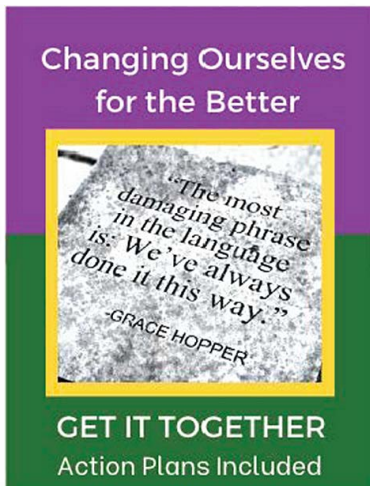


# Changing Ourselves for the Better

Create your own easy-to-follow, step-by-step  
action plans for improving your relationship



Be the change you want to see

## Changing ourselves for the better: A Couples guide

Admit it. You're not perfect. You get mad. You hold a grudge. You lash out, shut down, roll your eyes, run away. You say things you shouldn't. What else is new?

### Welcome to the party. You're human.

Everybody overreacts under stress. It's how we're built. In retrospect, we know better. But in the heat of the moment, we all say and do things that make matters worse.

**"My lizard brain made me do it."** Our brains have evolved an ingenious mechanism for protecting us from potential harm. Whenever we feel threatened—physically or emotionally—one of three reactions kicks in to protect us. We 1) fight, 2) flee, or 3) freeze. Often, we do a combination of the three.

It's important to remember: **we don't choose these reactions.** They're programmed into us to keep us safe. Think: **Better Safe than Sorry**, and this makes sense.

Here's an example. Say I'm at a concert and I hear a loud bang coming from the stage. I don't stop and try to figure out whether the bang was a gunshot—or a child's balloon popping. The instant my ears hear the bang, my hormonal alarm system kicks in. It's time to hit the ground, play dead, or get moving.

Fortunately, most of us don't need to be on high alert very often. But the rational mind—the relative newcomer on the evolutionary scene—doesn't process information fast enough to keep the more primitive parts of our brain from instantly, thoughtlessly reacting—and often, overreacting—to perceived threats.

When there is frequent conflict in a relationship, the body has a hard time achieving or maintaining a state of calm. Although modern humans are seldom confronted by bears, wolves, or gunshots, our fear circuit can go off just as quickly during a highly charged fight with a loved one, boss, bully, or spurned lover.

As conscious beings, we can challenge our reactions and argue with automatic thoughts. But we can't stop them from coming—especially if they come often. We are deeply affected by our interpersonal relationships, and also damaged by these reactions. Below are examples of each of the three reactions to stress:

## "It's time to hit the ground, play dead, or get moving."

- **Fight:** We argue. Attack. Push. Scream. Defend. Kick doors. Throw plates.
- **Flee:** We run away. Abuse chemicals. Watch porn. Start inappropriate relationships.
- **Freeze:** We shut down. Space out. Close off. Hold chronic tension in our muscles and organs. Eventually, we will probably have a host of symptoms as a result: aches and pains, heart palpitations, rashes, anxiety, insomnia, depression.

# Step 1. The checklist

## Instructions

Make two copies of the checklist below and each of you fill one out. Check any items that apply to you. Some may be hard to admit, but be honest. Rather than rationalizing why you do what you do, or mentally checking off the bad habits that apply to your partner, own your part. Take credit for the ways in which you keep stepping on your partner's toes.

Once you've both finished, take turns reading any behaviors you checked out loud to each other. It's okay that some sound similar. Each one gets at something slightly different. Important: ***When you read your checked items to each other, read each entry s-l-o-w-l-y***. If you rush through your list, your partner won't be able to take in what you've said.

When you've both finished reading your checklists to each other, take a few minutes to talk about how it felt doing the exercise. Each description is getting at something slightly different.

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## Fill out the checklist below as honestly and completely as possible before sharing them with each other.

I know that you hardly ever hear me admit when I've made a mistake. It's not because I think I'm perfect. It's because I am embarrassed/ashamed. I promise to work on admitting when I've made a mistake, instead of defending my actions or blaming others. **Work on: Admitting mistakes.**

Sometimes I act like a critical parent with you. I'm sorry. I want to change that. I want to remember that although we often see and do things differently, you are as important as I am in every way. You deserve respect. If I slip and notice myself judging, criticizing, or assuming the worst about you, I will stop myself, fill out a Sorry card, and make amends. **Work on: Treating you as an equal, not a child or employee.**

Sometimes it's hard for me to admit when my words or actions have hurt you. I'm sorry. I often try to justify my own hurtful behavior. I promise to take responsibility when you tell me my behavior felt insensitive, thoughtless or unkind. ***I will focus on your hurt feelings, not the 'rightness' of my argument.*** And I will apologize rather than defending my behavior. **Work on: Accepting as fact when you tell me my actions hurt you. Make sure your partner feels understood.**

I have difficulty backing away from the idea that I am right and you are wrong. I can see how my attitude makes our conflicts worse, and makes me seem like a know-it-all. I want to improve my ability to simply empathize with you, without needing to be right all the time. **Work on: Mutual understanding, not who's right and who's wrong.**

Sometimes when I feel bored or unlovable, I blame those feelings on you.

**Work on:** Owning my issues instead of blaming you for my unhappiness.

Example.

Nick: I hate how I look!

Jess: What's wrong?

Nick: I'm fat. I'm ugly. Admit it, you think I'm fat and ugly, don't you?

Jess: That's not fair. I haven't said a thing about your weight.

Nick: I know. But I can tell. You're embarrassed to be seen with me. Just admit it.

Sometimes I dismiss your ideas, especially when I disagree with them. I know this can be frustrating. You deserve to have your ideas considered. I will try harder to understand and accept how you experience the world, and not dismiss, invalidate or try to change how you're feeling. **Work on: Giving you respect around the feelings or ideas you have, without trying to change, dismiss or poke holes in them.**

There are times when I misinterpret reasonable requests as demands, and legitimate complaints as attacks on my character. When this happens, I get defensive. I either blow up, or react as if you just questioned my integrity. This isn't fair to you. You should be able to tell me when something I do bugs you and feel safe talking about it with me. **Work on: Softening my response to reasonable requests, complaints or constructive criticism.**

When something bad happens unexpectedly, I know that my reflex is to blame someone. When I do it in public, it's not only hurtful, but embarrassing. I'm going to stop this bad habit. **Work on: Responding to problems with a positive attitude, so no one gets embarrassed or feels blamed.**

Sometimes I say I've done something when I really haven't--or say I haven't done something when I really have. What's almost as bad as the lying, is that instead of apologizing, I accuse you of nagging, snooping around, or being a control freak. I'm sorry. You should be able to count on me to the truth when you ask me a question, even if it reveals something I don't feel good about. **Work on: Doing what I say I will do. Not lying, blowing you off, or blaming you when I've done one something I know you won't like.**

When I'm hurt, anxious, or upset I often withdraw or shut down. I am going to work on being more open about what's going on, so you don't have to guess, worry, or walk on eggshells. I know it scares you when I do this. **Work on: Limiting silences to a reasonable, finite, agreed upon amount of time (no more than an hour or two), and be the one to initiate--either in writing or in person--a conversation about what's going on.**

I can be rude and insensitive to your feelings sometimes, which I rarely admit. I want to be more mindful of how things might affect you—before I blurt out what I'm thinking. **Work on: a) Noticing when I have the urge to be snide, sarcastic, or humorous (at someone else's expense), b) holding my tongue, if what I am about to say may cause pain.**

Sometimes I'm selfish. I use: work, physical complaints, or my bloated sense of self-importance as excuses for under-functioning in our relationship, and letting you do more than your share. I want to stop being so arrogant and dishonest with you. I will stop making excuses and start doing more to fulfill your requests and meet your needs. **Work on: Owning up to my sense of entitlement and taking steps to up my game, instead of making excuses, or calling you 'needy' or 'oversensitive' when you react to my selfishness.**

Because I have been dishonest with you in the past, it makes sense that you would have trouble trusting me now. I need to take responsibility for my actions and show you I have changed before you'll be able to trust me more fully again. I am sorry for hurting you. **Work on: Telling the whole truth, even when it's embarrassing, or shows me in a negative light.**

Sometimes I blow up, when I really should take time to calm down and figure out what I need. I need to learn how to be less angry. And when I am angry, I need to find ways to express it, without lashing out, calling you names, or saying things designed to intimidate you or get you to do what I want. **Work on: Anger management, self-soothing techniques, identifying the sequence of events that are likely to trigger an outburst, and learn ways to prevent, interrupt, and change the sequence.**

Sometimes I use humor or sarcasm in ways that hurt or embarrass you, and then insist I was just joking if you say Ouch. I understand that if a joke hurts someone, it's not funny. I want you to feel safe with me and not worry about me saying things that will make you feel bad. **Work on: Using humor to amuse, not to impress others, or to intimidate, embarrass, or punish others.**

Sometimes I drink (or use pot, pornography, or other substances) too much and I know this scares you. I may also have tried to blame you for 'driving me to drink, spend money, flirt, etc.' I know that I am responsible for my addictive behaviors. You have not made me do any of them. I am willing to talk with Betsy (or another expert) about this so it doesn't continue to cause problems in our relationship. I want you to always be able to count on me. **Work on: My addictive behaviors by doing one or a combination of these: cutting up my credit card, throwing out all the booze in the house, reading, therapy, 12-step group, or treatment.**

Sometimes I say things about you to our kids or other family members so they'll take my side instead of yours. This is totally uncalled for and inappropriate. I will try to be more direct with you about my concerns and not drag other people into our problems. **Work on: Looking for positive things to share about you with the people in my life. I promise to talk to you privately and/or in therapy if I have complaints or unmet needs.**

Sometimes I don't show appreciation for things you do. It's partly because I feel inadequate compared to you. I'm sorry. I want to show you how much I appreciate you more often, and not hold back, even when I'm feeling bad about myself. **Work on: Noticing all you do and showing you appreciation more often.**

I have threatened to: leave divorce ruin your reputation make you pay. I need to stop terrorizing you. This behavior is mean-spirited and short-sighted. It scares you, makes you mad, and leaves you feeling unprotected and alone. I know that is no way to treat the most important person in my life.

**Work on: Never threatening to do things to frighten, control, or shock you.**

I know that I haven't been as affectionate or felt as sexual as you would like. I promise to try harder to be more physical with you. I want you to feel wanted, not rejected. I'll try to stay open more often to being close. **Work on: Being more affectionate. Being more open to intimacy. Also, not staying up so late, so I'm better-rested and more relaxed during the day.**

other

Before you get together to go over these with your partner, read your checked items out loud to yourself. This should put you in a humble place, which is where you want to be before you do this exercise.

## Step 2 Converting your checklists into Action Plans

**Instructions:** Now that each of you has identified what you do when you get triggered, it's time to quit the blame and shame game, and get to work. As long as you both commit to taking action, things will only get better!

### Working together

- 1) The first thing you'll do is choose one of behaviors from the checklist you just finished reading to your partner. That will be the behavior you'll put on your Action Plan. If you're not sure where to start, ask your partner to choose one. That way, you'll be sure to work on a change your partner will appreciate.
- 2) Next, read through the **SAMPLE ACTION PLAN** at the end of this document. It's self-explanatory and will give you a good idea of what kinds of things to include when you make your own.
- 3) Now you're ready to **fill out the Action Plan Template**. It follows the same steps as the Action Plan you just read through.
- 4) Print out the template and take some time to really think about concrete action steps you will take to make the changes you've chosen. Get a clear picture in your head of what success will look like. What will you be doing differently once you've changed this behavior? Remembering the benefits will help you stay positive, focused and motivated.

## Step 2 My Action Plan:

Here is an example of what your Action Plan will look like. You choose the behavior you want to change, and come up with concrete action steps to help you get there.

<b>1. This is the behavior I need to change</b>	<b>2. What makes it hurtful to others?</b>
I criticize you in front of the kids.	It's disrespectful. And it sends the message to our kids that disrespecting you is okay.
<b>3. Personal reasons for stopping</b>	<b>4. Here are my action steps</b>
I want to be a more respectful person and a better role model to our kids.  It's the behavior of a bully, not a loving partner.  It's obnoxious, and I don't want to turn into my parents.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. I will not criticize you in public.</li><li>2. I will talk to you privately if I'm unhappy with something you do.</li><li>3. I will show appreciation in front of the kids for positive things you do .</li></ol>
<b>5. If you're willing, here's what you can do to help me be successful</b>	
If you think I'm likely to disagree with you about something, talk to me about it privately. That way, I can make sure I don't let my negativity leak out onto the kids. How about if we come up with a hand signal you can use if you sense I'm in a critical mood. And if you do something positive that I don't notice, feel free to bring it to my attention, and I will say something to show I appreciate it,	



## My Action Plan

**Instructions:** This template is designed to help you change any behavior that's hurting your relationships. Completing it will help you come up with action steps you can take to make changes for the better.

1. This is the behavior I need to change	2. What makes it hurtful to others?
3. Personal reasons for stopping	4. Here are my action steps
5. If you're willing, here's what you can do to help me be successful	

## Step 3 Follow-up

On your calendar, mark a day and time each week when you will check in with each other on your action plans. By picking the same time and date each week, you increase the likelihood of making progress and sticking with it.

When you've changed one behavior from your checklist, choose another. Action Plans can be used to break down any goal into specific behaviors.

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