

## HOW TO STOP BOTHERING YOUR GIRLFRIEND

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A psychologist once had a client who said her best friend told her she should break up with her new boyfriend because he was controlling, critical, and jealous. Never giving advice, the psychologist asked her what her other friends thought about the situation. She replied, “My three best friends keep telling me I should break up with him.” Without saying a word, the psychologist thought to himself: “When one person told me I was a jackass, I didn’t listen. When three people told me, I bought a saddle.” For guys who don’t want to buy a saddle, here are some helpful hints along with some commentary from a woman reviewer.

**Affirm, empower, and encourage her.** A man never becomes weaker by making someone else stronger. Rather than criticizing her—or her friends—try using encouragement instead. Rather than focusing on what is wrong, focus on what is right. When we build up others, we build ourselves.

**Don’t try to fix everything.** When she is talking about a problem, she may want to be heard rather than be given advice. <sup>2</sup> Stop giving so much advice. If she wants advice, she’ll ask her friends. Unless she asks you for advice, fix yourself first, because it will take more time. <sup>3</sup>

**Listen to the music as well as the words.** Your girlfriend may use speech not only to transmit information in a literal manner, but to convey her feelings, emotions, and experiences. Don’t take everything she says literally, but listen to the music as well as the lyrics. <sup>4</sup>

**Express less criticism and more gratitude.** Criticism can be a passive way of asking for what you want. Rather than focusing on what you do not receive, 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.

**Stop trying to control her.** *Reactance theory* predicts that a target behavior will increase if a person’s personal freedom is challenged. Trying to control your girlfriend, such as restricting activities or access to her friends, will exacerbate rather than diminish a problematic behavior. If you don’t know what *exacerbate* means, ask your girlfriend to explain it to you. <sup>1</sup>

**Listen and learn.** You can’t talk and listen at the same time. If you are thinking about what you are going to say next, then you are not really listening. Good communication is said to be about 99% listening and 1% talking. The better you listen, the better you will be heard.

**Put in a pause.** Rather than reacting impulsively to something she says, put in a pause so you can respond in a reasonable way. It is better to pause than to say something that cannot be retracted. The tongue can do as much damage as any other part of the body.

**Respond to ideas, not the person.** Don’t allow irritation to rise from minor things that she says. Respond to her on the basis of principles, not based on personal characteristics. In other words, put principles before personalities.

**Don’t argue mentally.** Don’t allow yourself to become bothered by everything she says. Try finding points of agreement to see if you can understand her perspective better. If you can understand her perspective, she will be more likely to understand yours.

**Learn the five most important sentences.** 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: “I am sorry... 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. <sup>5</sup> Asking “why” will usually put a person on the defense. Instead of asking “why” questions, consider asking “how” questions.

**Don’t touch when angry.** Physical touch can be powerful, but it can be misinterpreted when mixed with anger. Avoid touching her during an argument—lest it be misunderstood. Instead, use your feelings of anger as an internal cue to lower your tone, slow your pace, and take a step back if necessary. Tone of voice often says more than words.

**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? If not, then don’t say it.

**Count before speaking.** For guys 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. If you can’t count to 1,000, then don’t say it.

**Consider agreeing with criticism.** One way to maintain good communication is to avoid defensive responses. When your partner points out your flaws, avoid a defensive rebuttal by using JADE: Don’t justify, argue, defend, or explain. When you are criticized, consider responding with “You may be right.” Agreeing with criticism often leads to new insights and new patterns of communication. <sup>6</sup>

**Respond with active-constructive comments.** When listening to your partner share something, there are basically four ways in which you 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), *passive-destructive* (e.g., ignoring the sharing, showing lack of interest, expressing no indication of

caring), and *active-destructive* (e.g., criticizing or pointing out the negative aspects of a positive sharing). Of these response styles, it is the active-destructive that most readily destroys relationships, and it is the active-constructive response that builds relationships. Rather than building walls, think of building bridges.

**Learn her love language.** Modern research has confirmed the wisdom of the old adage: “Different strokes for different folks.” When you express love to your girlfriend, make sure that it meets her needs—not just yours. Learn to use not only the language that you like, but use the ones that your loved ones like the most. In other words, learn to express love the way your partner experiences being loved by you. Five languages of love include affirming words, giving gifts, spending quality time, physical touch, and acts of service (Chapman, 1995). If you don’t know her language, then you need to learn it soon.

**Learn to use a love map.** What is her favorite movie of all time? What is her favorite food or drink? What are her biggest worries or the things she dreads the most? What are her goals and aspirations in life? If you can’t answer these questions, you need to get a love map (Gottman & Silver, 1999). Otherwise, you will get lost in the relationship.

**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 girlfriend wants.

**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, there is a simple sentence to use: “I’m sorry.” Even better, try this one: “I was wrong.” These are often the most difficult sentences for men to speak. These types of disclosures can be the beginning of a new conversation---or perhaps a new relationship. <sup>7</sup>

**Make amends when you have hurt someone.**

Whether it is inadvertent or otherwise, hurting someone requires restitution. Admitting when you are wrong sometimes requires an *apology*.<sup>8</sup> 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?”).

**Let go of being right.** You can be 100% right, but in winning the battle you may be losing the relationship. Making a point to be right usually means making the other person be wrong. Letting her comment go uncorrected 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.”

**Avoid harsh start-ups in conversations.**

When there are harsh comments, criticisms, or complaints expressed within the first 15 minutes of an interaction with a marital partner, the interaction usually goes downhill from there (Gottman & Silver, 1999).<sup>9</sup> One way to avoid harsh start-ups is to begin each interaction on a positive note. It is never too late to begin a new day.

**Always end on a positive note.** Good dog trainers and good preachers have one thing in common: They end on a positive note.

Prior to publication, this article was sent out to peer reviewers, consisting of happily married young women who dated extensively before getting under contract with the love of their life. While protecting their anonymity, I would also like to express my gratitude for their reviews. Reviewer comments are listed below:

1. “Haha 😊”
2. “Amen! When a guy listens to a problem and offers advice, we know he means well, but oftentimes his first suggestion illuminates the fact that he doesn’t grasp the intricacy or complexity/politics involved. A simple ‘Man, that sucks, I’m sorry’ goes further than you think.”
3. “This is a good point. I’d be interested in reading more about this. Sometimes it seems like the longer a relationship, the smaller the things we fight about. A new relationship, I’d never bring up something as trivial as [x], but in a comfortable relationship, I would. The more I know someone, the less grace I seem to give.”
4. “Women are like symphonies with lyrics. If there’s a period of purely instrumental music, take note and lean in.”
5. “I’ve never thought about this before—very true! A ‘why’ question can make me feel personally questioned and go on the defense.”
6. “This would definitely prevent unnecessary escalation. I need to remember this.”
7. “And lack of these types of disclosures could be the end of a relationship.”
8. “Why is this so hard? (Asking for a friend) 😊 Good placement of the ‘Let go of being right’ section.”
9. “Interesting! It makes total sense and, if memory serves, this is 100% accurate.”
10. “I must admit I was a little surprised to learn that this whole article was written by a guy—and citing guys. Any individual who is in a relationship, would like to be in a relationship, and/or would like to be a better person, should print this out and reference these adages daily.”

## References

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**Content was last updated 2020.**

**Disclaimer:** This article was written at the request of some of my dog training friends who like to have fun. This article is a counterpart to a previous one titled “How to Stop Annoying Your Boyfriend” (Doverspike, 2020). ☺

**Dedication:** This article was uploaded on Valentine’s Day in honor of those men and women who are kind.

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