

Start Soft When You Want to be Heard

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Has this happened in your relationship?

It's been a long day at work and when you walk through the door, the first thing you see is your spouse stretched out in the recliner watching TV. You stagger inside under the weight of the grocery bags you're carrying, and instantly feel upset. "This is not fair," you mutter to yourself. To make matters worse, you find that he forgot to put the dinner in the oven, even after you left it ready-to-go in the fridge with the directions taped to the refrigerator door. And the laundry that he promised to fold, well...it's still in the basket. You're disappointed and angry. You feel let down. He's defensive, and probably feeling a little guilty for not doing the things he promised to do. Tired, stressed, let down, disappointed, defensive, angry, and guilty. A recipe for an argument? You bet.

Turn it Around

It's probably going to feel normal to want to jump into an argument over this. But, think about what's going to best serve you and your relationship. You want to tell your spouse that you're disappointed and angry, and you want him to hear you. And you'd like to talk about how to handle household chores differently, so that this doesn't happen again. She / He's going to hear you much better if you start soft.

How You Start is How You'll Finish

Family researcher and psychologist John Gottman, Ph.D. calls it the softened start-up. He suggests that how you start an argument is how it will likely end. If you start soft, the chances of resolving the problem and finding a mutual solution are much greater than if you start out with harsh words that turn into an argument.

Gottman's Rules for Softened Start-up

1. **Keep it simple.** Avoid going on about what's bothering you. Briefly state your complaint. The longer the list of complaints, the sooner your listener stops paying attention.
2. **Complain but don't blame.** Talk about how you feel and how things look to you. Complain but don't criticize. What's the difference? Criticism is an attack on personality or character. For example, calling your partner a slob, or telling her you think she's lazy. A complaint on the other hand is a clear, respectful, specific, immediate statement of a problem.
3. **Start with something positive.** Stating problems in a positive way makes it easier for your partner to hear them. Instead of saying, "You never listen to what I want," try "I loved it last week when you surprised me and had dinner ready when I got home from work. I'd like more of that."
4. **"I" instead of "You."** Statements that begin with "I" tend to be less critical and don't put the receiver on the defensive. Statements that start with "you" are often "fighting words." Instead of "You never listen," try "I love it when you turn off the television and talk with me."
5. **Describe don't judge.** Instead of accusing or blaming, simply describe what you see happening.
6. **Talk clearly about what you need.** Don't expect your partner to read your mind. Be direct and say what you need. And forget about testing your partner. "If he loved me he should know ..." just doesn't work.
7. **Be polite.** Politeness goes a long way in a relationship. And, it's catching. Please and thank-you are powerful words.
8. **Express appreciation.** You can always think of something to appreciate about your partner. Even a broken clock is right twice a day!
9. **Don't store things up.** Take care of issues as they come up. Saving them to "cash in" all at once only creates a bigger argument.
10. **Allow yourself to be vulnerable.** Let your spouse know what you're feeling. Look behind emotions like anger and resentment for a "softer" emotion like disappointment, fear, hurt or insecurity.

Original Source: Gottman, John M., and Nan Silver. (1999). "Principle 5: Solve your solvable problems," in The seven principles for making marriages work (Chapter Eight, 157-185). New York: Three Rivers Press (Random House, Inc.).