

Dang that man!

He leaves his things on the floor and then gripes about the house being a mess. He doesn't seem to get it that I want him to listen to my feelings. He is so distant and in his head all the time. Why doesn't he act like he cares about me?

That woman! She always acts like she knows the best way to do everything, and she is never listens to what I have to say and get irritated with me over the most stupid things. Why doesn't she pay more attention to the important things? I hate it when she makes such a mess with her stuff in the bathroom and leaves those bottles everywhere.

Nagging at and about our mates is almost a way of life. We build up a case against the person that we love the most and then wonder why they are unhappy with us. When couples come in for therapy they inevitably have a long list of complaints about their spouse. They have been unhappy with their spouse for years for one reason or another. They don't like this. They don't like that. By the time they come into see me they are convinced that their partner has been doing everything wrong and what they really want (though they won't always admit this) is for me to tell their partner what is wrong with them and to help them fix their partners problems. It is a rare event to have someone come in for therapy who understands that they, as a couple, have a problem and that it's not one or the other's fault.

The first few sessions are generally spent with both partners laying out their case against their partner and looking to me for validation. Then I begin explaining to them that they are each responsible for what has become a laundry list. Rather than spending all of their resources and energy pointing out each other's flaws, they need to focus

instead on what the other is doing right. I don't know what it is about our culture that makes us focus on the problems rather than the blessings in our lives, but we do.

Letting ourselves focus on the blessings our mates bring to us helps us to encourage the very traits we most want to build upon. We want our partners to listen to us, to support us, to care about what we care about. We want them to show us they love us through the things they say and do. How do we get that when our partners seem so far from being able to provide it? We start with "catching them being good". We notice aloud the things they do that we appreciate and value. We refrain from nagging about the things we don't like and we praise and celebrate the things that we appreciate about our partners. The more we share our positive feelings with them about what we like, the more likely it is those behaviors will be repeated. They will feel loved and appreciated and we get what we want.

Why is that so hard for us? For one, we often don't believe that we deserve the things we really want so we don't do the things that will give us what we want. Then we blame our partners for not providing it, even though we have not done our part in providing an environment conducive to their being loving!

When we protest, "Why of course I want my partner to be more loving!" Yet we refuse to do the very things that will create the space for them to give us what we want. We demand, we nag, we criticize and we berate. We try to make them be what we want. NEWS FLASH: You can't make your partner do anything!

Instead, create an environment that invites them to be what you want them to be. If you want your partner to be more loving, be more loving to them and verbally

appreciate the things they do that make you feel good. Notice the things they do that are attempts to be loving, even if it's not exactly what you wanted.

My husband hates it when I leave town. He is unhappy and for years he acted angry and distant when I was getting ready to leave town. Yet, he always, without fail, checked my auto fluids and tires before I got on the road. I saw this as a supremely loving act, in spite of his decidedly unloving angry behaviors. I let him know how much I appreciated his doing this for me and hugged him. I verbalized it to my friends when they were around to let him know that I was proud of his being so loving toward me. Now, while he still hates it when I leave town, he is never angry and distant.

Loving behaviors come in all sorts of forms, and we don't always have the same idea of what it is to be loving. When we can notice what our partner is doing in an attempt to show us their love, even if it's not in the form we want, we can encourage the loving behavior and then ask for what it is we do want.

Criticizing focus's on the negative behavior and leaves the other person feeling unappreciated and devalued. Praise creates an environment of joy and a desire to please. When we tell our partners, "I loved it when you did the laundry for me. It makes me feel so cared for to have someone in my life help me with those kinds of details" it creates a bond of appreciation.

I'm not suggesting that we shouldn't tell our partners about the things they have done that displease us, I am just saying that the messages should, on balance be more positive than negative. Letting our partners know what pleases us is positive feedback that creates more of what we want. Negative feedback (criticism), when it is more

frequent than positive feedback (praise) creates the very things we don't want. It creates an unhappy partner who feels unappreciated and undervalued.

Share the joy with the people around you who know you and you grow the impact of the praise exponentially. Let your partner hear you bragging on them to your friends. Tell your partner how your friends reacted to things that you tell them about your fantastic partner. I guarantee you will get more of what you want through praise and "super praise" (bragging in front of others) than you will ever get through criticism.