

Names are changed to honor client confidentiality.

Negativity Sours Relationships

Let's face it—glass-half-empty people are hard to live with. Their pervasive negative attitude can tip the glass of even the most optimistic person.

Peggy's married to a glass-half-empty type.

Seeking my advice, she expressed her frustration: "His negativity drains me," she said. "I'm tearing my hair out."

"What's he negative about?" I asked.

"He can't stand clutter," she said, "so when he comes home, he wants things neat. But try as I may, I can never match his expectations. He'll notice the one thing I failed to do, the one thing out of place, the one thing that wasn't cleaned."

It galls her that he overlooks or never comments on the positives.

"The things I do go unnoticed," she said. "He treats the kids the same way. In his eyes, they can't do anything right; he's always riding them hard."

Peggy's mounting aggravation forced her to finally speak up.

"I let him know what he was doing to us—that the kids and I are always on edge, like we're living with a supervisor."

He said he was unaware of being fixated on the negative and asked Peggy to let him know when it's happening. She's tried, but her attempts backfire.

"When I do," she said, "he becomes instantly defensive and argumentative, and he pontificates for several minutes. I then remind him that he's asked me to point these instances out to him and I'm merely doing what he wishes. However, in the end, I get nowhere. In fact, I have more resentment after the exchange than if I had just kept my mouth shut and ignored him."

Peggy's feelings for her husband are souring.

"I continue to be turned off by his negativity," she said, "and even more so by his defensive response when I point it out. What can I do when a straightforward approach merely escalates the negativity?"

Before answering, I asked her about her communication style. I wondered whether she sets him off in some subtle way. For example, words spoken with a critical tone will likely trigger a defensive response in the other person.

But Peggy was adamant: “I make sure my attitude is neither critical nor aggressive.”

“In that case, take your quandary directly to him,” I advised.

He sends her a double message. Verbally he says, “Do let me know,” but his response conveys the opposite, “Don’t you dare bring it to my attention.”

She should frankly ask him: “Which is it? Do you want to be informed or not?”

If he says he wants to be informed, then she should ask: “Okay, how can I do so without you getting upset or defensive?”

The best time to pose that question would be when things are calm—he’s more likely to be receptive. After asking the question, she should wait for his response. Oftentimes we jump in before the other person has a chance to mull it over, or we bury the key issue under too much verbiage.

In the land of fairy tales, her husband might say: “Gee, Peggy, I want nothing more than to cease putting a damper on my family’s happiness. And that nasty explosive habit of mine has to go.” From there he gladly offers suggestions.

But when I last looked, this is Planet Earth, and in all likelihood he’ll remain true to form—defensive and argumentative. If that occurs, she should resist getting pulled into an argument. But if she does get drawn into discussing sides issues—irrelevant debates—she should recover the ball and return to the key question: “How would you like to be alerted when you’re being negative?”

Currently, Peggy’s motivated to seek a solution—collaboratively—with her husband. That’s a good sign. He would be wise to take heed, realizing that if she quits trying, the relationship’s in trouble. Without a means for addressing and resolving issues, the problems will merely go underground—festering and worsening.

Peggy’s not filled with hope.

“I’m afraid if the status quo continues,” she said, “I’ll have no other option but to pull away from him emotionally—for relief’s sake. But I don’t really want to do that.”

He needs to know what she’s truly thinking, the depths of her anguish and where it might be headed.

“Tell him how his negativity is driving you away,” I said, “how it’s affecting your desire to be close to him.”

I asked her how she would say it in her own words.

Her response: “All this negativity ... it’s turning me off. It makes me like you less, and I don’t want to like you less.”

Wonderfully put.

By knowing the severity of the problem, he’ll be challenged to make the necessary changes to save a very leaky ship before it’s too late.

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