

Explanations of Partner Behavior Makes All The Difference in Marital Happiness

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How we interpret our partner's behavior largely determines how happy we are in relationships. A closer look at the meanings we give for partner behavior may indicate a need to re-evaluate those interpretations if we want to improve and enhance couple communication and improve the emotional environment in our home. We can challenge preconceptions and automatic assumptions to embrace reframing, refocusing, and forgiveness.

Conflict is inevitable in any close relationship. Merely "minding your own business" can lead to clashes as each person pursues their needs. The emotional fallout from conflicts, including hurt feelings, anger, resentment, fear, and guilt, is a natural consequence of being in a close and important relationship. How we interpret our partner's behavior during such conflicts significantly influences our emotional responses.

We are, in essence, authors of mini-theories, constructing explanations for relationship events, particularly those accompanied by uncomfortable emotions. These theories are heavily influenced by our personal beliefs, experiences, and history, often manifesting as cognitive or perceptual filters that color our perception and interpretation of events.

The tendency to seek comfort and assign blame is evident in our belief that we "should" always be emotionally or psychologically comfortable. Unhappiness or discomfort prompts us to identify a cause or someone to blame. This attribution of reason and responsibility impacts our feelings and plays a pivotal role in how we respond to our partner's behavior. In marital conflict, there's a typical inclination for each spouse to identify the other as "the cause," "the wrong one," and the individual responsible for fixing or changing the situation. This assignment of responsibility not

only shapes our emotions but also significantly influences how we interact with our partners.

Blame is associated with viewing their behavior as intentional, voluntary, selfishly motivated, and blameworthy. This perspective, known as the "fundamental attribution error," tends to overlook external factors and attribute personal problems to others' poor choices while attributing our own behavior to situations outside our control.

Beliefs about our partner's behavior profoundly impact our feelings toward them. When we attribute positive partner behavior to their personality, viewing it as intentional and characteristic of ongoing behavior, our feelings about the relationship are enhanced. Conversely, discounting their positive acts or attributing them to external factors diminishes positive feelings.

The concept of "filters" in communication is crucial here. Filters, shaped by our beliefs and experiences, influence our interpretation of partner behavior. Over time, these filters can evolve from rose-colored glasses to "mad-colored glasses," altering our perception of our partner's intentions. Identifying and understanding these filters is essential for maintaining a healthy relationship. When conflicts arise, examining our filters and mini-theories about cause, blame, and responsibility can shift focus from blame to acceptance of shared responsibility for the issue and its resolution.

Changing our perspective and reframing problems as challenges within the interaction or relationship allows us to accept responsibility for contributing to the problem and the solution. Reframing may involve clarifying messages, expressing feelings appropriately, neutralizing distorted filters, and forgiving past hurts. Changing how we interpret events can restore love, closeness, and cooperation in the relationship. See "[Explanations of Partner Behavior Worksheet](#)" to further explore the impact of "filters" on your relationship. Also, please check out these Brief Lessons, available in [MyStore](#).

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Note: This article has been revised and edited from its original version, which was previously published in 2013 on this site. The content has been updated for contemporary language, clarity and accuracy.