

Harmful Interaction Patterns

CRITICISM. Often, criticism appears as a complaint or episode of blaming that's coupled with a global attack on your partner's personality or character. Criticism frequently begins with "you always" or "you never."

DEFENSIVENESS. These are the counterattacks people use to defend their innocence or avoid taking responsibility for a problem. Defensiveness often takes the form of cross-complaining or whining.

CONTEMPT. This is criticism bolstered by hostility or disgust. Think of somebody rolling their eyes while you're trying to tell them something important about yourself. Contempt often involves sarcasm, mocking, name-calling, or belligerence.

STONEWALLING. This happens when listeners withdraw from the conversation, offering no physical or verbal cues that they're affected by what they hear. Interacting with somebody who does this is "like talking to a stone wall."

Beneficial Interaction Patterns

SOFTENED START-UP. This is the ability to start talking about a complaint or a problem gently, without criticizing or insulting your partner. When one spouse does this, the other is more willing to listen, making compromise possible.

TURNING TOWARD YOUR PARTNER. Close relationships consist of a series of "emotional bids"-that is, your partner reaches out for emotional connection with a comment, a question, a smile, or a hug. You can choose to

1. *turn away, ignoring the bid*
2. *turn against, reacting with anger or hostility*
3. *turn toward, showing you're open, listening, and engaged*

REPAIRING THE CONVERSATION. This is an effort to deescalate negative feelings during a difficult encounter. A repair can be an apology, a smile, or bit of humor that breaks the tension and helps you both feel more relaxed.

ACCEPTING INFLUENCE. Partners who are open to persuasion from each other generally have stronger, happier marriages. Being stubborn or domineering has just the opposite effect. Our studies show that a husband's willingness to accept influence from his wife can be particularly helpful to forming a strong, happy marriage.