

# How Not to Give Yourself a Headache When Your Partner Isn't Acting the Way You'd Like

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Bill and Sandy have been quietly reading in the living room for an hour. At bedtime, Sandy comments sarcastically, "Gee, we sure had a great, intimate evening together — as usual!" Bill is stunned, but rather than risk rocking the boat any further, quietly gets ready for bed and turns over and goes to sleep, while Sandy tosses for another hour, feeling angry and depressed.

## *Sandy's Internal Dialogue*

He doesn't share things with me any more; he's bored with our marriage. He knows how upset I've been that we don't talk as much as we used to, and he just doesn't care. And we especially need to resolve what to do about our vacation plans. This relationship seems hopeless!

## *Bill's Internal Dialogue*

Gee, I thought it was so great that Sandy and I had an evening together just relaxing and doing our own thing. And for once, she didn't nag me about our vacation plans. I can't believe she had to ruin it by bringing up that same old 'we never communicate' business. What does she want from me?

## **IS THIS COUPLE SPEAKING TWO DIFFERENT LANGUAGES?**

Bill sees Sandy's demands on him as infringing on his independence and individuality; Sandy sees Bill's need for solitude as his not wanting to be married to her. He fears engulfment; she fears abandonment. Both feel angry and hurt and the prospect is that the following evening Bill may feel anxious about taking some time to "cool out" after work, while Sandy grows increasingly depressed about the deterioration of the relationship. The next day, when Sandy comments that she thinks his shirt clashes with the rest of his outfit, Bill says "Get off my case," and they continue their dance of hurt and anger. And the relationship between them chills.

This kind of communication gap can exist in any kind of sex-love relationship or between friends or family members. A lot of the "rules" for how we are to behave are the gender role messages that men and women receive in our culture. It is important to look at these gender role messages, for embedded in them are many of the irrational beliefs that underlie relationship difficulties.

## **Women**

From an early age, girls are taught that they should be nice and sweet; that they must not be too assertive; and that they must have a man in their life to be happy and worthwhile.

Tending to see most of their life fulfillment in terms of a sex-love relationship, they spend considerable energy clinging to poor (and even physically abusive) relationships, and feel extremely depressed and anxious when they are unmated or when their partner is not connecting with them the way they'd like. In turn, they're likely to carry on a variety of dysfunctional behaviors such as sulking, passivity, clinginess, and neglecting other important areas of their life, including work and other interests. Should they depart from their sex-role scripting and be assertive or decide to live without a man, they risk being called "bitches," "castrating females," "dykes," etc.

### **Men**

While girls are nurturing dolls and sharing their inner feelings and thoughts, boys are out fighting crab apple wars or engaging in physical tussles. Boys learn early on the dictates of masculinity: that they must not engage in any kind of behavior that might be seen as "feminine," such as disclosing feelings of vulnerability, compassion, fear, or hurt. If they do display such behaviors, they risk being called "wimp," "fag," "pussywhipped" and other terms derogating them by associating them with "womanly" qualities. A related mandate of masculinity is the "sturdy oak," meaning men should be action-oriented, independent, in control, make lots of money, and be oh-so-careful not to reveal that they don't have the skills to handle every situation.

As a result of this programming, men wind up with many problems in their intimate relationships, including (1) poor skills in identifying and processing feelings and managing stress; (2) considerable feelings of frustration, powerlessness, and rage; and (3) difficulties in being able to play or enjoy non-goal-oriented activities. If they *do* decide to express emotions, they risk disapproval by men and often by women as well. And the ultimate fear — that of being thought a homosexual — keeps many men from risking emotional closeness with a man and thus receiving some emotional support.

Ultimately, both men and women can benefit from learning to better understand the set of attitudes and behaviors they are taught they "should" have — a programming that pinches us psychologically and makes us fearful of risking non-societally-approved behaviors. By learning to view many of our mate's relationship behaviors as a natural consequence of the way men and women are raised, we can learn to stop taking things so personally and be significantly less disturbed when our mates aren't acting the way we'd like. As we do this, it's crucial for us **not** to give up our strong *preferences*, *wishes*, and *hopes* that our mates connect with us in better ways. The goal is rather to help us give up our absolutistic *demands* or *shoulds*. We cannot realistically expect that someone who may be emotionally needy must *not* be emotionally needy, or that a person who seems to be allergic to talking to us or touching us must immediately change. By giving up our demands — and facing the grim reality of where in fact our mate is for now — we maximize our chances of being a more successful agent of change.

Drawing from the work of such researchers as Eleanor Maccoby, Carol Gilligan, Deborah Tannen, and John Gottman, I have constructed the chart on the next page that summarizes some of the key differences in the way many women and men view intimate relationships and communicate about problems. After you read through the chart, think about how it applies to the following couple's situation.

*She:* Feels the need to talk, make love. The more he withdraws, the more she insists, pushes, keeps them up for hours talking about it. She keeps asking "How do you feel?" and, unable to stand the distance, tries to force her way through his emotional wall.

*He:* Has had less interest in sex than he used to, plus experienced some problems with erections the last time they had sex. He wants to be in control of when they have sex so that it will be more likely he can “perform” successfully. He sees the marriage as OK but feels he’s not capable of the kind of intimacy she wants.

Having read through the chart, do you see more clearly how, by sticking doggedly to their gender role-related way of pursuing their goal, they will actually wind up driving their mate further away? Now try to envision how — if they both eased up somewhat on their stances and handled their negotiations more flexibly — they might be able to connect much better.

## **FUNCTIONAL VS. DYSFUNCTIONAL RELATIONSHIPS**

The difference between couples who manage to get along well versus those who get along poorly does not necessarily lie in the number of disagreements they have, but rather in the way they go about *resolving* these disagreements.

We might think of couples’ problems as falling into two basic categories: *practical* problems and *emotional* problems. Practical problems include different approaches to getting things done (such as household tasks or making social plans); differences in preferences regarding the amount of affectional or verbal expression; conflicts over childrearing or money issues; or deciding where to vacation.

When these practical problems rear their heads, *functional* couples are likely to experience *appropriate* negative emotional reactions: disappointment, annoyance, moderate frustration, and concern. Trouble arises when these feelings run amok, as they will if one or both partners escalate into irrational thinking. When partners become emotionally upset — enraged, highly frustrated, anxious, or depressed — they are likely to behave in the worst possible ways: shouting, making character assassinations, or becoming depressed or withdrawn. In turn, their chances of effectively resolving the problem between them become vastly reduced.

This is not to imply that anger is never permissible. Indeed, there are few among us so rational and saintly that we do not at times erupt into anger and say or do things we wish we hadn’t. Having gotten off-track, however, we are capable of using the rational portions of our brains to forgive ourselves and each other and, when we’ve cooled off, to resume our dialogue in a more fruitful way.

Behind the anger, low frustration tolerance and hurt we experience when our partner behaves badly are four basic irrational beliefs:

1. My mate should treat me fairly and justly and try to satisfy me.
2. This situation is awful!
3. I can’t stand it!
4. He/she is a rotten person for acting this way.

The following chart illustrates some specific irrational beliefs and their emotional and behavioral consequences. Try applying this paradigm to a specific practical problem situation about which you are extremely upset. You will almost certainly recognize in it many of your own irrational beliefs and ineffective behaviors. By learning to challenge these disturbance-producing beliefs and replacing them with more rational ones, you can greatly increase both your chances of *feeling* better about your relationship and of getting better *results*.

### **BUT ISN'T SUPPRESSING ANGER BAD FOR YOU?**

A widely held theory that tends to feed many people's anger is the *hydraulic theory of anger*. According to this theory, unless humans express or let out their hostile feelings to those who balk them, these feelings will inevitably grow to enormous proportions and either cause depression or ulcers or burst out in some form of explosion.

A great deal of recent psychological research has revealed the limitations of this theory of anger. Interestingly, we are learning that *the more people heatedly ventilate their feelings of anger, the more irate they feel and the more hostile and punitively they act*. Anger begets anger, and can have highly damaging effects on the process of conflict resolution and on the relationship itself.

## SEX-ROLE SOCIALIZATION MESSAGES AND THEIR EFFECTS

Women's Self-Messages	Women's Emotional & Behavioral Consequences	Men's Self-Messages	Men's Emotional & Behavioral Consequences
1) I'm a good nurturing wife. My mate <i>should</i> satisfy me sexually. I <i>deserve</i> some affection!	Anger  Avoidance	1) I bring in the money and tolerate her weight. I <i>shouldn't</i> also have to have sex with her if I haven't initiated it. I <i>deserve</i> some peace.	Anger  Avoidance
2) My mate <i>should</i> be willing to talk about the problems (or go for counseling). I <i>can't stand</i> the stress of not talking and working things out.	Anger  Yelling, pushing for long discussions	2) I have enough tensions and criticisms at work. I <i>shouldn't</i> have to face this crap when I get home. I <i>can't stand</i> these discussions.	Anger  Withdrawal, verbal attacking
3) When I want sex, he <i>should</i> at least be willing to have it some of the time, just to please me. This <i>proves</i> he doesn't care about me.	Anger Depression  Sulking, withholding, verbal attacking	3) If I'm just not turned on (or not turned on to her) she <i>should</i> understand, even if we don't discuss it. This <i>proves</i> she doesn't care about me.	Anger Depression  Sulking, withholding, verbal attacking
4) He <i>should</i> give me regular sex; he's my husband. Doesn't he love me?	Anger, hurt  Withdrawal	4) She <i>shouldn't</i> see me just as a sex object. Doesn't she love me for myself?	Anger, hurt  Withdrawal

### DETACHING INSULT FROM INJURY — OR, IS IT REALLY POSSIBLE NOT TO FEEL UPSET?

We're not talking about suppress-ing, repressing, or denying feel-ings when your mate is acting badly. We're talking about *reduc-ing the degree of distress*.

It can be very painful, at worst, and a real drag, at best, to see your images and expectations of your loved one shriveling up before your eyes. "Why did I ever get mated to this person?" you sometimes think. "Why me?"

It may seem almost impossible to feel only frustrated and disap-pointed, but if you are willing to do some hard work you can learn to keep yourself from experienc-ing an endless wellspring of hurt or angry feelings.

And this work begins with your understanding that *your mate is not causing your distress*. True, he or she may or may not be giving you something you want; and, unfortunately, you have limited control over that. Where you *do* have power, however, is to reduce your *awfulizing* about your mate's behavior and thus not give yourself a pain in the gut over it.

Start by asking yourself these questions:

- Do I want to suffer? Or to enjoy my life as fully as I can?
- Do I want to keep having my feelings of self-worth depend on how *others* are treating me at any given moment?
- Is my objective to make my partner feel like a rotten person? Or do I want my message to reach her? If so, I'm not going to reach her very effectively through anger and blaming.
- How much sense does it make to keep "whining" that the world shouldn't be so unfair? It makes much more sense to make myself as happy as possible, despite life's hassles and unfairness.

Reducing your upset over your partner's behavior is highly empowering. You are refusing to add insult to injury. Yes, your mate may be acting badly; but you can avoid compounding an already frustrating situation by not going into a depression, rage, or withdrawal. In so doing, you are not only helping *yourself* feel better, but you may also increase the chances that your partner will hear and address your request.

The next step to take is to write out a self-help form on a specific behavior of your mate's about which you are upset. Let's assume that at *A* (the Activating event), your mate has not been relating to you physically as much as you'd like; and that you're feeling depressed and angry. Look for your core irrational beliefs, or *B's* — in other words, your shoulding, awfulizing, global condemnation of your partner (or yourself), or your *I-can't-stand-it-itis*. Then, vigorously dispute these irrational beliefs by asking yourself questions such as the following:

- Where is it written that my partner *must* be having sex with me as much as I would like — *now*? (It would be nice, but unfortunately, it's not happening right now.)
- Is it really awful and intolerable? (Or just frustrating and inconvenient?)
- Just because s/he is failing to give me what I want in this area, how does it make him/her a totally rotten, selfish human being? (It doesn't.)
- Why *must* I get every important thing I want in my sex-love relationship? (It would be great if I did, but few people do. Relationships involve a lot of compromise.)
- Where is it written that my partner *must* not act selfishly or neurotically? (S/he is flawed, like all humans. And the less crazy I make myself, the better the model I provide for him/her to overcome his/her problems.)
- Is my partner *really* creating my misery? (Or am I doing it by telling myself it's awful and intolerable that s/he is not acting the way I'd like?)

Finally, write out for yourself some rational counter-messages and go over them again and again (aloud and in your head) until you are genuinely able to reduce your disturbance over your mate's behavior.

Many of the same dynamics that occur in male-female relationships also occur in same-sex relationships. The form on the next page was completed by one of my clients, Stan, who's in a relationship with Mike.

Stan reported that before he had learned to reduce his disturbance, he had frequently communicated with Mike in ways that caused Mike to tune out or get angry at him. For example, he'd say things like "You never show me affection any more; you make me feel like I'm really repulsive; you're a selfish person, just like your father." Once Stan learned to make himself less upset over the situation, he reported that he had had the calmest discussion ever with Mike and that although Mike hadn't said much, he had really listened and understood. "I told him," Stan said, "I wish you weren't being this way — avoiding me sexually or even any discussion of sex. I feel disappointed and frustrated. I wish we could work together to find a solution. I think it's really sad for both of us that we're missing this delicious thing." And guess what?" he added. "The next morning he actually gave me the longest hug he has for a long time and told me he loved me!"

### **REMEMBER THAT CHANGE DOESN'T HAPPEN OVERNIGHT**

We are living in a time when more women than ever work full time outside the home, and a greater range of behavior and lifestyle options are being allowed in both men and women. During this time of transition, relationships face many exciting new challenges — one of which is managing our frustration over some of the snags we may encounter along the way!

How can couples best facilitate this process of building better relationships? Not by *driving* our partners to change, or by keeping them up nights pressing them to open up or relate or get off our backs — for these approaches are most likely to produce behavior opposite to what we want. The following are some important guidelines to help you maintain good frustration tolerance as you go through the process of relationship negotiation.

**1. Validate and acknowledge your partner's viewpoint even though you may not agree with it.**

Don't automatically assume that *your* reality is the only reality. For example, "I know that you're uncomfortable talking about this subject, and you'd just as soon not have to deal with it, especially with all the pressures you've got at work. But this is something I'm very concerned about, and I'd like us to spend half an hour this evening brainstorming some options."

**2. Avoid blaming or globally condemning your mate when s/he acts in an emotionally constricted, with-drawn, or other difficult way.** Try to view his or her behavior not as awful and intolerable, but as a long-standing pattern that originated long before you came on the scene.

**3. Try not to interpret your partner's hostile or negligent behavior as a reflection of your worth.**

**4. Remember that most men have had relatively little "empathy training":** namely, learning to meet some of the other person's wants, whether it's convenient or not. For many of them, a seemingly simple task like talking about feelings may be like a blind man trying to describe an elephant. *And many women have had relatively little "independence training"* — so while it may feel oppressive at times for men to be so pressured to "relate," that's what women have been raised to focus on!

**5. Try to have the courage and patience to accept that some issues may not get resolved for**

**months**, and others per-haps not for years. Don't assume that if your mate is changing at a barely percep-tible rate, s/he's not changing at all. People change in *tiny* steps, not miles at a time. Compliment your partner on these small changes (instead of saying, "So how come it took you so long?").

6. **Keep trying to act lovingly**, for your own enjoyment as well as that of your partner, even at times when you may not be feeling all that loving. You'd be surprised at how some expression of ten-derness can help warm things up. A good rule of thumb is to set yourself a goal of acting like a doll (though not a non-assertive doormat) for three months; if that doesn't inspire *some* change in your partner, prob-ably *nothing* will!
7. A special note for women: **Try not to fall into the trap of seeing your partner as not being "manly" enough** if he expresses weakness, loses his job and has to take a reduced salary, or doesn't make bril-liant flashing con-versation at dinner parties. Women, alas — while dis-dain-ing machismo — often tend to reject many sen-sitive men on the grounds that they aren't successful enough. In fact, as I've ob-served, so-called "sissies" often make the best mates, while hard-driving, cigar-smo-king execu-tives may make the worst.
8. **Periodically exchange "wish lists."** Examples include giv-ing your partner a night off while you babysit, cook-ing a special meal, or making the bed in the morning.

#### **SEVEN EXCELLENT IMPASSE-INTERRUPTERS**

Here are some useful techniques you can experiment with the next time you feel you're headed for a replay of your same old disastrous script. These approaches will re-quire practice and some will work better than others; but you have little to lose in trying to break out of your usual patterns.

1. **Write your thoughts and feelings** in a poem or letter.
2. **Use puppets to fight with.** This can lend some humor and give some distance to the dialogues you are acting out while highlighting some of the childish elements in each of your beha-vior.
3. **Use flash cards**, such as "Just because we strongly disagree on this doesn't mean we have to hate each other's guts" or "Gimme a break! Acknow-ledge my feelings, even though you think I'm a jerk for hav-ing them."
4. **Use the "To-Me-ness" prin-ciple.** This is one of the all-time best methods I've ever encountered for getting away from "There's only one truth here, and it's mine."

*Your mate:* "You're a hope-less, hysterical neurotic. Nobody but me would ever put up with you."

*You:* "To you I'm a hysterical neurotic; to me, I'm an emotionally expres-sive person trying to collabo-rate in making our relation-ship better for both of us. We see me differently."

5. **Meet your partner halfway.** If your partner keeps insisting on his or her point of view, instead of saying "Why can't you understand?" or "You're not listening to me," say "I agree with part of what you say" or "I see your point, but I still think my point also has to be dealt with."



6. **Don't reinforce sulking.** The best way to deal with sulking is probably to ignore it. Or you might try saying "Is there any-thing I can do to help?" Even if your mate says "No," it may help you feel OK about letting it go for now, and s/he may be more willing to open up later.
7. **Set limits.** If your partner is shouting or acting abusively, state firmly, calmly, and clearly: "I understand you're very upset at me. But while I don't mind your sharing your feelings and preferences with me, *I am not available for abuse.*" (If the abuse is physical, leave the premises at once. *No* one deserves to be hit.)

## WHAT TO DO WHEN YOU ARE AT A MAJOR IMPASSE

1. *Take ten minutes out and go into separate rooms.* Then, try your best to put yourself in your partner's shoes and see the problem from his perspective. Be prepared, when you return, to communicate that you see the validity of your partner's perspective — without adding, "Yes, but . . .". For example:

*Mary:* I guess you're feeling overwhelmed with pressures and thinking, 'I'm married to this self-centered person who instead of appreciating my pressures and all the comforts my income is providing just wants more, more, more. And instead of letting me have some peace and quiet when I come home, she is always pressuring me to 'talk' or 'show more affection' or a hundred other things that I just can't do.'

*Tom:* I guess you sometimes feel taken for granted or that you're just the maid around here. And you probably just want what I guess most women want: more affection, more touching, being able to talk about things that happened during the day. You're probably especially frustrated because you're always putting out for the kids and me, and for your staff at work, and don't feel you get much back for yourself.

2. *Tape the argument.* Then listen to it separately, each writing down at least two things each of you could do next time to make your communication more constructive.
3. *Change the surroundings and activity.* For example, agree to go for a walk in the park and enjoy the sunshine, take a merry-go-round ride, or go to the beach. Then talk only about the scenery and don't mull over your anger.
4. *For fifteen minutes, switch to a topic that will remind you of a time when you felt close and optimistic* — for example, a wonderful trip you took together or a time your mate did something you really appreciated or were especially proud of.
5. *Hold or hug or touch each other,* even if it doesn't at the moment feel particularly authentic. Give your partner reassurance to help reduce his or her anger/anxiety/hurt/depression. E.g.: "I care about you and am very committed to this relationship," or "I know this feels unpleasant . . . but I really think we can get through this and work it out."
6. *Ask each other, "What can I do to make things better?"* Then answer as specifically as possible.

## **BEHAVIORAL EXCHANGE CONTRACTS**

One of the all-time best ways to help motivate your partner to change something you dislike is to make a contract in which you agree to change a behavior of yours that particularly bothers him or her. Use the following guide-lines to maximize your chances of success.

1. *Each of you will continue to hold to your commitment even if the other person de-faults.* “You didn’t do yours, so I’m not going to do mine” will merely put you back where you started.
2. *Choose a maximum of two or three specific, measurable be-haviors per person to work on.*
3. *Do not pick too large an in-crease over the current level of the behavior.* For example, if your mate has done just about no housework at all the past few weeks, don’t aim for four hours in one week; aim for one or two. Better to pick a small step and suc-ceed than to set too high a goal and fail.
4. *Let each other know how very pleased or appreciative you are* when something positive is done.
5. *Sign and date the agree-ment and make a copy for both of you —* and remember to look at it regularly.

The contract on the following page was suc-cess-fully executed by a couple I saw in counseling.

## **ASSESSING THE STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES OF YOUR RELA-TIONSHIP**

Take some time to write out the answers to the following ques-tions, and try to encourage your mate to do so as well. Then ex-change what you’ve written and read them apart from each other. Your answers can provide the framework for a constructive goal-setting session, in conjunc-tion with some of the other ap-proaches for managing anger and improving communication outlined in this article.

1. What are the things I like most about my spouse? What are my reasons for wanting to continue to live with him/- her?
2. If I could have a magic wand and change three things about my partner, what would they be? (Try to think of a recent, specific ex-ample.)
3. In what ways do my usual ways of reacting to problems make me more unhappy?

## WARREN AND ANDREA'S CONTRACT

*Each of us, being of sound mind and wishing to enhance the State of our Union, agrees to do the following. We will each continue to make our best efforts even if we feel the other is defaulting.*

### Warren

1. I will refrain from exploding or getting defensive if Andrea criticizes me, and try to feed back to her what I understand her to be saying.
2. I will take full charge of the kids two nights a week (helping them with their baths, homework, getting them fed and to bed).
3. I will dispute the irrational belief that my partner *must* not disappoint me in any way, and that if she does, it's awful and intolerable and means she's a rotten person.

Signed: \_\_\_\_\_  
(date)

### Andrea

1. On at least three occasions this week, I will express affection to Warren or tell him I really appreciate something he's done; and will refrain from criticizing him for "the small stuff."
2. I will cook a special meal that Warren really likes two nights a week.
3. I will dispute the irrational belief that my partner *must* not disappoint me in any way, and that if he does, it's awful and intolerable and means he's a rotten person.

Signed: \_\_\_\_\_  
(date)

4. If I could change two things about *myself*, what would they be?

### SOME FINAL TIPS

1. Be mutually willing to recognize your partner's rights to express feelings openly and honestly.
2. Be flexible in negotiating conflicts. If you don't bend, you'll break.
3. Express appreciation of your partner's efforts and struggles.
4. Try to maintain a sense of perspective and humor.

Even if your partner continues to act in ways you dislike, remember that you do have *choices*. Freed up from your disturbance about your mate, you can stop over-focusing on trying to change him or her and start concentrating on getting involved in other absorbing activities.

You can let your mate know you're there for him or her, but if s/he seems to be unduly depressed, angry, stressed, or anxious, calmly encourage her/him to seek out some psychological "coaching" from a competent professional.

Let's face it. Relationships are not easy. But if you choose to continue *yours*, be prepared to put considerable energy into keeping yourself relatively undisturbed, while calmly encouraging your mate to do likewise. Over the years I have become increasingly impressed with people's tremendous ability to use their rational capacities to live more happily and effectively — with themselves and with others.