowledge the reasonable part of _____'s argument, listen non-defensively, and assure him that you are not as rigid as you may seem on the issue, _____ isn't willing to give your feelings equal consideration.

7. Maintain Your Cool

This step requires the implementation of predictive habit #1 (Avoiding a judgmental attitude), and confidence that you can eventually implement predictive habit #2 (Standing Up for Yourself Without Putting Your Partner Down) if necessary.

If you're implementing this step, it's either because _____ is criticizing you, or because he continues to be unwilling to work with you in spite of your non-critical, cooperative attitude. A huge difference between those destined to succeed in their relationships and those destined to fail has to do with how indignant they get about their partner's objectionable behavior. People destined to succeed realize it's still too early to get all bent out of shape. They don't see their partner's temporary attack mode or stubbornness as a big crime, and hence, they don't make a federal case out of it. They realize that all of us can become uncooperative or disrespectful at times, and they know that just because their partners are treating them poorly in the moment doesn't mean that they'll continue to do so. They're confident that if their partners continue to disregard or criticize them, they'll stand up firmly for themselves in just a moment. But first, they'll make it as easy as possible for their partners to shift their attitudes. They do this by avoiding a judgmental attitude (predictive habit #1, p. 5)

When it feels like _____ is attacking or disregarding you, try saying the following to yourself:

- *“It’s no big deal that _____ is acting this way. It doesn’t make him an awful person.” (It will be a big deal if he keeps on acting this way after I do the “offer and ask” thing in just a minute, but at this point, it’s no big deal).*
- *“Just because he’s treating me bad right now doesn’t mean that he’ll continue to do so.”*
- *“There’s no rush. If he continues treating me poorly, I can stand up firmly for myself in a minute. But first I’ll make it as easy as possible for him to change his attitude.”*

8. Offer and Ask

With this step, you’ll implement several predictive habits at the same time. For example, it requires that you maintain a nonjudgmental attitude (predictive habit #1), begin standing up for yourself without putting your partner down (predictive habit #2), give equal regard (predictive habit #4), and offer assurance (predictive habit #5)

In this step, you ask _____ to become more cooperative and assure him of your willingness to do the same. For example, if he’s criticizing you, you might say something like,

- *“Hey, I’m willing to listen to you, but I’m having a hard time because it feels like you’ve already decided that I’m wrong. Could you slow down a bit and just tell me why you’re upset?”*
- *“I’m sure that there are valid reasons why you’re upset. I’m just having a hard time listening because I feel like you’re starting with the assumption that I’m guilty before we even talk!”*

If _____ is putting you down, you might say something like,

Hey! You have my attention. You don’t have to talk to me like that!

If _____ is being stubborn or uncooperative in spite of your attempts to cooperate with him, you might say something like

*Hey, I’m trying to work with you here, but it feels like I’m not getting it back!
Will you work with me?*

In the “offer and ask” step, you offer assurance (I’m willing to listen; I’m not saying that things have to be entirely my way; I’m not saying that I’m right and you’re wrong; I care about how you feel too, and I’m willing to work with you, etc.), and you ask him to be willing to do the same (Will you work with me? Will you stop criticizing me and just tell me what’s bothering you? etc.)

To be effective, the “offer and ask” step must be made calmly, but firmly. Usually, when people take this step, there’s some frustration in their voices, but it’s also clear that they’re still able to be respectful. They make it clear that they’re still willing to try to maintain a cooperative attitude, but only if their partners are ready to return cooperativeness. When implemented well, this step has the tone of a “friendly warning shot” fired into the air. It should have the effect of getting _____’s attention, but also making it clear that you’re still willing to try to be understanding and work together. With it, you’ll communicate something like, “You’re beginning to piss me off, but I’ll try to stay calm if you can just give me some indication that you’re willing to work with me here!”

9. Stand Up/Engage

With this step, you continue to put predictive habit #2 (Standing Up for Yourself Without Putting Your Partner Down) into action.

Once you've taken the "offer and ask" step, you'll often find that _____ shifts to a less critical or more cooperative attitude. If he does, simply return to "The First Steps" (e.g., explain your point of view without criticism or contempt, recognize and acknowledge the reasonable part of _____'s argument, listen non-defensively, and assure him that you are not as rigid as you may seem on the issue). However, it's possible that, in spite of your good attitude and assurances, _____ will continue to criticize you or refuse to recognize any validity in your feelings. If this is the case, you'll need to allow your anger to surface, and let him know in no uncertain terms that his attitude is not acceptable. If _____ is putting you down, you might say something like,

*Who do you think you are -- talking to me like that?
I don't care how valid your point is -- I'm not going to put up with this crap!*

If _____ is refusing to recognize any validity in your viewpoint, you might say something like,

Look, I don't expect you to agree with me, but I do expect you to be willing to work with me. My viewpoint is just as valid as yours here. Who in the hell do you think you are?

It's really important to note that successful partners "return hostile fire" only when their mates reject their "offer and ask" steps. Many people skip over "offer and ask," and immediately unleash their anger. **This is a huge mistake.** If you blast _____ every time he becomes critical or stubborn without "firing a warning shot," he'll feel unfairly assaulted by you, and he'll probably become even more uncooperative over time. On the other hand, if _____ rejects your good attitude and criticizes you or stubbornly refuses to "work with you," somewhere inside he'll know that your anger is justified, even if he can't recognize or admit it at the moment.

Some people find it confusing when their therapists encourage them to vent their anger at their partners. Don't relationships already have too much anger? Aren't we supposed to become less angry? Yes, too much anger is indeed toxic in relationships. If you become angry at _____ every time you don't like what he does, you'll not likely ever get the kind of understanding and respect from him that you'd like to have. However, there are also times when anger is not only justified -- it's necessary. If you avoid anger at moments that call for anger, your relationship will likely fail. So what is the difference between the moments when anger is needed and when it's counterproductive? The answer is relatively simple:

*When you've made a good faith effort to assure _____ of your willingness to assume a cooperative attitude, and he just keeps on attacking you or is unwilling to give an inch, you need to get angry. **In most other situations,** your anger will probably do more harm than good.*

Often, we hear clients say that they won't engage in an angry exchange, because they don't want to "stoop" to their partner's level." They think of themselves as "better" in some sense than their partners. The problem is that this attitude (I'm more mature my partner) is the single most toxic thing to relationships identified by researchers thus far. Technically, it's a form of contempt. It's almost impossible for you to avoid contempt in the face of an attack, unless you become angry and defend yourself at the moment of the attack. We find that those who can angrily defend themselves are much more able to assume non-contemptuous attitudes in the

aftermath of an attack than those who disengage when attacked. A bit of good old fashioned verbal scuffling is much less damaging than refusing to fight and then looking down on your partner. If you become silent and “stonewall” when you feel criticized or disregarded by _____, he’ll likely hear you saying, “I’m not even going to waste my time trying to talk with you. You are too disgusting or scary or irrational to even deal with.”

Relationships that have been stuck for years in an attack/withdraw pattern change dramatically when typically withdrawing partners develop the ability to square off with their mates, provided that they can avoid making a big deal out of how awful their partners are for “picking fights” (see step #11 below).

10. Reject _____

With this step, you take predictive habit #2 (Standing Up for Yourself Without Putting Your Partner Down) to its most forceful level.

If the anger you unleash has been preceded by good-faith efforts on your part, it may have the effect of “snapping _____ out of it.” He may get a grip and begin working more cooperatively with you. However, he might not. He might respond with his own anger. If he does, don’t back down. Engage in a heated exchange for a while. Demand to know why on earth he thinks that he could possibly be smarter or better than you. Make it clear that his know-it-all attitude infuriates you. The most effective people in relationships are no more afraid of relationship discord than their partners are, and are able to “pitch a fit” when the situation calls for it. When faced with an attack from _____, the most effective response is to 1) assure him that you’re willing to listen, 2) ask him to stop attacking you, 3) “let him have it” if he continues to attack or disrespect your feelings, 4), refrain from making a big deal of his offensive behavior, and 5) be willing to talk about the subject you were fighting about again with an open mind.

At any point, if his attitude softens even a little, return to the “First Steps.” However, if 5 minutes of heated arguing result in no change in his attitude, you’ll probably need to say something to him like,

*“You know what? I don’t even want to be near you right now.”
“Get away from me!”*

If he won’t get away from you, get away from him! Go to another part of the house. Leave temporarily. Remember, rejecting your partner is a strong and provocative move, and should be reserved only for situations in which _____ continues to attack or utterly disregard your feelings in spite of your efforts to collaborate.

11. Don’t Make a Big Deal of It

This step requires a strong ability to implement predictive habit #1: Avoiding a Judgmental Attitude.

If you’ve progressed all the way through step #10, you’re pretty angry. Now it’s time to calm down. People destined to succeed become angry and stand up firmly for themselves, then they let it go. They don’t make a fuss about the fact that they had to stand up. To them, it’s not the end of the world when their partners act in ways that required them to get angry and growl back. “Standing up” is all in a day’s work. In contrast, in the aftermath of an argument people destined to fail become consumed with thoughts like, “He is a monster!” He’s the most selfish person in the world!” He’s a control freak!” “He’s verbally abusive!”

After a situation in which you got angry and stood up for yourself, try adopting the attitude reflected in the following thoughts:

- *“It’s not a crime that I had to stand up and put him in his place. It doesn’t make him a bad person.”*
- *“It’s natural enough for him to want to have his own way. I don’t blame him.”*
- *“It doesn’t have to be a big deal. He stepped over the line – I let him have it. No biggie. I’ll do it again if necessary!”*
- *“He probably only does this as often as he does because I haven’t known how to stand up for myself without making a big deal of it in the past.”*

12. Try again, later.

This step draws most heavily on predictive habits # 1, 4 and 5 (“Avoiding a Judgmental Attitude,” “Giving Equal Regard” and “Offering Assurances”)

Just because you don’t make a big deal of _____’s offensive behavior doesn’t mean that you’re going to just forget about it and move on. Nope. The issue didn’t get resolved. People who succeed in their relationships don’t settle for situations in which they don’t feel that their feelings are given equal consideration. You’ll need to approach _____ again, but do it in a good way. Don’t demand an apology. Don’t get him to see how awful his offensive behavior was. Instead, just ask him to talk to you about the subject again. Be willing to compromise and ask _____ to do the same.

Often, attempts to re-process arguments get off track because couples end up arguing about how they argued the first time (e.g., “You had no right to talk to me like that!” “You implied that my viewpoint was stupid!” etc). Resist the temptation to do this. Instead, go back to the issue you were arguing about, and try to talk about it again. Use the “first steps” (explain your point of view without criticism or contempt, recognize and acknowledge the reasonable part of _____’s argument, listen non-defensively, and assure him that you are not as rigid as you may seem on the issue). If _____ reacts defensively, offer assurances. If he continues to be defensive or critical, maintain your cool and go to the “offer and ask” step. If necessary, get angry and stand up for yourself all over again, then refrain from making a big deal of it. Try again later. Be willing to go through the whole process as many times as may be necessary. If you develop the ability to stay with this process, _____ will become more understanding and cooperative over time.

Guidelines for Implementing THE SEQUENCE:

1. Start with *The First Steps* (1 - 6), and go to steps 7-12 only if _____ disregards or criticizes you.
2. *The First Steps* need not be implemented strictly in the sequence suggested in the chart. However, the suggested sequence is highly effective and a good plan to begin with.
3. If _____ criticizes or dismisses your viewpoint, do not continue with *The First Steps*. Instead, go directly to steps 7 and 8 (“Maintain your cool,” and “Offer and

Ask”). If _____ still continues to dismiss or criticize you, proceed to steps 9 and 10 (“Stand Up/Engage” and “Reject your Partner”).

4. Whenever _____ stops criticizing or dismissing you, return immediately to *The First Steps*.
5. While Steps 9 and 10 (“Stand Up/Engage” and “Reject your Partner”) are absolutely essential in situations where, in spite of your good attitude, _____ continues to disregard or criticize you, they can cause more harm than good unless they are followed by steps 11 and 12 (“Don’t Make a Big Deal of It” and “Try Again, Later”). *Whenever you implement steps 9 and 10, be sure that you follow through with 11 and 12.*