

How to move from criticism to a healthy expression of our needs.

Putting an end to the spiral of blame!

*"Why am I always the one who has to empty the dishwasher? Can't you see it's full? When you put your plate in the sink, doesn't it "click" in your head? I'm really tired of having to think about everything and do everything in this household! "*

Chances are that this sounds familiar to you. This is the start of an exchange that will undoubtedly take a nasty turn. Either it will escalate verbally, or one of you will leave the conversation to avoid escalation. Either way, it will leave you both frustrated, angry, sad, misunderstood and probably feeling quite alone.

The example of the dishwasher can be applied to any topic of discussion a couple may have: the distribution of household chores, raising the children, money, sexuality, in-laws, acknowledgement that we expect from each other, friendships, work, leisure, etc. Any exchange can go into a nosedive as soon as the conversation starts on the tone of reproach.

And yet, as we all know from having experienced it, reproach does not do any good. It is a dead end for a relationship: the accumulated blame increases resentment and wears down the relationship as surely as a good file weakens the strongest bond.

We know this, yet why do we continue to be reproachful? For two reasons, we believe. On the one hand because we do not realize that our reality is not necessarily the same as our partner’s, and on the other hand because we have not learned to express our needs properly.

There is not just one reality

What generally leads us to express criticism is a deeply held perception that we all perceive reality in the same way, or rather that my reality must be the same as yours. Yet, nothing could be further from the truth.

Make no mistake: this is not about validating absolute relativism, endorsing the thesis of the existence of "alternative facts" or even challenging the evidence as fake news. Let us go back to the trivial example of the dishwasher that has now finished its cycle. That the dishwasher is filled with clean dishes is, of course, a fact, an indisputable, objective fact.

However, where our perception of reality may differ is when it comes to knowing what to do with the clean dishes in the dishwasher that has finished. For me perhaps, a dishwasher should be emptied as soon as you notice that it has turned off, so that you can reuse the dishes and not leave dirty ones in the sink; for you on the other hand, it is a task you prefer to do later, at the end of your workday for example, and the sink can serve as a receptacle for dirty dishes during that time.

These two perceptions of reality are both right. Objectively, there is not one which is true and the other which is false. They simply reflect two different worldviews on something as mundane as a dishwasher filled with clean dishes.

If I take the path of reproach, it is therefore because I am making a fatal mistake, namely that I consider that there is only one universal reality in which a clean dishwasher is emptied immediately, period! It is just improbable to be able to imagine another possibility, another reality, because any other attitude necessarily results from neglect, an obvious lack of good manners or even pure selfishness. So, since we share the same reality, if you have not emptied the dishwasher straight away, it's in full awareness, in full knowledge of the facts. Ultimately, you might have even done it on purpose, just to annoy me!

We can see here that when we are convinced that there is only one perception of reality that exists or that is right, then criticism can come easily.

So, what if I started by telling myself that if my partner does not empty the dishwasher right away, it's because (as crazy and unlikely as it sounds), he just doesn't see the dishwasher chore in the same way.

From criticism to expressing my needs

Even if I am aware that my partner might (it’s impossible, but hey, let's be crazy ;-) have a different viewpoint from mine on the dishwasher, that does not protect me from criticism.

The conversation could start as follows: *"I know very well that you don't care if the sink is overflowing with dirty dishes, but it's important to me, you understand! Do you understand that??? You do, don’t you? This isn't the first time I've told you, though, is it? In fact, you don't respect me at all, that's the sad truth!”* And here we go again.

Our purpose here, however, is not to stigmatize the one who starts the conversation reproachfully; the spouse who responds by defending themselves or by counter-attacking is just as responsible for the bad turn taken by the exchange in escalating the conversation further. The same goes for the one who leaves the conversation abruptly: this does not solve anything. There are two of us in this boat and we cannot avoid responsibility by arguing that *"you started it"* or *"if you didn’t speak to me in that tone, I wouldn’t answer like that"*. We will come back to this later.

If we fall into blame so quickly, it is because not only do we believe that our perception of reality is shared by our partner, but also that the expression of our needs is superfluous.

Because yes, criticism is none other than the very awkward expression of an unmet need. Behind each reproach, there is a very real need which is perfectly legitimate: to be appreciated, respected, acknowledged, supported, etc. If I blame you for not emptying the dishwasher straight away, it is because seeing a clean and tidy kitchen is important to me, that it calms me down, and because I just think that this task should be shared equally between us.

And when I express criticism, it is because I assume that you know what my needs are because we are a couple. And you are supposed to take that into account. Well, at the risk of disappointing you, nothing could be further from the truth once again.

Believing that because we have been together for years, you know what's going on in my head and in my heart, you know my needs without me having to express them, is a mistake commonly shared by many couples. It comes from a fantasy vision of the couple, that of fairy tales populated by princesses anticipating the slightest desires of their prince no less charming. Perhaps the first few months or years of the relationship also made us believe in the possibility of this fantasy, when we felt like we were feeling the exact same thing at the same time, sharing everything, the same desires, the same projects. But let us not be mistaken, this is passion, a time that is certainly very pleasant, even intoxicating, but it is quite distinct from the time where love is being built consciously, patiently, step by step: realising that whether we like it or not, as a couple we remain two very distinct individuals.

Connecting to your needs and learning to express them

I am solely responsible for (a) connecting to my needs and (b) expressing them.

Firstly, *you must be connected (no, not in the internet way)*. Carried away by the hustle and bustle of everyday life - work, kids, home, family, friends, etc. -, we sometimes find that we have left our needs behind. Forgotten the desire to practice a martial art, abandoned the wish to one day be my own boss, lost sight of the desire for a healthier life, etc. The result: frustrations accumulate and a fertile ground for reproach is made. What do I want? What is important to me today? What would do me good? These are questions that are sometimes no longer easy to answer and which require reconnecting to yourself.

Maybe I also simply have trouble *expressing* my needs. Let us go back to our dishwasher ;-) How can I express my needs properly? *"I need you to empty the dishwasher"?* No. *"I need you to respect me"?* No. My need is not related to you, it belongs to me and therefore must be expressed in "I". For example: *"You know what, every time I walk into the kitchen and see that there are dirty dishes in the sink and the dishwasher is full of clean dishes, I can't help but empty it and load the dishwasher with the dirty ones. Because I tell myself that you are not going to do it and therefore, I will probably have to do it later anyway, and since that drives me crazy, I prefer to do it right away. And I don't think that’s fair, I don't feel like I’m respecting myself. Anyway, it's not OK, I think that we are in a vicious cycle, and I know that some of it is me as well. I would really like to talk about it to get out of this cycle. What do you think?"*

By expressing my needs in this way, I’m opening the door to a proper exchange, to a real dialogue that allows for the co-construction of solutions that can reconcile both our needs.

The fear of rejection

Beyond the difficulty in connecting to our own needs, the awkwardness with which we express these needs often finds its cause in the fear of rejection.

It's relatively simple to blame someone, like throwing the hot potato back to them: it's up to them to deal with it now! Expressing a need is quite different: when I express a need, I’m not launching a missile at my partner’s head, I’m instead making a request. And a request, as we well know, can be refused. When I’m expressing a need, I’m therefore opening myself to otherness and I’m consciously taking the risk that my partner chooses not to meet my need or at least not immediately.

So what? What have I got to lose? That my partner cannot or does not want to meet my need (now), that we have to "negotiate"? It’s not a matter of life or death here, after all, and it's less frustrating and noxious than the mountains of blame and criticism that we build up towards each other.

So, to finish with the dishwasher ;-) it is still better to agree that every other day it will be emptied by my partner at the end of the day, and therefore every other day the sink will fill up with dirty dishes, rather than fret over the issue every single day, right? My need may not be met the way I want it to be met right away, but my partner will still empty the dishwasher every other day, which will fulfil my need for fairness.

Does the relationship have to satisfy all my needs?

Do all my needs have to be met by my relationship? For example: it has been years since we went to the cinema; It’s something that I really enjoy, but I find that for my partner, it’s not their thing anymore. I have a choice: (a) I can blame them over and over again; (b) we can discuss it constructively, to see if they might be willing to accompany me for certain types of films for example; (c) I can decide to cultivate this passion on my own or with friends; (d) I can choose to give up going to the movies for good.

We agree that solutions (a) and (d) must be discarded as they would fuel an undoubtedly deep resentment in the long run. If, from our discussion, I find that my partner really does not want to accompany me to the cinema any longer regardless of the film shown, what is preventing me from choosing to cultivate this passion on my own? This is in no way selfish, since by feeding my need to immerse myself from time to time in films, I’m taking care of myself and it is a safe bet that when I get home, it will be with a positive energy which in turn will nourish our relationship.

By meeting my own needs, even outside the relationship but of course after having discussed it with my partner, I’m taking care of the relationship. Believing the opposite, that a loved one must "tick all the boxes," that my relationship must meet all of my needs, comes from the same fantasized vision of the fairy-tale couple.

Be kind to yourself and to each other

Presented like that, obviously, it does not seem complicated to transform criticism into a healthy expression of our needs. But we all know it is never that easy in real life! It only takes a moment when you're a little more tired, a little more on edge, and bam!, criticism is fired like a cannonball, and it's too late!

That’s the advantage of there being the two of you ☺ ! Hit by this cannonball at full force, I too have a choice in the expression of my emotions: either I tense up and I respond harshly, or I verbalize my emotions by meta-communicating, that is to say by communicating about our communication. For example: *"Wow, when you said that like that, it's really hard and hurtful, I even feel like it's downright unfair. I understand that at the moment it's difficult for you, but what's going on? Why is this so difficult all of a sudden? Do you realize how we're talking to each other? That’s not us. What can we do together to resolve this over the long term? "*

Go further :

Maybe you want to further refine your technique of expressing your needs? You may find this [DESC method](https://comediation.be/comment-mieux-communiquer-avec-mon-conjoint/) blog post helpful.

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We hope this article will help you better connect to yourself and express your needs. Do not be discouraged, however, if you do not succeed right away, be kind with yourself and with your partner: learning to make requests rather than criticize is like a muscle, it has to be maintained and developed every day. We are obviously at your disposal during the sessions to continue to accompany you on this path.

Valérie Claeys & Yves Dinsart

*Together we counsel and offer support to couples having problems*

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