

Recording 3.5 - When Your Partner's Behavior Seems Wrong

Practice Sequence

1. Studies have shown that there's one thing that will prevent your partner from being receptive to you faster than anything else: You coming into the conversation believing that his thinking or actions are bad or wrong when he might not see it that way. This involves situations where you feel that he's been selfish or irresponsible, or that he's behaved inappropriately, or that his thinking is just off-base, or that what he wants is unreasonable.
2. Sometimes there's really no way to look at things other than "this is just wrong." But most of the time, you have a choice:
 - You can judge your partner's actions as "bad," or just frustratingly different than what you wanted.
 - You can judge your partner's opinion as "wrong," or you can simply prefer your own opinion while acknowledging that there's no way of knowing for sure whose is better.
3. Researchers have found that most of the times when people get upset with their partners, their partners haven't done things that are intrinsically bad for relationships. Once they get upset with each other, there's often plenty wrong with the way they interact with each other, but the initial things that set off disagreements aren't usually about right and wrong. They're about differences in values or priorities for which there is no generally accepted standard for what's better or worse.
4. So how can you know where the line is between "This is clearly wrong" and "This isn't necessarily wrong, but I don't like it – and I don't think there's anything wrong with what I like either"? There are some things that are uniformly bad for relationships:
 - lying,
 - sexual infidelity,
 - physical violence or threats,
 - violations of privacy or personal space, and
 - making irreversible, unilateral decisions about things that you know your partner has strong feelings about.

If your partner has done one of these things, consult chapter 5 in the book. If he *hasn't* done one of these things, it's probably not wrong. There's strong scientific evidence showing that there's more than one way of doing relationships that can work. Just because you don't like his perspective, or his priorities, or his way of doing things doesn't make them wrong.

5. Just because your partner's thinking or actions might not be wrong doesn't mean that you should just back off and let him do whatever he wants. There isn't anything wrong with

your priorities or expectations either, and when you disagree, each of you needs to be willing to make some adjustments. The effective combination involves letting go of the idea that your partner is wrong, and standing up for yourself when you need to -- making sure that your wants, needs and priorities count as much as his. Just don't make the mistake of thinking that they should count *more* than his.

6. You might be reluctant to let go of the idea that your partner is wrong because you believe that he won't change unless you convince him that he's wrong. But that isn't the way it works. Your accusation will actually weaken your influence. It will arouse his defenses. He'll feel like you're putting him down, and he'll be less inclined to be respectful of your point of view. If your goal is for your partner to be open and flexible, you won't help him get there by being closed and inflexible yourself. You'll have much more influence if you communicate something like. "This is how it seems to me, but you might not agree. You're an intelligent person and if you see things differently than me, I'm going to be respectful of that. I might have trouble understanding it, but there's no reason why my feelings should count more than yours." This is the attitude will foster openness and flexibility in your partner. And if it doesn't, there are other, powerful steps you can take. They're described in recording 6. But you don't stand a chance of being truly influential if you start out by implying that your partner is wrong in situations where his priorities, expectations or ways of doing things are arguably as legitimate as your own.