

# SEVEN STEPS

## TO INFIDELITY RECOVERY SUCCESS

### HORSEMAN ONE: CRITICISM

Criticizing your partner is different than offering a critique or voicing a complaint! The latter two are about specific issues, whereas the former is an ad hominem attack - it is an attack on your partner at the core. In effect, you are dismantling his or her whole being when you criticize. It makes the victim feel assaulted, rejected, and hurt, and often causes the perpetrator and victim to fall into an escalating pattern where the first horseman reappears with greater and greater frequency and intensity.

Here is an example to help you distinguish between the two:

**Criticism:** "You never think about how your behavior is affecting other people. I don't believe you are that forgetful, you're just selfish! You never think of others! You never think of me!"

**Complaint:** "I was scared when you were running late and didn't call me. I thought we had agreed that we would do that for each other."

The antidote to criticism is to *complain without blame*. Talk about your feelings using "I" statements and express a positive need. What do you feel? What do you need from your partner in this situation?

**Criticism:** "You never pay any attention to me! All you care about is watching that stupid TV show!"

**Antidote:** "I'm feeling isolated and lonely tonight. Can we please talk about my day?"

In order to connect with your partner in a healthy way, there must be real communication. Remember: in many situations, making your intentions clear can allow both of you to avoid needlessly hurting each other's feelings. It's imperative that you express your feelings honestly, even when it's hard - even when it makes you feel vulnerable. Instead of vilifying each other, the two of



you can become a team, able to soothe one another and give each other comfort. When you are a team, and you don't attack each other, you learn to build and maintain loving support and trust.

Fighting off your urge to criticize can hold defensiveness, contempt, and stonewalling at bay. Not only can the elimination of critical ad-hominem attacks prevent defensive, critical, and stonewalling responses from your partner, but it can also prevent flooding for both of you – the overwhelming of all cognitive systems in extreme physiological arousal. Remember from our discussion of flooding: When physiological arousal accompanies relationship conflict, it may lead to:

- (a) a decrease in one's ability to take in information (reduced hearing, reduced peripheral vision, problems with shifting attention away from a defensive posture),
- (b) an increase in defensiveness,
- (c) a reduction in the ability for creative problem solving,
- (d) a reduction in the ability to listen and empathize.

It is a natural human endeavor for people to seek an explanation for their *negative* affective states and for their positive affective states. Therefore, it is natural for people to develop a negative habit of mind, searching for why they feel so bad. They naturally develop the habit of mind to scan their environment for other people's transgressions and mistakes to account for their own annoyances or disappointments. It is also natural for people to stockpile their partner's mistakes in the service of avoiding conflict. When they stockpile, they then search for underlying patterns in these irritating partner habits, and come up with an explanation that is their final "You" statement of blame, e.g. *"You're always talking about yourself, you don't care about me at all!"*

To learn to replace criticisms and ad-hominem attacks with complaints, you must move from blame to stating a **positive** need. Behind every complaint lays a wish, a longing. To work towards constructive solutions and mutual fulfillment, you must both make an effort to let go of grudges and bitterness. You must give your partner the opportunity to try to "fix it." Instead of attacking with "You" statements and immediately putting your partner on the defensive, you must allow them to do something that may make a difference. Instead of communicating "negative need," try communicating a "positive" one.

We understand that this can be very difficult. According to Dr. Gottman, "People don't usually think about what they need or what will remedy the situation. They think negatively about what their partner should stop doing to



ease their own irritation or disappointment. But the positive need is a way that their partner can shine for them." Here's an example:

**Negative Need:**

Jenny: *You talked about yourself for the entire length of dinner.*

Rob: *I did NOT.*

**Positive Need:**

Jenny: *I would love it if you asked me about my day.*

Rob: *I had no idea you felt that way. How was your day?*

Try this one at home! You may be surprised by the improvement of responses you elicit from each other. You may experience a change in the quality of your mutual understanding. By working together, the two of you can learn to apply this knowledge to make conflict discussions more productive, healthy, and more likely to reach a mutually satisfactory resolution.

## ROLE-PLAY HOMEWORK

Try out the following exercise to practice fighting off the first horseman.

Read the exchanges below and try to find a complaint to replace the criticism made by the first person in each pair.

Come up with a statement they could make to express their feelings as a positive need.

Make sure you reverse the role play.

Once you feel comfortable, introduce a current issue you are both facing right now, aside from the affair, and try a role-play using your current way of communicating, then use the "soft start-up" technique.

Here's an example:

**Janine:** "When I ask you to meet me, you're always ridiculously late - don't be so unreliable and insensitive!"

**Greg:** "I'm not insensitive or unreliable. Stop overreacting."

**Alternative for Janine:** "I wish that when we made plans to meet somewhere, you would make it more of a priority effort to make it on time."



Now it's your turn! We have provided sample responses at the bottom, which you can refer to after you complete the activity on your own. *(no peeking!)*

1. **Phoebe:** "You never call me back or respond to my text messages."  
**Brent:** "Tell me about a single time this has happened!"
2. **Ben:** "You're always bossing me around and you never let me make decisions."  
**Rory:** "I do too! Last night, you got to pick the show we watched."
3. **Marshall:** "You're so demanding. I can't always be at home on time when I'm this busy at work!"  
**Holly:** "I'm not demanding, I barely ever ask you for anything."
4. **Karen:** "You never clean up after yourself. You're so careless!"  
**Jim:** "Yes I do! You're the one who always leaves the dishes in the sink."
5. **Linda:** "You're always going out with your friends when I ask you for help."  
**Wesley:** "What are you talking about? I do everything around the house because you're the one who's out all the time."
6. **Loren:** "You never take me out dancing like you used to. You used to be so fun. What happened?"  
**Hayden:** "I don't have time for this right now."

Here are some sample responses:

1. **Phoebe:** "It would mean a lot to me if you took a moment to respond to me when I call or text you, even if it's to tell me that you are busy and will call me later."
2. **Ben:** "I would really like it if I could choose the show we watch tonight."
3. **Marshall:** "I know it sucks, but I have a huge deadline coming up at work, and I may have to stay at the office late some days this week. After this is over, I will take an afternoon off next week and we can go for a drive."
4. **Karen:** "I'm feeling really stressed and would really appreciate it if you helped me clean up tonight."
5. **Linda:** "I would really appreciate it if you spent some time here with me and helped with some projects we need to get done tonight."
6. **Loren:** "I would love it if you took me out sometime soon - maybe we could see a show or go dancing?"

We hope that this exercise is helpful to you. If you can begin to identify ways in which to convert critical statements into complaints using a positive need, you will be able to practice communicating with your partner you in a healthier manner!

