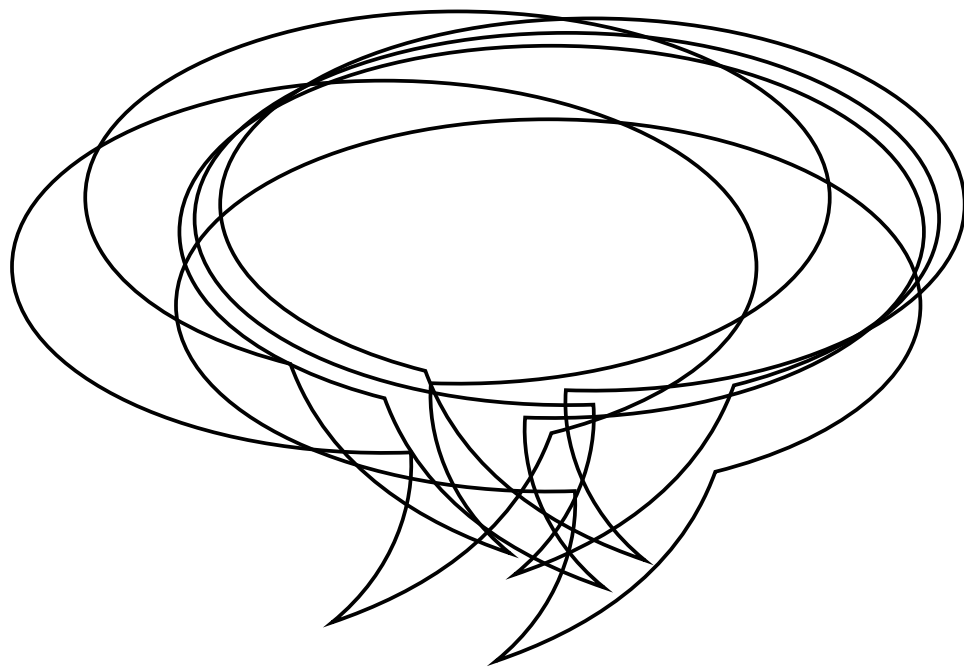


Six Things Unhappy Couples Say

and what to do about them



by toni nieuwhof

Six Things Cheat Sheet

1 “YOU’RE NOT THE SAME PERSON I MARRIED”

It’s easy to lose touch with each other over time. Since people grow and change over the years, you may be making inaccurate assumptions about each other. Ask your spouse “why” to explore his or her perspective when you air your differences. Avoid being judgmental, critical or drowning out what your spouse is saying with your own internal voice. To be sure you’ve understood what your partner is trying to say, repeat back what you heard in your own words.

2 “WHY IS IT SO HARD TO GET ON THE SAME PAGE?”

Being out of sync emotionally makes you feel disconnected and “unsafe”. You move closer when you sit with each other’s emotions, accept and validate them. Avoid judging, trying to control, or saying “you shouldn’t feel that way...”. Don’t skip over the emotion and jump straight to problem-solving. Try to read your spouse’s words and body language for the emotion behind the message, and acknowledge how they’re feeling, first and foremost. Say something to the effect of, “Sounds like you’re feeling X because...”. Then ask, “how can I help?”.

3 “ALL I’M LOOKING FOR IS A LITTLE RESPECT!”

It’s way too easy to ask for respect, disrespectfully. An ancient proverb says, “A gentle answer deflects anger, but harsh words make tempers flare”. You can learn to speak kind words, even when you adamantly disagree with each other. If either one of you has had a problem with showing kindness or respect, make it a point to have a turnaround conversation. How could you start a kindness revolution in your house? If you’re parents, I’ll even suggest you take it a step further. If your kids have been witnessing unkindness and disrespect between you, call a family meeting. Start off a new era in your family life with an apology from both of you and together, talk about some family communication ground rules.

4 “THE REASON I’M SO UNHAPPY IS (S)HE...”

It’s so common to slip into blame mode and a victim mentality in long-term relationships. The problem is, if you’ve got a victim story in the back of your mind, it’s clouding your vision. It may prevent you from seeing your own role in your unhappy relationship. Do you know of something you said or did (or didn’t do!) that offended your spouse? Own up to it today. Owning your part means admitting your offenses, even if you believe they’re minor. Even if you secretly believe they pale in comparison to all the offenses committed against you, admit and apologize. When you decide to own your part, regardless of how large or small it is, you take an important step toward getting rid of blindspots and other barriers in your relationship.

5 “WE DON’T GO THERE...IT’S TOO DIFFICULT”

Are you easily triggered into anger? Or fear? When your spouse said something that’s a 3, did you respond with 9-level emotion? If your anger, anxiety or sadness seems to come from a deep well, or is frequently tripping you up, your partner is likely not *the* cause. Seek out real help from a medical or counselling professional.

6 “YOU’RE SO NEGATIVE...”

What you focus on expands. Your partner’s strengths and the qualities you admire need to find their way into your conversation. Aim to say something affirming, appreciative, or affectionate five times for every complaint or criticism you express. Maintaining positivity helps prevent the negative downward spiral that will suck the joy, fun, and life out of your relationship. Find yourself lamenting that there’s not enough love between you? Love and joy aren’t emotions you take *from* your partner; they’re emotions you bring *to* your partner.

“ Between stimulus and response, there is a space. In that space is our power to choose our response. In our response lies our growth and our freedom. ”

Victor Frankl

1. “You’re not the same person I married!”

Ask why with curiosity

“He’s not the man I married.” Ever thought this before? Many of my family law clients said it and, honestly, I have too. As humans, we’re wired to grow and to make shifts in opinions or changes in habits based on what we’ve learned in life so far. Your partner will evolve over the years and so will you, but if you’re like many couples, you won’t always track with each other closely enough to understand the shifts.

When your husband or wife objects to your viewpoint and you’ve been married any length of time, you may silently make assumptions about why they see it that way based on your history. You stop asking “why”. The problem is, your answer to their motives may be overly cynical, judgmental, or critical. Resist your impulse to fill in your own answer to the question.

Think you know your partner well? Recently, I planned a canoe trip to an area that’s reputed to be a canoe-tripper’s dream. A little hard to get to, but well worth the effort. My husband Carey has been pretty vocal in the past about having no use for camping. So I planned the trip, didn’t invite him and assumed he’d be happy waving us off from our driveway. Turns out, I was wrong. He wants in on this adventure. Even after more than 30 years of marriage, I had more to learn about Carey. Trust me, you have more to learn about your partner.

You owe it to your partner to ask. After being together for any length of time, *(s)he’s not the same person!* is true of you, too. To stay connected with each other as you grow and evolve, ask and really listen to what your partner has to say about their own motives, beliefs, and values. Hey, I’m not saying that you need to agree with all of their perspectives, and vice versa. But you do need to ask why and listen open-mindedly to avoid pre-judging. Assume that you have more to learn about each other, so ask “why?” and then be curious.

What to do

1. Tell each other about a time when you recently suspected your partner misunderstood your motives. Explain how it made you feel using "I felt..." language (avoid "you always..." or "you never...").
2. What obstacles stop you from ditching your assumptions and becoming more curious about each other's motives? How do your differing answers to "why" align with your values and expectations as individuals?
3. We're all wired differently. Have you taken any personality assessments, or compared values or expectations with your spouse to learn about your differences? What is it about your wiring that may make it difficult for you to really listen?

Our next steps

(your name)

(your name)

To practice being more curious about my partner, I will:

2. “Why is it so hard to get on the same page?”

Commit to Being ‘Safe’ for Your Partner’s Emotions

If you’ve ever felt this way in your relationship, you may be dealing with life while missing each other’s emotions. Many couples struggle to notice, respond to and validate how each other is feeling and as a result, their sense of being connected takes a hit.

Carey and I had to learn the hard way how to be emotionally safe for each other. Carey’s personality is highly energetic, while I tend to dole out energy like it’s a scarce resource. He becomes frustrated when there’s an obstacle between him and his achievable goal. I feel a sense of dread when faced with something on my to-do list after my physical and emotional reserves are depleted.

So, late one evening, Carey began to hang window blinds in our bedroom. He needed my help, but I was ready to fall into bed. Our emotions quickly fired up. I felt I didn’t have it in me to hang the blinds, even though earlier we’d agreed we would do it that day. I felt criticized for being drained. Carey felt judged for being frustrated about ditching our plan. We lacked insight into how our emotions were mirroring our wirings. We both held that sense of injustice about being judged for how we felt, which only pulled us further apart. We needed to learn how to be emotionally present and safe with each other.

Acclaimed researcher Dr. Sue Johnson¹ teaches couples how to be emotionally present and safe with each other to build a stronger connection. She stresses that couples need to slow down, to listen and to respond to each other’s emotions with compassion and not defensiveness or judgment. This is important to a relationship, because our surface conflict may be driven by our basic human need for our loved ones to accept our emotions without criticizing them.

What to do

1. Think about your emotional history. In your family growing up, were you encouraged to identify and explain your emotions? Were you coached on how to manage your emotions? How would you describe and rate your current emotional health?
2. If your partner is willing, compare notes on your emotional histories using the questions from 1 above.
3. See if you can identify your own tendency when your spouse expresses emotion or vents. Do you acknowledge their emotion? Validate it? Dismiss it? Change the subject? Skip the emotion and jump into problem solving? Instead, how about saying something like this (non-judgmentally!): "It seems like you're feeling (label the emotion) because (your understanding of the cause)"? If you're off base, then your partner can help you understand by explaining how they really feel and why.

Our next steps

_____ (your name)

The next time my partner is venting, I will:

_____ (your name)

The next time my partner is venting, I will:

3. “All I’m looking for is a little respect!”

Commit to a Pact of Kindness and Respect

“We need a bonfire pit. All of my friends have one!” said our son who had been lobbying for a firepit for a while. Finally one Saturday, Carey and our sons gathered some decent-sized stones and dug a circular patch out of the sod at the back of our yard. We were ready for the inaugural fire. Our boys were so excited, they couldn’t even wait till nightfall. We would roast hotdogs for dinner under the sun and sit around the embers, watching the stars come out.

As they piled up the kindling and logs just so, I stayed busy in the kitchen cutting the hotdogs and getting the condiments ready. Next thing I heard was frantic shouting, “Get the hose!” I looked out the kitchen window to see Carey running with all his strength from flames leaping twelve feet in the air. As I rushed outside, and Carey ran back with water to tame the massive flames, I turned to see if the kids were okay. They looked pale and shocked. Soon the story came out: deciding to give the bonfire a boost, Carey grabbed the gas from a jerry can sitting in the garage.

My words spewed out faster than water from the hose. “How could you let this happen? With the kids right here! What were you *thinking?*” It’s true I was afraid to think of what could have happened and thankful no one was burned alive, but our kids heard me talk down to their dad. Carey wasn’t expecting the mushroom cloud of flames that erupted and was mortified by the whole incident. He made a simple mistake. But I was disrespectful to him. And that’s a problem.

Even in the case of the fire, where I think we’d agree that there’s a legitimate safety concern to talk about, my choice of words and timing were devoid of respect and kindness. If I had a do-over, immediately after the flames were tamed, I would have asked the kids how they were feeling, and I would have talked about how grateful I was that no one was seriously burned. Then, after I’d cooled down, out of earshot of the kids and without judging, I would get Carey’s take on what happened. We would decide together how to debrief the incident with the kids. After all, there was no urgency. They had just witnessed a larger-than-life lesson about gasoline and fire safety. Debriefing in the heat of the moment, while everyone’s emotions are triggered is usually not a helpful strategy².

What to do

1. In general, on a scale of 1 – 10, how kind are you toward your spouse? How much respect do you offer? When you're both in decent emotional space, ask your spouse's opinion.
2. We all fail at being kind sometimes, especially at home. Do you ever use "family voice" – that irritated, frustrated tone that would get you fired if you used it all the time at work? What strategy could you use to communicate with more kindness?
3. De-brief a recent incident when things became heated. How might you have responded differently to show more respect to your partner?

Our next steps

_____ (your name)
To show more kindness or respect, I will:

_____ (your name)
To show more kindness or respect, I will:

4. “The reason I’m so unhappy is (s)he...”

Spot Your Own Victim Story – Then Own It!

When Carey and I were in the middle of our rocky season, I was overwhelmed with disappointment and fatigue, and I blamed it on Carey's work hours. *It's his fault*, I told myself, *he needs to be home more to help out*. The thing is – by believing my victim story, I took a more complex picture and made it unidimensional. With deeper reflection and professional advice, I started to realize that there were other root causes for my fatigue that had more to do with the fallout of childhood trauma than with Carey's work hours. Over time I saw that part of the reason I was feeling exhausted was loneliness. I had a tendency to isolate myself from other adults. Carey can't bear the weight of being my only intimate friend. I entered counseling with a clouded view of Carey and—thankfully—began to discover some ways my perspectives were lacking. As I pursued personal growth, I started to see how the victim story I was telling myself was letting me off the hook. It was preventing me from owning my part, and we both were suffering as a result.

You see, a kernel of truth can be deceiving. Yes, your partner has a weakness, and it may be impacting your relationship. However, if your tendency is like mine and you look no further than your victim story, you may also be letting yourself off the hook. It's a natural tendency, because it's the path of least resistance. But the path of least resistance isn't going to help you make progress, personally or as a couple. The partly fictional victim story you're believing may cause resentment or contempt to build inside you, even while it slips under the radar. Ancient wisdom says, "...those who promote peace have joy."³ Exposing your victim story and seeing your own part more clearly is an important part of peacemaking.

Don't be fooled by the idea that your partner is to blame for your misery. If you leave because of your partner's weaknesses without owning yours, they will only show up to cause similar problems in your next real relationship. Commit to looking for your part now, not later.⁴ And own it once you find it.

What to do

1. Have a conversation with a wise, close friend or family member in your circle. Ask them this question: "What part am I playing in our unhappiness as a couple?" And this one: "Do the things I say make me sound like a victim?" If they don't have an answer, or say it's all your partner's fault, ask someone else you trust.
2. Can you spot a fictional angle to a victim story you've been telling yourself? Is there any way that story has allowed you to follow a path of least resistance? If you have a spiritual practice, use it as you explore this question. For example, ask God to make your victim story and path of least resistance clear to you.
3. Once you recognize your part, why not apologize? Be specific about how you've let your partner down, and show you're sincere by working on the issue. You'll probably feel internal resistance to offering an apology, but do it anyway. You may be surprised by how your partner responds as a result.

Our next steps

_____ (your name)

My next step in owning my part is...

_____ (your name)

My next step in owning my part is...

5. “We don’t go there...it’s too difficult.”

Seek Counsel When Triggers Cause Over-reactions

I’m not sure I’ve been more enchanted by a wilderness park than I was by Yosemite National Park in California. Carey and I made a big detour one time to spend a couple of days there. Three things stand out in my mind: a breathtaking view of Half Dome, a surreal hike through the massive sequoias and a blowout fight. We reached Yosemite first thing in the morning, ready to explore this natural masterpiece. Up sprang an argument that left us both triggered. Even the powerful beauty of our surrounds couldn’t rescue us from the pit. We hiked off our frayed emotions on separate trails. I was ready to catch a flight home.

With your partner, do you ever notice yourself being triggered easily into extremes of anger, sadness or fear? It’s one thing to have an emotional response, but it’s another to be triggered into your body’s fight, flight or freeze reaction. If an argument between Carey and me is getting very heated, I may start to feel anxious or fearful, and my hands and feet may become cold. As my anger rises, I may feel my heart race. I start to perspire. My anger may kick into full gear as my thinking becomes clouded. This reaction sometimes happens in a flash. Some people are triggered into a paralysis or “freeze” reaction. Once you’re triggered, there’s no point carrying on an argument because you won’t have the ability to think as clearly as usual. You’re likely to make a bad situation worse.

If you’re getting triggered frequently or consistently, don’t do what I did and delay seeking help. When we finally went for help, the advice we received was invaluable. Our counselors helped us see how much our hurts from before our marriage drove our overheated reactions and triggers in our marriage. Do your best to find professionals with a proven track record of helping unhappy couples. Invest time reviewing the qualifications, experience, and feedback from other couples before you choose the professional to approach. Then, with your counsellor’s guidance, do the hard work. One baby step at a time in the right direction eventually transformed our marriage from very unhappy to thriving. In the end, we didn’t regret a single minute, effort, or dollar we invested in getting professional advice to figure out what was triggering us and adopting healthier ways of dealing with our differences.⁵

What to do

1. What triggers you, and what happens when you over-react? How does your over-reaction affect your partner and your kids?
2. What options do you have to explore your triggers? How might you prevent your emotions from escalating as you deal with your differences? What plan would help you avoid a blow-out if they do?
3. Sometimes couples over-react with each other over a clash of values or expectations. The next time one of you is triggered and only after things have calmed down, see if you can identify a value or expectation that felt threatened.

Our next steps

_____ (your name)

I will work on _____ (my over-reaction) by taking this one step:

_____ (your name)

I will work on _____ (my over-reaction) by taking this one step:

6. “You’re so negative...”

Choose to Affirm Each Other

In an unhappy season in your marriage, it's easy for your mindset to be clouded by the negative. And your negative perspective flows over into the ways you communicate with each other. If you 'go with the flow', you may end up in a downward spiral.

I bet there are reasons you were attracted to each other in the first place. Chances are, your partner's strengths haven't just disappeared, and yours haven't either. What if you could see each other as two good people with good intentions who are simply stuck? Why not take a closer look at how you are building each other up, as opposed to tearing each other down, in the communication that flows between you? Especially if you find yourself in a challenging season as a couple, you can choose to improve your interactions. You can disagree with your partner's perspective but still affirm their value and worth.

Start by paying attention to how much positive versus negative communication you're expressing and receiving.⁶ Researcher Dr. Brent J. Atkinson has studied how using positive messages can help build a stronger relationship. He highlights the importance of a five-to-one ratio of positivity to negativity in a successful marriage. This means a spouse should express appreciation, affirmation, or another positive emotion, which includes flirting and sharing affection, five times for every one complaint or criticism.⁷ For Carey and I, focusing on the inherent worth in each of us was an important part of repairing our emotional intimacy and transforming our marriage.⁸ Part of that involved our decisions to curb the negative talk and steer more toward the positive.

What to do

1. Pay attention to, and even keep track of, your own ratio of positives to negatives in what you're conveying to your partner. The only person whose words and actions you can control are your own, so keep your focus on yourself – not on what your partner does.
2. Do you know each other's love languages? If you do, how often are you actually translating what you know into showing your love to your spouse his or her way? If you're not familiar with love languages, you can discover more and take a free assessment at www.5lovelanguages.com.
3. Making a decision to act or speak with self-control when you're not feeling the love can feel awkward or even 'fake'. But if you're breaking a habit or pattern, in that context, it's normal to feel that way for a while. Talk to a happily married couple with a solid long-term relationship about times when they had to decide to love the other to make it through a tough season.

Our next steps

_____ (your name)
Two ways I'll affirm my partner are...

_____ (your name)
Two ways I'll affirm my partner are...

References

¹Dr. Sue Johnson, *Hold Me Tight: Seven Conversations for a Lifetime of Love* (New York: Hachette Book Group Digital Inc., 2008)

²See *Before You Split*, Chapter 7 “Your Conflict Affects Your Kids More Than You Realize” for what you can do as parents to bring more kindness and respect into your family.

³Proverbs 12:20 taken from the Holy Bible, New International Version, NIV, Copyright 1973,1978,1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc.

⁴If you’re stuck with problems you can’t seem to communicate about, this book explains how to expose your victim stories that have been holding you back: Kerry Patterson, Joseph Grenny, Ron McMillan, and Al Switzler, *Crucial Conversations: Tools for Talking When Stakes Are High*, 2nd ed. (McGraw-Hill Education, 2012)

⁵For more practical steps to take if emotional over-reactions are showing up in your relationship, see Chapter 2 “It’s Not My Fault” in my book, *Before You Split*. I also recommend listening to our podcast interview with Dr. Gary Chapman, Episode 18 on the Smart Family Podcast (click here <https://smartfamilypodcast.com/episode/sfp-018-with-dr-gary-chapman-on-how-social-isolation-has-affected-relationships-five-simple-ways-to-strengthen-your-marriage-today-and-why-taking-the-first-step-to-improving-your-marriage-is-so/>, wherever you pick up your podcasts or visit our website at www.smartfamilypodcast.com).

⁶See Principle 2: Nurture Your Fondness and Admiration, in John Gottman and Nan Silver, *The Seven Principles of Making Marriage Work: A Practical Guide from the Country’s Foremost Relationship Expert* (New York: Harmony, 2015) 67-86.

⁷Brent J. Atkinson, *Emotional Intelligence in Couples Therapy: Advances from Neurobiology and the Science of Intimate Relationships* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2005), 82.

⁸You’ll find more about how Carey and I left our unhappiness behind in Chapter 10 “Find the Fun and Intimacy You’ve Been Missing” in my book, *Before You Split*.



About the Author

Toni Nieuwhof is an author, speaker and family law mediator, and has spent decades of her professional life practicing law and combining her professional careers of pharmacist and lawyer in leadership roles for hospitals.

Her most challenging work as a lawyer involved advising and representing people going through the journey of divorce. In her roles as mediator and lawyer, she is a steadfast voice for the well-being of the children involved.

Toni co-founded and co-hosts the Smart Family Podcast to help people love being home. For more practical resources to help you leave your unhappiness behind instead of your spouse, Toni's book entitled *Before You Split: Find What You Really Want for the Future of Your Marriage* releases on October 6, 2020.