

Understanding Relationship Criticism and the Styles of Conflict Resolution

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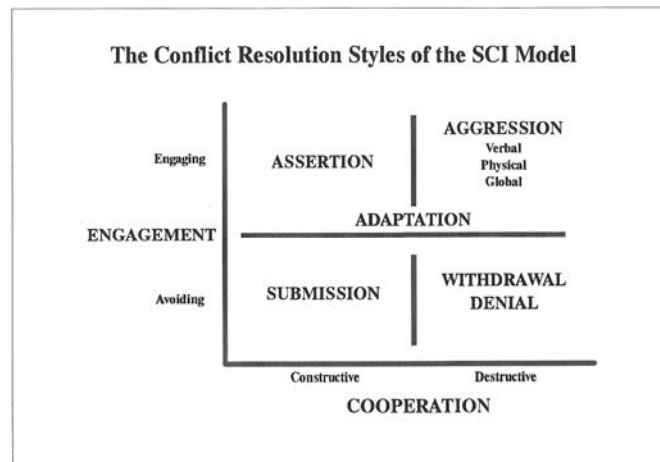
The occurrence of criticism of the partner in an intimate relationship, especially when it is chronic, is a significant interpersonal burden and risk factor for relationship and family distresses and even divorce.

But what is "criticism"? Negative attack? Perfectionism? Disgust? Resentment? Bitterness? Plea for help? Expressions of dissatisfaction? Contempt? Effort to improve the partner or the relationship? Habit carried over from one's own childhood? Blame?

Criticism is usually understood to be an exaggerated universal negative ("not", "never", "...don't"..) statement or one where the focus of attention is on the other ("blame"). For example, "I don't know why you can't leave me alone" is negative, while "You don't talk to me!" is both negative, universal and focused on the other ("blame"). Criticism is typically focused on the partner rather than the speaker, which sets up defensiveness. When the focus is on a listener, they will typically be prodded to defend -- especially because the statement is negative -- blame! Blame is a negative statement focusing on the listener!

Conflict Resolution Styles

There are several forms or "styles" of criticism in interpersonal interactions. The Styles of Conflict model (Metz, 1993) (see below) classifies conflict resolution efforts on a grid of engaging vs. avoiding and constructive vs. destructive styles. Because direct verbal statements such as "You're always complaining..." are negative and direct or engaging actions, the style is "verbal aggression." Because such verbal negatives are "engaging" they are easier to recognize. It is more subtle if the criticism is an avoiding style -- withdrawal or denial. For example, one may criticize one's partner by quietly ignoring them when a conflict might arise, or quietly look disgusted (e.g., rolling one's eyes or "smirking").



THE SCI STYLES OF RELATIONSHIP CONFLICT (Metz, et al., 1999)

Engaging Styles <style description and sample item

ASSERTION < constructive, cooperative, collaborative responses in a clear, direct, non-coercive manner. ("Calmly ask your partner to talk.")

ADAPTATION < positive effort to modify or circumvent conflict by play, humor, hyperbole. ("Create amusement or say something funny to break the tension.")

AGGRESSION < negative, divisive, competitive, or destructive responses designed to compel compliance.

Verbal < criticism, sarcasm, ridicule, name-calling...

("Criticize your partner or call him/her names.")

Physical < threats, pushing, throwing, breaking things, out-of-control, hitting. ("Push or slap partner.")

Global < composite of verbal and physical aggressions.

Avoiding Styles <style description and sample item

SUBMISSION < yielding, obliging, accommodating, acquiescing, or placating responses. ("Give in to your partner.")

DENIAL < disowning, disavowing, failing to acknowledge, or dissociating responses. ("Ignore the issue.")

WITHDRAWAL < shunning or evading conflict by retreating or drawing back responses. ("Are unwilling to talk; remain silent.")

Meanings:

It is helpful to recognize that a criticism – engaging or avoidant – is always a negative request. For example, “You never listen to me!” as a request is often “I want you to understand me...” When we are negative, we unwittingly invite a negative response.

Criticisms also commonly disguise one’s own feelings. Typically this may be a manifestation of hidden feelings of anxiety, or self-doubts, or worries of being inadequate in the relationship, doubting one’s love-ability. Another common source of criticisms is entitlement, believing one is owed. Related to this is a sense of righteousness, believing one should demand fairness or correctness, “my way or the highway” thinking. Still another is feeling overwhelmed and pleading for help, relief, or rescue.

To replace negatives with constructive styles, use “assertion” – clear, direct, open, positive and cooperative statements to express your positive intentions or constructive requests.

Are there gender differences?

Many men as a group do not welcome questions from their partner, commonly fielding questions as “irritating” and “pestering”. Questions can do this because the focus of a question is on him, setting the stage for defensiveness. To avoid this, replace questions with requests. Rather than “Why did you say that” make a request. “I would like to understand how you feel...” Or, “Do you want to help me with this?” to a request, “I would really like your help with this...”

Many women, on the other hand, report that when her partner asks her questions she commonly feels that “he cares about me.” “How was your day?” “Do you want to go with me?” Such simple communication differences, while very simple, can make a clear and positive change in the feelings in an intimate relationship. Try it and see.