

## HOW NOT TO REPAIR A RELATIONSHIP

Mark Beard, LPC

Ideally, when a couple tries to improve their relationship we will see negative behavior eliminated, while at the same time positive behavior is being added. However, far too often couples try to add new positive behavior and communication to their relationship in hopes of making the relationship healthier without ever addressing the issues that made the relationship unhealthy. When this happens, the unhealthy behavior and communication undermines the healthy additions. Sometimes the best way to begin improving one's relationship is to stop doing things that spark arguments, resentment, anger, and other negative emotions. Then, the new healthier behavior has a better environment in which to take root. The following are a few suggestions for subtracting the negative in order to preserve the positive.

- 1. Do not try to fix them.** When people in relationship try to make improvements, it is almost inevitable one will want to spend more energy on "fixing" the other than he or she spends on addressing his or her own needs. After all, we tend to be more annoyed with the behavior of others than with our own. Resist the temptation. Anything perceived as done or said to "fix" the other person will likely be interpreted as blame being assigned to them. It can also come across as an indication you feel he or she is broken or "crazy." In addition, it may be perceived as being condescending, arrogant, nitpicking, hypocrisy, and more. The only person we can hope to change or control is ourselves. Always start with one's self and hope your growth will inspire the other person to grow as well.
- 2. Do not embarrass them by talking to others about your issues.** Working on one's relationship invariably leads to talking with someone about the relationship issues. This can easily lead to unflattering comments made to others about one's partner. *Use caution here.* Even when each are expecting to talk about the problem issues and complaints with a professional counselor, one can feel embarrassed by the way a complaint about them is expressed. Now, consider those same sensitive issues and comments shared with friends, pastors, co-workers, or relatives and one can see how easily embarrassment can take place.  
A safer approach involves taking care not to label the other person or to assign meaning and intent to his or her actions. For example, saying something like the following: "He/She is such a \_\_\_\_\_," or "He/She did that out of spite," is an example of labeling and assigning intent to the other's actions. If you must "vent" your anger, never vent your anger with mutual acquaintances or in a counseling session with the other person present. If speaking to a mutual acquaintance or relative, it is best to explain your frustrations in such a way the other person does not feel the need to take sides and feels free to offer suggestions to help you both. One does not want to create antagonistic feelings in others for one's significant other. That never works out well.
- 3. Do not forget to defend them.** In light of the previous comments, keep in mind that when others see difficulty in another's relationship, they sometimes comment on it. Even if you feel their observations are right and they appear to be in your corner, do not allow your partner to be demonized in the conversation. When one person feels friends or acquaintances have labeled him or her as the source of the problem, the person often feels more alienated and less motivation to mend the relationship.  
Even if it is not possible to cast their behavior in a good light, keep the perspective balanced. Give them credit for what you can. Do not present yourself or allow others to assume you are the victim in the relationship or totally innocent of any contribution to any problems in the relationship. This, in itself, will help you take responsibility for you attitude toward the other person and your part in the relationship.
- 4. Do not be verbally harsh.** The harsh manner in which couples sometimes speak to one another never cease to amaze me. While listening, I am often thinking to myself in disbelief, "*You said what? Can't imagine why that made them angry.*" Of course, I keep that to myself. Instead, I try to get the person to think about what he or she said and try to imaging they hear their words from the other person. Sometimes we have to resort to a short lesson on what works and does not work. In short, harsh words do not build close, healthy

relationships. Harsh words cause separation and hurt. Even when angry, be kind. Choose your words wisely. Soften your tone. Do not use insults and sarcasm. Eliminate all name-calling and/or profanity. If a person can control his or her words and behavior in public, at work, or in other gatherings, it can be done at home in private. It is a matter of wanting to do it.

5. **Do not “put them in their place.”** This is bad idea, no matter whom one may be dealing with, but especially true with certain personalities. To be clear, to put one in his or her place is to diminish their opinion or importance. It is to “take them down a notch.” Degrading or trying to humble a person, in anyway, is a bad idea. Do that to some and they will turn away in hurt and start withdrawing. Do that with others and they will respond in rage and unleash their anger on you. Instead, work to help the other person see your perspective. Ask non-threatening questions that call them to examine their position. (*Note: Some people will never be wrong and no one will convince them otherwise. The reason goes deep into their psyche. You cannot change them. Sorry.*)

6. **Do not make comments about their negative mood.** First, a comment about a person’s mood is not a good place to begin unless he or she appears to be in a wonderful mood. Nevertheless, I have seen people mess that up too, with a comment like, “Why are you in such a good mood?” There’s nothing wrong with that, but then they add, “You were in a crappy mood an hour ago.” Additionally, it is a bad idea to use an opening comment that sounds anything like the following: “Why are you in such a @#\$\$%^ mood?” or the ever popular, “What’s your problem?”

Instead, you might offer to do something nice for the person or simply do something nice without being prompted. If you are afraid to make a move or say a word without setting them off, find an errand to run such as going to the store. Then as you are departing, tell them you are going out and ask if you can get or do anything for them. Make your departure without ever mentioning their negative mood.

7. **Do not speak with uncertainty about the relationship.** When speaking of the troubled relationship, this can take the form of comments such as, “This isn’t working,” or “If you don’t \_\_\_\_\_, I see no hope,” or “I should have left a long time ago,” or “Maybe we should just give up.” Statements like these, work almost like signals to the other person to stop trying to work on the relationship. Progress will slow or stop when uncertain feelings about the relationship are spoken. Why? In most cases, when a person doubts the commitment of another to the relationship, the person will take a self-protective posture.

8. **Do not have important conversations by texting.** Texting may be one of the most convenient ways to communicate at times, but for people in relationships having trouble, it is a curse. It is one of the *worst ways to communicate feelings, anger, upset, and similar emotional states*. Don’t do it. I have never spoken with one solitary couple in conflict that solved anything through a texting conversation. Don’t do it. However, I can cite numerous misunderstandings, hurtful words, hurtful comments, times people were provoked to anger and more by rashly texting their thoughts. Don’t do it.

Texting messages cannot convey the proper tone or prevent the sender from seeing the hurt or upset on the face of the receiver. Instead, texts are perfect for rash comments and can easily feel impersonal. Don’t do it. Text messages can be saved, read, reread, and used against a person. Don’t do it. Texting someone something hurtful or harsh or a stinging comment is a coward’s way of communicating. You guessed it, don’t do it.

If you have a troubled relationship, by all means, add all the positive behavior possible. However, do not neglect to eliminate as much of the negative behavior in your relationship as possible, lest your best efforts be undermined by your mistakes.