

# Toxic Tweaking: The Marriage Killer

Looking to turn your marriage around? Stop trying to nit pick your spouse to perfection!

Steve is the kind of guy you love to hate. He always has something positive to say. When someone would ask him how he was doing, he would reply, "If I were any better, I would be twins!"

Steve's philosophy is quite simple. "You can choose to be in a good mood or you can choose to be in a bad mood. I choose to be in a good mood. Each time something bad happens, I can choose to be a victim or I can choose to learn from it. I choose to learn from it. Every time someone comes to me complaining, I can choose to accept their complaining or I can point out the positive side of life. I chose the positive side of life."

The impact of a positive attitude is best understood through Steve's personal account of falling some 60 feet from a communications tower.

"The first thing that went through my mind was the well-being of my soon-to-be-born daughter," Steve explained. "Then, as I lay on the ground, I remembered that I had two choices: I could choose to live or I could choose to die. I chose to live."

"The paramedics were great," Steve continued. "But when they wheeled me into the ER and I saw the expressions on the faces of the doctors and nurses, I got really scared. In their eyes, I read 'he's a dead man.' I knew I needed to take action.

"There was a big burly nurse shouting questions at me. She asked if I was allergic to anything. 'Yes,' I replied. The

doctors and nurses stopped working as they waited for my reply. I took a deep breath and yelled, 'Gravity.' Over their laughter, I told them, 'I am choosing to live. Operate on me as if I am alive, not dead.'"

Steve lived thanks to the skill of his doctors, but also because of his amazing attitude. Attitude, after all, is everything. "Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own" (Matt. 6:34, NIV).

### The Power of Negative Thinking

Like Steve, marital experts are well aware of the power of negative thinking.

They have observed that the assumptions we make about our spouses and our relationships can determine the level of happiness we experience within our marriages. Several experts have gone so far as to say that a main reason why people divorce is that they consistently experience negative thoughts about their mates.

Negative thinking develops when we try to "nitpick" our spouses to perfection and constantly question their motives. In other words, you interpret the behavior of your wife to be much more negative than she had intended. You believe that your mate is trying to ruin or weaken the marriage on purpose.

During courtship and early married life, almost everything your wife says or does is interpreted in a positive light. She can do no wrong. Even unpleasant behavior can be turned around and made positive. This produces a "perfect" image of your loved one that emphasizes the appealing features and conceals the undesirable ones. It's like looking through a pair of rose-tinted glasses—everything is perfect.

But if the marriage runs into trouble, the repeated

disappointments, arguments and frustrations lead to a change in perspective. Your “rose-colored” perspective turns grey. Your attitude changes from one of admiration to faultfinding. Then, much of what your wife does is interpreted in a negative light. She can do no right.

The major problem with negative thinking is that we tend to see and to hear what we believe about one another, even if it isn't true. When you believe something about your wife, positive or negative, you will find evidence of that belief in everything she says or does. As Romans 14:14 says, “...but to him who thinks anything to be unclean, to him it is unclean” (NAS).

### How To Fight Negative Thinking

I am not advocating some kind of unrealistic “Pollyanna” thinking. We cannot just sit around wishing or hoping that our mates will change unhealthy behaviors. However, we need to consider that our mate's motives are often more positive than we are willing to acknowledge.

As we learn to fight negative thinking, the single greatest thing we can do is to keep track of our loved one's positive behavior. Your mate may already be doing some positive things, but you may not be totally aware of it.

For starters, try to notice methodically what your mate already does that pleases you. In order to note pleasing actions, spouses begin to really look at each other. This will force you to break through the barriers that obstruct your vision of your mate's good deeds.

The apostle Paul recognized the importance of this when he wrote: “Finally, brethren, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is of good repute, if there is any excellence and if anything worthy of praise, let your mind dwell on these

things.” (Phil. 4:8).

One of the best ways to care for your most-important relationships is to guard them from becoming infected by negative thinking. As you keep track of positive behavior, you will be erecting a solid foundation of protection around your marriage.

Steve concluded his story with these words of wisdom: “Life is all about choices. When you cut away all the junk, every situation is a choice. You choose how you react to situations. You choose how people affect your mood. The bottom line: It’s your choice how you live life.” NM

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**Gary Smalley** is president of Today’s Family, a non-profit counseling center in Branson, Missouri, and is the co-host of a national radio program called SmallTalk. For more information please visit .

## Various Forms of Criticism

### Joking

Criticism can be hidden under the camouflage of humor. Proverbs says, “As a madman who casts firebrands, arrows and death, so is the man who deceives his neighbor and then says, Was I not joking?” (Prov. 26:18-19, AMP).

### Zingers

You’ve heard of zingers—those lethal verbally guided missiles. The power of these caustic statements is apparent when you realize that one zinger can undo 20 acts of kindness.

### Faultfinding

Faultfinding is a favorite response of the perfectionistic spouse. It’s interesting to hear those who criticize say

they're just trying to remold their partner into a better person by offering some "constructive" criticism. All too often, criticism doesn't construct, it demolishes.

## Invalidating Words

Invalidation is like a slow, fatal disease that, once established in a relationship, spreads and destroys the positive feelings. As one wife said, "The so-called friend I married became my enemy with his unexpected attacks. I felt demeaned, put down, and my self-esteem slowly crumbled. I guess that's why our fights escalated so much. I had to survive."

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Adapted with permission from, *Communication: Key to Your Marriage* (Gospel Light), by H. Norman Wright.

## **Talk about it**

You've just read how negative thinking can ruin your marriage. Take an inventory of your thought life. Are you a negative thinker?

Read James 3:1-12. What are the consequences of allowing our negative thoughts to corrupt our words?

Memorize Philippians 4:8. Keep this passage in mind the next time you're tempted to give in to faultfinding and criticism?