Resolving Relationship Conflict
By First Taking Personal Responsibility For
# Your Part

By Peggy L. Ferguson, Ph.D.

Couples often come into counseling complaining about the behavior of the other partner. They blame and hold the other person for their unhappiness, lack of communication in the marriage, lack of intimacy, feeling unloved, and even for not accomplishing their own goals.

We are all responsible for the relationship outcomes in our lives, decisions, responses, and happiness or misery. Each person is ultimately accountable for their part in developing and reacting to conflict. It is essential to identify your patterns in creating conflicts initially and then worsening the outcomes of the disputes by your reactions.

The notion other people make us happy or unhappy and determine how we will react is comfortable but false.   Each person carries into a relationship their emotional baggage. Some baggage involves beliefs, attitudes, old unsettled issues, and contemporary and historical unresolved feelings, which color how you take in the information in your life. This baggage is a filter that distorts how you see events in your relationship.

Most events are naturally neutral until the
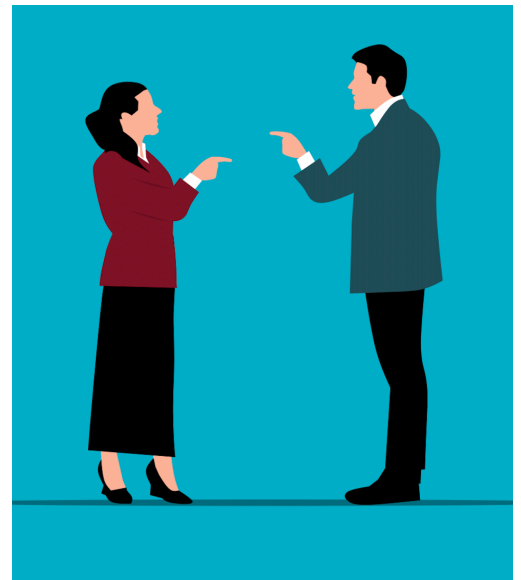
participants observe them and ascribe meaning to them. Our prior experiences or filters distort personal experiences and can take on the quality of "themes" in our interactions. An example might be the fear of abandonment. If you are a child of divorce, come from a family of origin with addiction, and never really know what will happen, you may have insecure attachments to significant others. If you experienced abandonment as a child or an adult through divorce, death, or relocation, you might have a filter of fear of abandonment. This filter may become apparent when your partner tries to de-escalate an argument by taking a "time out" to cool down before again trying to resolve the conflict; you may feel compelled to "make" them stay to hash it out when a time out would be more beneficial to resolve the presented problem. A series of arguments that resulted in one partner leaving, then sweeping the issue under the rug, and never really returning to problem-solving, compounds the problems and builds up the already present "abandonment" filter. The person demanding that the other one stays past the point of utility feels compelled to do so and blames their compulsive behavior on the other person's history of not following through with continuing to work on the problem after the time-out. Each person blames the other for their own part in the escalation and in the pattern as being based on the other person's actions. In fact, both people contribute to the circular features of the interaction. Both partners feel like the other is not listening to them. And they probably are not listening. Each partner feels compelled to make themselves understood with each subsequent exchange. The conflict keeps escalating in tone and negativity.   It just takes one person taking responsibility and doing something different for the circular pattern to be interrupted.

Both people want to believe the other person is causing them to feel or behave in specific ways. Some statements that indicate that you are not taking responsibility for your part in conflicts include the ones below. Concern yourself only with identifying the ones that you do.   Allow your partner to be responsible (or not) for their behavior.

"If it weren't for you..."

"What is the point of taking responsibility for my part in things if my spouse doesn't?"

"If you didn't ignore me, I wouldn't remind/nag."

"If you didn't nag, I wouldn't withdraw."

"If you weren't so critical, I would help more."

"When you are irresponsible, I must step up and take control."

"If you took responsibility around the house, I wouldn't feel so stressed out."

"You should know how I feel. If I have to tell you what I need, it doesn't count."

"If you showed me you love me, I wouldn't have to go ballistic to get your attention."

"If you weren't so hard on the kids, I wouldn't have to be so lenient.

"If you didn't behave like a child, I wouldn't have to act like your parent."

Add some of your examples:
"If you _____, then I would/wouldn't _____."

Here is a template that you can use to change up old patterns by taking responsibility for your own perceptions, filters, feelings, and behavior.

"When I see _____, what I think it means is _____. When I think that, I feel _____. In the past, I would have done this _____. Today, I'm going to _____"

"When I see us arguing and you trying to leave in the middle of it, what I think it means is that you are going to give up on us. When I think that I feel hurt, desperate, and panicky. In the past I would have done anything to keep you from leaving. Today, I'm going to take a breath and calm down, trust you will come back, and try to bring this up later when we are more calm."

**2023, Resolving Relationship Conflict
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Taking responsibility for your part in a conflict or a problem is the first step in learning how to resolve relationship issues, restoring positive feelings, and having power over our emotions, decisions, and behavior (reactions). When we can identify and be aware of the "filters" that influence our thoughts, feelings, and reactions, we can proactively clarify the meanings in communication and avoid many conflicts we have been revisiting.

Further suggestions for improving your communications:

$2.95 Communication 101: Using 'I' Messages for Positive Interactions

$2.95 Fair Fight Tactics: A Brief Lesson

$19.95 A Couple Communication Exericse.

**Hubbard House Publishing and
Transformational Endeavors**
www.peggyferguson.com
www.TransformationalEndeavors.Online
peggyferguson@peggyferguson.com