

Weekend Homework Assignment: Accepting Responsibility

By Ellie Lisitsa

Defensiveness:

She: You're always watching TV!

He: What do you mean, "I'm always watching TV?" I'm working! Can I watch the news?! You're always watching TV, and the kids...

His defensive response to her criticism does nothing to help the situation. Instead, feeling attacked, he turns the tables and accuses her... to which she responds in kind, defensively! Off they go!

What is another way that they could have handled this exchange? The antidote to defensiveness is accepting responsibility. Here's an example:

Accepting Responsibility:

She: You're always watching TV!

He: I know you're frustrated. I'm so tired when I get back from work that I just want to rest for a while. If it bothers you, let's find another relaxing activity that we can do together. What do you think?

She: Okay. I'm sorry, it just feels overwhelming when I'm trying to take care of the kids and you're just sitting there.

He: How about if I help you and then we both go for a walk later tonight? We've both got to relax.

She: Sounds good! Thanks for understanding.

Here's another example:

Defensiveness:

He: You always work so late.

She: I have a project to do for work, we've got a deadline.

He: You ALWAYS have a project to do for work. There is ALWAYS a deadline.

She: That's not true.

He: Why don't you just move into the office?!

Well, that certainly escalated quickly. Let's try again... this time accepting responsibility.

Accepting Responsibility:

He: You always work so late.

She: I know. I'm sorry. I've got so much to do. What's the matter?

He: You haven't noticed that we never spend any time together anymore?

She: I know it's been hard. I miss you. I'll try to talk to my boss about these deadlines.

He: I would really appreciate that.

She: I'll try to take off early on Friday, maybe we can go to a show or something?

He: Sounds great!

Think about perpetual problems in your relationship, those problems that come up often and never seem to go away. Do you feel that the TV is on too much? Do you feel that your partner is away all the time? Do you feel overburdened with housework? Do you feel like you spend too much time arguing about little things?

In healthy relationships, partners don't get defensive when discussing an area of conflict. According to Dr. Gottman, they instead take responsibility for their role in the issue and express an interest in their partner's feelings.

They say, *"You're right, I could have been more aware of how exhausted you were. What you are saying makes some sense, tell me more."* Having acknowledged that you have some role in the problem, you are accepting responsibility for a part of it. When you do this, you will find that you can have real dialogue with your partner! You become a team working through the problem together.

Imagine the conversations/arguments/fights you have about conflict areas going differently. If these discussions crop up all the time, you'll be sure to benefit greatly from handling them in a healthier way.

Think about a particular problem: What is your goal? What is the real problem underlying the conflict? In the first example, she wants more help and he wants them both to have a chance to relax. In the second example, he misses her, and she is stressed out at the office.

When you have time, make a list of the subjects you want or need to address – the ones that never seem to get resolved. Write down your desired way for the conversation to go. Using the examples above, try to replace defensiveness with taking responsibility the next time the subject comes up. Don't forget to complain without blame and express a positive need. You will be happily surprised with the results!

This article can be found online at:

<https://www.gottman.com/blog/weekend-homework-assignment-accepting-responsibility/>