

## **Explanations of Partner Behavior Makes All the Difference in Marital Happiness**

**By Peggy L. Ferguson, Ph.D.**

If want to improve your marital communication and the emotional environment in your household, learn how to change how you explain your partner's behavior. You may need to challenge what you have previously thought in order to reframe, refocus, and forgive.

Conflict is inevitable. As any two individuals go about their daily business, if their lives intersect, it is inevitable that at some time they will come into conflict. Simply "minding your own business" will at some point, bring you into conflict, as you go about meeting your needs and the other person goes about meeting his/her own needs.

Hurt feelings, anger and resentment, fear, guilt, and other uncomfortable feelings are a part of being in a close, important relationship. Conflicting needs lead us to feel hurt, angry, or fearful. How we feel when we are in conflict, or when something happens that upsets, depends in large part, on the explanations that we develop about our partner's behavior.

We are mini-theory authors. We develop theories about the "whys" of relationship events, especially those where we experience uncomfortable feelings. The theories that we write or the explanations that we give to events are largely colored by our own personally relevant beliefs, events, and history. Often referred to as "filters" these cognitive or perceptual distortions color how we perceive things and the meaning that we make of those events.

We tend to believe that we "should" always be emotionally or psychologically comfortable. When we feel unhappy, sad, angry, hurt, or fearful, there must be a "cause" to not feel comfortable. If there is a "cause", someone or something must be to blame or responsible. When we attribute cause and responsibility for our feelings, or any discomfort, including conflict, we want to identify "the one who is wrong" and give them responsibility for fixing it.

In our development of explanations for partner behavior we are motivated to discover and explain to ourselves why they did or said the thing that upset us. The theories of "why" involve several components. We want to know whether their behavior was because of outside circumstances or whether it is due to their personality. We want to know what

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their intentions were, and whether or not they are likely to continue to do the same things in the future.

In marital conflict, the tendency is for each spouse to identify the other as "the cause", "the wrong one", and the one whose job it is to fix it or to change. The way that we assign responsibility for events, especially hurtful ones, not only influences our feelings, but has a major impact on how we respond to each other's behavior.

When we believe that the partner caused the problem, and that the event occurred because of the partner's personality, we are also more likely to believe that the behavior was intentional, voluntary, selfishly motivated, and blameworthy. When we develop this mini-theory, we typically hold them accountable. Most people are guilty of the "fundamental attribution error", which is a mindset that says that the problems that we experience personally are because of outside factors, while the same problems in others use of their poor choices. While we tend to give ourselves some slack, we may not be so quick to extend that benefit of the doubt to others.

What we believe about partner behavior has a major impact on how we feel about them. When we experience a positive partner behavior and believe it to be due to his/her personality, believe it to be intentional based on their own desire to exhibit that behavior, and believe this behavior to be characteristic of ongoing behavior, we tend to feel good about the partner and the relationship. We give him/her credit for intentional, positive behavior. When we discount those same positive acts by ignoring, dismissing, or attributing them to something outside the partner, we feel less positive about the partner or relationship. Imagine how you feel when you believe that the partner is the source of the problem, that they hurt your feelings intentionally because they want to, and that this behavior will continue over time, because "that's the way s/he is."

Recall previous discussions about "filters" and how what we think can change or distort incoming information in communication. All relationship behavior is communication. We are constantly taking in information during our interactions, deriving meaning from them, and responding to what we think they mean. Filters distort the meaning that we give to partner behavior. In the beginning of the relationship, the filters may have been rose colored glasses where partner behavior was viewed in the best possible light. Now that you have had a history of unresolved conflicts and hurt feelings, you may be viewing partner behavior through "mad colored glasses". Your belief about partner's intentions for his/her behavior may be very different from your partner's perception of his/her intentions. When your beliefs about partner behavior are positive you tend to feel positively about partner and to respond in a favorable manner. When your beliefs about partner behavior are negative, you are more likely to feel more uncomfortable feelings

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and to possibly act them out. Partners are often inaccurate in the theories that they write about their partner's behavior. These theories have a major impact on marital satisfaction and happiness. When filters distort how you ultimately assess a situation and derive meaning from it, you may create the very thing that you are trying to fix or eliminate.


You have probably spent some time and energy trying to identify your own "common filters" that have served as themes in communicational mishaps and distress. The next time you find yourself in conflict with your spouse over something that was said or something that happened, look at your "filters", then examine your mini-theory.

Identify your beliefs about cause or blame, and responsibility for the problem and the solution. Look at your own responsibility and accountability in conflict. When you can reframe "the problem" as being the spouse, to "a problem" existing in the interaction or in the relationship, you can shift your focus from blame to acceptance of responsibility for your contribution to the problem and the solution. Your contribution to the solution may be clarification of messages, or owning and expressing feelings appropriately. It might include working on identifying and neutralizing your own filters that distort how you perceive things. It could even involve forgiving your partner for hurts experienced in the past. When you can change how you look at things, you can regain the love, closeness, and cooperation that had been lost. See also "[Explanations of Partner Behavior Worksheet](#)".

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