

Rules for Softened Start-up

- **Be concise.**

It's harder to hear a complaint if it goes on and on, if it seems like a lengthy diatribe, even if it is about one thing. You usually don't need a lot of examples. Just describe the complaint, be brief, and then stop.

- **In the initial start-up complaint sentence, complain but don't blame.**

Let's assume you have a complaint to make or a gripe you want to discuss with your partner. Complaining is okay, but criticizing is not. Take the **BLAMING** out of the complaining. Talk about what you are feeling, and how you perceive things, presenting these as your *perceptions*, not as absolute truth.

- **Start with something positive.**

Posing problems in a positive context can often make it easier for your partner to hear a complaint. Think of a time when this issue was better and express appreciation of your partner's actions during that times. For example, instead of saying, "You are not affectionate when we watch TV," say, "I liked it the last time you held me during that romantic movie. I wish you would do that more often."

- **Make statements that start with "I" instead of "You."**

Child psychologist Haim Ginott (and later Thomas Gordon) noticed that statements that start with the word "I" instead of the word "you" are less likely to be critical and to make the partner defensive. Try to state what you are feeling in this particular situation with a complaint sentence that starts with the word "I" instead of saying, "YOU are not listening to me," just rephrase this as "I would like it if you'd listen to me."

- **Describe what is happening, don't evaluate or judge.**

Instead of accusing or blaming, just describe what you see happening. For example, instead of saying

"You don't help clean up," say "I seem to be winding up doing all the housecleaning today."

- **Talk clearly about what you need.**

Instead of asking your partner to guess what you need or to read your mind, just say it explicitly. For example, instead of saying "This dining room is a total mess," say "I'd appreciate it if you would clean your stuff off the dining room table."

- **Be polite.**

Make requests politely, adding such phrases as 'please' and "I would appreciate it if...." Politeness can go a long way, and it is contagious.

- **Express appreciation.**

If your partner has, at some time, been better in this situation, then ask for what you need and couch it with an appreciation of what your partner did right in the past and how much you miss that now.

- **Don't store things up.**

While being specific is better than launching a global criticism, storing things up so that you have a barrage of complaints in the "chute" is not a good idea.

- **Restate your feelings in terms of the more vulnerable emotions.**

Emotions that make you want to withdraw from the world, like sadness and fear, also convey vulnerability, and this may be easier for your partner to respond to than the emotions associated with resentment. At times, there may be a softer emotion "behind" your harder emotion. For example, behind your anger or resentment there may be hurt, disappointment, fear, or insecurity. If you can rephrase your anger and resentment in terms of these more vulnerable emotions, sometimes they are easier for your partner to hear. For example, instead of saying "It makes me mad when you don't pay attention to me at parties," see if makes sense to you to say, "I get lonely (or insecure) when you don't pay attention to me at parties."