

You Can't Change Your Spouse—So Now What?

You've tried to change your spouse, but it's not working. You need them to communicate better. That annoying habit of theirs is driving you crazy. You need more physical intimacy and only get excuses. The spiritual climate in your home needs serious help, and your spouse won't do anything about it. How can you get what you want from your spouse?

We've said it many times: Nagging, complaining, dragging it out of them, manipulating or controlling, the silent treatment—you've experienced how those methods don't work. But that doesn't mean you're powerless. There is much you can do to influence your spouse's behavior.

This is where a little psychology can help. We're not talking about manipulation, and you won't need a graduate degree to get this. There are a few basic principles that work so much better than the dysfunctional behaviors you may have been trying. These principles work so well that you may be surprised at how differently your spouse responds.

Are you ready to feel powerful in your relationship? Try these ideas.

Invite, Don't Force

Step back and seriously imagine yourself in your spouse's shoes. How would you react? Would your words and actions make you want to put on the brakes and get defensive? Would you have to refuse to comply simply to save face? Would you struggle to understand what you needed/wanted? Would your relationship feel so unsafe that you would constantly be protecting yourself? Do you feel as though you're always walking on eggshells?

Trying to force behavior change makes your spouse defensive even if the change would be “good for you.” It raises walls between you. And it never works anyway.

Instead, take the position of inviting your spouse to join you. Need better communication? Open the door at a time when your spouse can hear you, ask questions, and be an attentive listener. Want more intimacy? Speak your spouse’s love language, and search for and find the key to their heart. Need them to be more involved spiritually? Look for the ways God is already working in their heart, and seek to join Him in nurturing that part of your spouse’s life.

Work intentionally at being a safe and appealing place for your spouse to be.

Make It Easy

As humans we tend to do what comes most easily. Your criticism, nagging, silent treatment or attempt at control only make things harder. Study your spouse and seek to understand why they do what they do. Remember, you’re not responsible to “fix” them, but you can increase the likelihood they will change for the better.

If your spouse struggles with letting go of a bad habit, ask how you can support them in doing so. If they are afraid or stressed about getting the professional help they need or taking some other action, seek to understand how your encouragement or other help can lessen that hurdle.

Does your spouse need a healthier lifestyle? Put in the effort to prepare more wholesome meals or join your spouse in regular exercise. Does your spouse struggle to communicate? Learn the way they already communicate, and craft your own communication in ways they are more likely to understand. Intimacy a challenge? Be your wife’s hero or your husband’s biggest cheerleader, and seek to meet their needs even above your own. Is “super-Christian” mode offensive or off-putting to your

spouse? Find a five-minute practical devotional you can read together at breakfast or at bedtime.

Celebrate Every Win

We all enjoy being celebrated. Does your spouse feel as though they need to earn your love and acceptance? The converse does not mean you accept serious bad behavior. But almost every husband or wife thrives on appreciation. Your spouse will sense how much value you place on them and on your relationship, and most people of good will are likely to respond positively.

Pay attention to any effort your spouse makes in a positive direction and let them know how much it means to you. You are married to a sinner. (Your spouse is married to one too. Pause; you'll get that in a moment!) But focus on anything positive that you can.

When your spouse does something positive that you enjoy, celebrate that win, even if small. Make sure you're truly celebrating, and not doing it in a way that demeans your spouse.

- Have they lost five pounds? Don't make a snide remark such as, "At that rate it will take you 20 years to get healthy!" Instead, say, "Honey, thank you for caring enough about us to work on your physical health!"
- Has a better moment of communication happened? Don't ruin it with, "Finally, you listened to me for five minutes." Instead, say, "Honey, just knowing you heard me makes such a difference. I appreciate that."
- Did you finally get a "yes" last night? Don't come back with, "I wonder how long I'll have to wait until next time." Instead say, "Honey, it's hard for me to tell you how much it means to me when we can be sexual. It makes me feel a million feet tall."

Consciously look for things you can appreciate and celebrate.

If your spouse encouraged you in an inviting way, helped make something easier for you and celebrated and appreciated your small wins along the way, wouldn't you be more likely to do something they needed or wanted? Treat your husband or wife that way, and they will be more likely to respond in kind.

That's how relationships work.

Your Turn: How have you tried to get your spouse to change? Has it worked? Putting yourself in your spouse's shoes, how might you respond differently? Leave a comment below. {eoa}

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