

How to Make a Positive Change in Your Spouse

by Dr. David B. Hawkins

Every day in marriage brings new delights and disappointments. Having their own life with their own issues our mate brings to the relationship “baggage,” just as we do.

Day in and day out living will bring many minor irritants—the bath towel left on the floor, the dishes left in the sink, the bills not paid. You must have a plan on how you will deal with these irritants.

There will also be more significant issues that arise—broken promises, emotional or physical unfaithfulness, neglect. You must also determine how you will respond to these.

Too many people don't really have a functional way of dealing with small or large issues. They have not stepped back (as I'd like you to do now!) to consider how they want to respond to stress. Having no plan, the default is *complaining*. This may take the form of small, sarcastic jabs at your mate, letting them know you are unhappy.

- “Why didn't you pick up your towel after showering?” you ask critically.
- “I don't know why you don't simply pay the bills when they come in!”
- “I hate it when you play on your computer when I'm trying to talk to you.”

Not only is complaining ineffective, and most often brings a defensive rebuttal from the one being complained about. It is a sure way to start a fight. Scripture warns us about complaining: “Don't grumble against one another, brothers and sisters, or you will be judged” ([James 5:9](#)).

A healthier way of responding, or *not* responding, is to *consent* to their actions. You determine that their actions are inconsequential and there is little reason to make a fuss about it. You can pick up the bath towel, pay the bill or accept your mate playing on their computer.

I'm confident that at this point you're wondering about how to not enable inappropriate behavior. You may be thinking that *complaining* is not what you want to do, and *consenting* to their actions doesn't work for you. What is another healthy option?

Confrontation. Let me be clear about the purpose and presentation of confrontation. Confrontation is serious business. It must be done carefully and caringly. Confrontation must be done so as to let someone know you are displeased with their actions and believe they have broken some implicit or explicit agreement.

Recently my wife confronted me about an issue that had been bothering her:

“David,” she said softly. “I'd like to talk to you about clutter.”

“Certainly,” I said, willing to listen to her concerns.

“I'd really prefer it if we kept the kitchen counters clear from bills and other mail. It seems that you often check your mail and then leave it laying there.”

“Very true,” I said. “I can see how I add to the clutter around the house.”

“Okay, then,” she continued. “If either of us leaves something on the counter for more than two days we’ll put it on the other’s desk. Does that sound okay?”

“Sounds like a plan.”

You can see from this interaction that Christie had a problem—our clutter, which drives us both crazy! We have both complained about this problem several times before, which gets us nowhere.

Look closely at her action and consider how they might fit into your life:

One, approach your mate respectfully. The first words out of her mouth were soft and respectful. Your first words will set the tone for what is to follow. If there is an edge to your voice, sarcasm in your words and hostility under your breath, you’re in for a tough time. Remember that you are on the same team and likely want the same outcome. Even if you want two different things, you want to collaborate so as to arrive at a conclusion that works for both. Respect goes a long way toward achieving that goal.

Two, approach your mate clearly. Complaining and sarcasm hide the real issues. The listener has to decipher what you are trying to say. Christie was clear with how she was feeling and what she wanted. Consider, before you speak, what it is you want to communicate. Consider what it is that you need and the desired outcome. Consider the best path for obtaining that outcome.

Three, approach your mate with confrontation, when appropriate. Christie was willing to clearly state what she saw happening and what bothered her. There is a time when we gently share with our mate that they have not kept their agreements, or have acted in a way that was hurtful. We must be willing to ‘stand in the heat’ as they process the difficult words you say to them. Remember that their response is not your responsibility—you are only responsible for the delivery of your words. If they have failed to keep their agreements, or have acted in a hurtful way, they cannot change unless they are told about their failure.

Four, approach your mate with clear expectations. Christie decided she needed to ask for some different expectations. Assuming you choose to confront, as opposed to consenting to their actions, make it clear what you would like. Have an end goal in mind. Consider what might work for everyone so that everyone leaves the encounter feeling as good as possible. Share expectations and possibilities clearly, being willing to brainstorm other possibilities if met with resistance.

Finally, approach your mate with accountability. Christie suggested some consequences if either of us failed to live up to our agreements. Agreements are only as good as our level of accountability. Agreements not clarified and solidified tend to fall between the cracks of life. Make agreements that are measurable and then follow up on them. A new habit takes time to become natural. Practice the new behavior again and again, discussing how it is working.

In summary, *complaining* leads to emotional disconnection and resentment. *Consenting* can be a way of deciding whether an issue is worth bringing to the table. *Confrontation* is a healthy tool to use to make boundaries and expectations clear. When combined with accountability, change usually occurs.



If you would like to learn more about healthy relating, please go to our website, www.marriagerecoverycenter.com and discover more information about this topic, watching my video series 30 Days to Relational Fitness. Pay close attention to the article, Therapeutic Healing Session, a useful tool for saving your marriage. Please send responses to me at drdavid@marriagerecoverycenter.com and also read more about The Marriage Recovery Center on our website. You'll find videos and podcasts on sexual addiction, emotionally destructive marriages, codependency and affair-proofing your marriage.

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