

Want to Improve Your Relationship? Start with You

Utah Marriage Commission

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Sure, romantic relationships can be difficult at times. Although they are not a walk in the park, there are ways that we can improve relationships and the part we play. Relationships are two-sided, and both sides play a part in how well a relationship is going. While it can be easy to blame the other partner, first looking at your own behaviors can be a more effective approach to jumpstart change. In this blog, we'll discuss four different behaviors you can change for a healthier relationship.

Blame vs. Self-reflection

When you blame your spouse or partner, it can lead to both partners feeling anger and resentment towards each other. Blaming from both sides puts both of you in a defensive position. Neither one wants to admit they are wrong. So, instead of immediately blaming your significant other, take a step back and look at the role *you* play. What are things you can control? What can you change about the situation? By reflecting on your own role, you might be able to see a different perspective that can lead to the

issue being resolved in a calmer manner. An ounce of self-reflective humility can prevent a lot of conflict.

Complaints vs. Requests

Complaining is when you express dissatisfaction or annoyance towards your spouse or partner about something they may or may not have done. In a relationship, this could look like complaining about your spouse not doing their dishes or taking the trash out. Complaints usually come from small irritations you notice in your relationship daily. This type of behavior can be unhealthy for your relationship if you are regularly nitpicking at your partner.

Instead of complaining, next time *make a request*. Sometimes, irritating small things can just be ignored. But when something needs to be discussed, don't start the conversation with a complaint. Take the time to communicate a specific request to your partner. For example, instead of saying something like, "*You never take out the trash when it is full,*" say, "*Hey, would be able to take the trash out when it gets full. I've noticed it has been overflowing a lot more lately and I would love for it to be taken out before that happens.*" By making requests, not complaints, you are much less likely to trigger your partner's defense mechanisms, avoid an argument, and get the change you want.

Unintentional Comments vs Responding to Bids

Being intentional can be a big difference between a healthy and unhealthy relationship. Being intentional means doing something with a purpose. In your relationship, your partner will make "bids." A bid is when you or your partner does something to get your attention or to connect with you about something. Bids can come be both nonverbal and verbal. An example of a nonverbal bid would be sighing, smiling, or winking. A verbal bid can be shown through a partner saying, "*You wouldn't believe what happened to me today.*" Bids are made all the time in relationships. The important part is how you respond to them.

But sometimes we don't tune in to those bids and make comments that are not intentional in response to your partner's bid. Making comments that don't mean anything or not responding to the bids can be seen by your partner as hurtful. They may think you don't care about them and what they have to say. Instead of responding with, "*Stop sighing so loud*" or just walking away, you can say "*What going on? Are you okay?*" The difference in response can demonstrate to your partner that you sincerely care about them and want to connect. Making intentional comments

can increase your connection, leading to a happier and healthier marriage.

Criticism vs. I-statements

Criticism is pointing out negative traits or aspects about your partner. Frequent criticism makes it so your partner no longer enjoys being around you. Imagine how it would feel if every time someone talked to you, they were only pointing out your character flaws! And if you are frequently pointing toward their flaws, they will start to do the same thing to you, creating a downward cycle of negativity.

Instead of criticizing your partner, try these two things. First, practice pointing out positive qualities in your partner. Change your inner voice to think more positively and express positive traits. If you are regularly doing this – storing up positive interactions – it smooths the way for dealing better with disagreements when they arise. Second, try making a specific statement. Instead of saying, “I can never trust you with our money, can I?” try what researchers call “I-statements: *“I know you’ve had some expenses lately. But when you spend unbudgeted money without telling me, it scares me and makes me nervous and I get frustrated. Can we work a little harder at budgeting together and communicating about expenses?”* Notice the gentler start-up that keeps things calmer. Also, notice the focus on how a partner’s behavior makes you feel, and a specific request about doing better that keeps the emotions down and the lines of communication more open. The toxic words to avoid are “you,” “always,” “never,” and “ever.”

Try these four straightforward ways to keep the focus on you and what you can control when you want to improve your relationship.