

## HOW TO BE A BETTER PARTNER

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When something is worn out, we often replace it with something new. Eventually, new things wear out as well. When a relationship becomes broken, there is sometimes a temptation to replace it with something new. However, new relationships can become broken as well. Are you are looking for a better spouse, friend, lover, or all three? The best way to find a new person is to look, and the best *place* to look is within yourself.

**Be more of what you want.** Perhaps you want to be more loved, but don't want to be more loving. Or you want to be heard, but don't want to listen. Love is action, not feelings. Rather than focusing on wanting to be loved, focus on being more loving. Rather than focus on being heard, focus on listening.

**Fake it 'til you make it.** You can often act your way into better thinking faster than you can think your way into better behavior. Like developing a new skill, learning new behaviors requires you to do something that may feel awkward. Like practicing a musical instrument, learning new interpersonal habits requires practice. Most habits do not become automatic until we practice them hundreds of times.

**Learn to say the four most important things.** There was once an old roadside sign that listed the most important things a person should say when greeting a spouse. This short list was designed particularly for husbands to remember some things that their wives like to hear: "Can I help?... You look great... Let's eat out... I love you."

**Ask "how" rather than "why" questions.** Questions that begin with the word "why" are often perceived by others as indictments or blaming statements. Instead of asking "why" questions, consider asking "how" questions.

**Use "I" rather than "you" language.** Questions that begin with the word "you" are often perceived by others as accusations rather than communication facilitators. Rather than making "you" statements, which place blame on your partner, consider making "I" statements, which place responsibility on you.

**Change your expectations.** If you take an inventory of your resentments, you may discover that many of them are based on unspoken expectations that were not met by your partner. Unrealistic expectations can become *premeditated resentments*. A loving attitude and resentment cannot exist in the same space. To reduce your resentments, change your expectations.

**Stop stockpiling resentments.** When feeling angry about a specific situation, pay attention to whether you keep score or maintain a stockpile of resentments from the past. Dragging up the past or throwing in the kitchen sink can increase your partner's defenses to a new level. When involved in a disagreement, stay in the present issue at hand, and avoid bringing up the past. Avoid using weapons of mass destruction.

**Avoid the psychology of victimology.** Stop blaming your partner. If you are being abused, then leave and seek safety. Otherwise, don't invest in the mentality of victimology, which involves maintaining the role of a victim. Instead, focus on what you can do to make things better.

**Don't touch when angry.** Physical touch can be powerful, but it can also be misinterpreted when mixed with anger. For both men and women, avoid using touch during a heated argument---lest it be misunderstood. Instead, use anger as a cue to lower your tone and slow down a bit. Remember, tone of voice often says more than words.

**Leave some things unsaid.** More damage can be done by saying something that does not need to be said than by not saying something that needs to be said. When in doubt, simply listen and learn. More problems are solved by more listening rather than more talking. No one ever hurt another person by being a better listener.

**Listen and learn.** Good communication is 90% listening. Because you can't listen and talk at the same time, limit your talking in order to listen. Good listening does not involve thinking about what you are going to say next. If you are thinking about what you are going to say next, then you are not listening.

**Think before speaking.** There is rarely a spoken word that cannot be made better by thinking before speaking. Before you speak, a good test is to THINK: Is what I am about to say Thoughtful? Honest? Intelligent? Necessary? Kind?

**Count before speaking.** For those who are better with numbers than words, here is a useful exercise: When you don't know what to say, count to 100. When you do know what to say, count to 1,000.

**Consider agreeing with criticism.** One way to maintain open channels of communication is to avoid defensive responses. When your partner points out one of your flaws, avoid a defensive rebuttal by using JADE: No Justifying, Arguing, Defending, or Explaining. Instead, when you are criticized, consider responding with "You may be right." Agreeing with criticism often leads to new insights and new patterns of communication.

**Listen to what others say about you.** When criticized, there is a natural tendency to defend oneself by reacting with a counter-criticism or offering an explanation. Instead of defending yourself, learn to accept those things about yourself that are negative. In other words, accept any kernel of truth in what your partner

is saying. If you accept yourself, you cannot be manipulated by others through anxiety or guilt. Further, the process of changing into more of what we want to become begins by accepting ourselves as we are.

**Express less criticism and more gratitude.** Criticism is often an ineffective way of asking for attention or love. Rather than focusing on what you want but do not receive from your partner, focus on what you have and what you have to give. Expressing genuine gratitude is one way of increasing your awareness of that which you already have.

**Respond with active-constructive comments.** When listening to someone share something, there are basically four ways in which we can respond: *passive-constructive* (e.g., understated support, such as silence or a neutral comment), *active-constructive* (e.g., authentic, enthusiastic support, such as showing positive interest, asking open-ended questions to hear more, and expressing positive emotion or praise), *passive-destructive* (e.g., ignoring the sharing, showing lack of interest, expressing no indication of caring), and *active-destructive* (e.g., criticizing, judging, demeaning, or pointing out negative aspects of a positive sharing). Of these response styles, it is the active-destructive that most readily destroys relationships and the active-constructive response that builds relationships.

**Learn your partner's love language.** Modern research has confirmed the wisdom of the old adage: "Different strokes for different folks." When you express love to others, make sure that it meets their needs—not just yours. Learn to not only use the language that you like the most, but use the one that your loved ones can receive the most. In other words, learn to express love the way your partner experiences being loved by you. Five popular languages of love include affirming words, giving gifts, spending quality time, physical touch, and acts of service (Chapman, 1995).

**Use the Platinum Rule.** The Golden Rule says, “Do unto others what you would have them do unto you.” This universal moral principle is contained in at least 12 major world religions. At the same time, it is often helpful to balance it with the Platinum Rule, which says, “Do unto others as they would have you do unto *them*.” What you want for yourself may not be what your partner wants.

**Pay attention to entrances and exits.** When leaving for work in the morning and when returning home in the evening, pay attention to how you enter and leave. Think of a 3-minute egg timer. A thoughtful comment or a warm embrace takes only a few seconds, yet the effects can last hours---even years.

**Avoid harsh start-ups in conversations.** At the end of a workday, when there are harsh comments, criticisms, or complaints expressed within the first 15 minutes of an interaction with a marital partner, then the interaction usually goes downhill from there (Gottman & Silver, 1999, 2015). One way to avoid harsh start-ups is to begin each interaction on a positive note.

**Start a new day right now.** When things seem to be going downhill during the day, keep in mind that tomorrow is a new day. A new day can bring about a change in perspective or an attitude adjustment. It’s never too late to start a new day—so take a pause and start right now.

**Avoid generalizations when complaining.** In low doses, complaints are not necessarily unhealthy but it is usually better to ask for what you want rather than to complain about what you’re not getting. When it becomes necessary to complain, avoid the use of generalizations such as *always* or *never*. Instead, particularize your request by stating what you want.

**Understand complaints, criticisms, and contempt.** *Complaints* involve specific statements of anger, distress, or displeasure.

Although rarely pleasant, expressing a complaint has the potential to make a relationship stronger than suppressing the complaint. *Criticism* involves attacking someone’s personality or character, rather than expressing a specific behavior. Complaints are usually behavioral, whereas criticisms are usually personal (often with blame attached). *Contempt* is a form of verbal abuse that is directed as an attack. Although criticism and contempt are both personal, what separates contempt from criticism is the intention to psychologically abuse or insult someone. Make requests when possible, and voice complaints only when necessary. Avoid criticism and contempt altogether.

**Learn to say you’re sorry.** Has your conscience ever nagged you regarding some comment you made or action you took? Rather than assuming the incident will eventually be forgotten, here is a simple sentence to use: “I’m sorry.” Even better, try this one: “I was wrong.” These types of disclosures can be the beginning of a new conversation---or perhaps a new relationship.

**Learn to say the 10 important words.** A variation of the five most important sentences, 10 of the most important words include: “I was wrong. I am sorry. Please forgive me.” It’s not only easier read than done, but it’s not even 10 words.

**Make amends when we have hurt someone.** Whether it is inadvertent or otherwise, hurting someone requires restitution. Admitting when you are wrong sometimes requires an *apology*. There are several components to making an apology: expressing regret (“I am sorry”), accepting responsibility (“I was wrong”), genuinely repenting (“I will not do it again”), requesting forgiveness (“Will you please forgive me?”), and making restitution (“What can I do to make it right?”).

**Promptly admit when you are wrong.** The 10th Step of Alcoholics Anonymous is sometimes described as *relationship glue*: “Continued to take personal inventory and when we were wrong promptly admitted it.” The operative word is *promptly*, because the longer you wait, the more likely you are to begin rationalizing that you are right. Admitting when you are wrong can often go a long way in making things right in a relationship.

**Let go of being right.** You can be 100% right, but in winning the battle you may be losing the relationship. Letting your partner be right does not mean that you are wrong. It may mean that you are choosing to be happy rather than choosing to be right. Try saying it once and notice what happens: “You may be right.”

**Don’t take it personally.** When your feelings are hurt by someone’s thoughtless or rude comment, the comment may reflect more about your partner than it does about you. Although you need to consider your own part in the interaction, the other person’s comment may not be about you. Remember to use QTIP: Quit taking it personally.

**Find grounds for continuing the relationship.** In the words of American author and playwright Robert Anderson, “In every marriage more than week old, there are grounds for divorce. The trick is to find, and continue to find, grounds for marriage” (1969, p. 32).

**Mind your own business.** In the days of newspapers, advice columnists received hundreds of letters each week from readers who sought advice about troubled relationships with romantic partners. Approximately 80% of the responses written by advice columnists fell in one of two categories: (1) MYOB: Mind your own business, and (2) Are you better with him/her or without him/her?

**Always end on a positive note.** Professional dog trainers end their training sessions with a reward for practicing a skill with which the dog is able and confident. This dog training principle also works well with humans. In any interaction, find an area of agreement or consensus so that the interaction ends on a positive note. This closing style increases the chance that the next interaction will open on a positive note.

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Resources updated August 15, 2017

Some content updated February 14, 2020.

The correct citation for this article is Doverspike, W. F. (2014, November 27). How to be a better partner. <http://drwilliamdoverspike.com/>