

# THE RULES OF CHANGE

It is very easy to believe that change can't happen or that it's too late to make adjustments. Actually, the duration of a problem has nothing to do with your ability to change it. You can start making a difference all by yourself by following the rules of change:<sup>1</sup>

1. Do more of what works: When things are going well, don't just take it for granted. Examine what you are doing that is helpful and do more of that! Focus on what you can do rather than on what you cannot do. Instead of saying, "If we succeed once, we can again," couples say, "If we have any failures, we'll never make it." People have many labels for destructive conduct (such as being insensitive, controlling, or selfish). They are less likely to have names for desirable behaviors and, therefore, overlook them. If you can't see any positive efforts, look at what you are doing when the problem is less intense. Do what used to work to fix a problem (you probably stopped doing it). Do what works, even if you shouldn't have to. Ask yourself:
  - What do we do when we get along well that we haven't been doing lately?
  - What finally puts an end to our conflicts? Do it sooner.
  - What is different about times when something constructive comes out of a fight or when a problem happens but doesn't bother me?
  - What did we do in the beginning of our relationship that made it more satisfying?
2. Do the opposite of what doesn't work: Look at what you have been doing that is not working (nagging, withdrawing) and do the opposite! Changing attack reactions to approval and appreciation, and defensiveness into sympathy and agreement are obvious 180 degree changes. However, sometimes making a total change takes a lot of faith. You may feel you are "joining the enemy." But you can do anything on an experimental basis. Make the change with complete sincerity because if you seem disingenuous, your plan won't work. Notice how the following 180 degree changes brought about desirable results:
  - A woman who had been begging her husband to spend more time at home began encouraging him to stay away and he started showing interest in the family.
  - A man was upset by how much his wife always criticized their daughter and he always intervened. One time, as an experiment, when his wife was critical he agreed with her. His wife was so surprised that she stopped her lecture all together.When you see any progress, stick with the plan. Going back to your old behavior will cause you to lose what little ground you've gained. Continue to do what you are doing until you are convinced that your partner's improvements have become habits.
3. Change anything: If you can't make a 180 degree change, change anything. What would your spouse say you need to change for your marriage to work? What would you have to do for your partner to see a difference in you? The idea is not to just give in and please your spouse, but to shake up your mind and start thinking about changes you can make in yourself. When either spouse does something different, it interrupts the negative sequence of events and prevents a vicious cycle from continuing. A small change can lead to bigger changes:
  - Change where you fight: You can make a rule to fight only in the bathroom or to argue in writing or by phone.

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<sup>1</sup> Ideas about change were taken from *Divorce Busting* by Michele Weiner-Davis (Simon & Schuster, 1992).

- Change when you fight: Postpone fights until after dinner. Pick specific weekly times when a hurt spouse can ask any questions about an infidelity. The guilty spouse can answer questions more compassionately when he or she knows there is a limit to constant rumination.
  - Change how you fight: Wear Groucho Marx glasses or hold your nose when you argue. Stick out your tongue when things get intense.<sup>2</sup> Time “rounds” of fights so that each person has just three minutes to state the case. Require the other person to paraphrase before making his or her own point.
  - Change who is in charge: Flip a coin to determine who handles specific discipline issues. Decide who makes the rules for different children. Let one person make decisions on odd days and the other make decisions on even days.
4. Act as if the change you want has already happened: Seeing or speaking things as you want them to be is a powerful way to induce change. Good can be found in almost any negative behavior and used as a wedge to start things moving. A partner’s withdrawal can be taken as thoughtful silence. Notice how even criticism can be responded to as though it was caring and concern:
- A woman got home at 1:00 A.M. after a night out with her friends and found her husband glaring at her. She thanked him for waiting up for her and told him it was very sweet of him to be concerned. An argument was avoided and they went to bed with a hug.
5. Don’t talk, act: Talking too much can block solutions. Lecturing, pleading, complaining, explaining, and threatening are usually signs that you’re trying so hard to change another person that you are overlooking actions you can take. Even if you are not lecturing but simply expressing your feelings, wants, and limits, your partner may have stopped listening to you. Most people have some “wild” idea about what could be done to change their problem but are afraid to try it. One “daring” action will speak a thousand words:
- After years of complaining that his wife always made them late, a man simply left when it was time to go. Of course, she was furious about the incident but was on time after that.
6. Give change a chance: You may need to consistently practice a new behavior for two to three weeks before you start to notice any progress. Don’t expect too much too soon, but when it is clear that an approach is not working, try something else. Have realistic goals. Expect neither failure nor perfection. When you do see some progress, don’t assume your partner is now a changed person. You will need to keep up your efforts for improvements to last. Make sure you aren’t “backsliding.” Review what you’ve been doing:
- Is the strategy you’re using different enough?
  - Is it too soon to tell if your approach is having an effect?
  - Are you overlooking small changes?
  - Are you making half-hearted efforts or reverting back to your old ways?
  - When you run out of ideas, seek help. You can discover the strategy that is just right for you.

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<sup>2</sup> See *The Seven Principles of Making Marriage Work* by John M. Gottman (Crown Publishers, 1999) for “repair attempts.”