

Starting a Conversation

Tips for a non-defensive response

1. Complain, don't blame

It's certainly okay to complain about your partner's behavior. We all do things sometimes that annoy or bother the other person. Rather than *blaming* your partner for their personality or character, simply complain about the particular situation. For example, rather than saying "You did not do the dishes – you are so irresponsible and disrespectful of me!" try saying: "Hey, the dishes are not done. We agreed that you would do the dishes after dinner. I'm really upset about this." While this is confrontational, it's not an attack. You are simply complaining about a particular situation, not your partner's personality or character.

2. Make statements that start with "I" instead of "You."

"I" statements have been a staple of interpersonal psychology for a very long time. It has been found that phrases that start with *I* are usually less likely to sound critical and make the listener defensive when compared to statements that start with *You*.

For example:

- "You are not listening to me," versus "I would like it if you'd listen to me."
- "You are careless with money" versus "I want us to save more."
- "You just don't care about me" versus "I feel neglected"

Clearly, the "I" statements are more gently than the "You" statements. Of course, you may be tempted to buck the general rule and come up with "I" statements like "I think you are selfish" that are not gentle at all. So, try to keep the spirit of the rule in mind and focus on how you're feeling rather than accusing your spouse. If you do, you will find your discussions to be far more successful.

3. Describe what is happening, don't evaluate or judge

Instead of accusing or blaming, just describe what you see. Instead of "You never watch the baby," try saying something like "I seem to be the only one chasing after the baby today." Again, this will help prevent your spouse from feeling attacked and they will feel less defensive and consider your point.

4. Make direct behavior requests

Your partner is not a mind-reader. Rather than simply complaining about something, try asking for something from your partner. For example, rather than saying "You left the kitchen a total mess," say "I'd appreciate it if you would clean off the kitchen table."

5. Be polite

Adding phrases like “please” and “I would appreciate it if...” is likely to make your partner feel less defensive.

6. Appreciate your partner

If your partner has, at some point, handled the situation better, then couch your request with an appreciation of what your partner did right in the past and how much you miss that now. Instead of “You never have time for me anymore,” say, “Remember how we used to have breakfast every Sunday together? I loved spending that alone time with you. Let’s start doing that again.”

7. Don’t store things up

It’s hard to be gentle when you’re ready to burst with emotion. To be more effective in your communication it is advised that you do not wait too long before bringing up an issue – otherwise it will just escalate in your mind. Coming to your partner with smaller complaints that are presented well is better than bombarding your partner with many complaints all at once.