

Expand Your Perceptions

How to See the Goodness in Your Spouse

By Nathan Cobb, Ph.D.

Contact:

Cobb Counselling & Consulting

Phone: (403) 255-8577

Email: drcobb@shaw.ca

Copyright © Nathan Cobb, 2006. All rights reserved.

No portion of this publication may be reproduced or distributed in any form or by any means without permission in writing from the author. Permission is granted to download and print this material for personal, non-commercial use only.

This publication is intended to provide information with the understanding that the author is not engaged in rendering professional services. If professional advice or expert assistance is required, the services of a competent professional person should be sought.

Attribution Research

Imagine the following situation. Someone cuts you off in traffic, nearly causing an accident. Your first thought might be, “What a jerk! Idiot driver!” A few days later, you cut someone else off in traffic the same way. Your first thought might be, “Uh oh. I didn’t see him. I wasn’t paying attention.” In the first case, you see the other driver’s behavior as caused by the kind of person he is. In the second case, you see your own behavior—the *same* behavior—as the result of being momentarily distracted.

There is an area of social science research that looks at attributions. Attributions are explanations for why people behave the way they do and who is responsible for things that happen. According to this research, when we explain other people’s behavior we often make what is called a *fundamental attribution error*: we are more likely to attribute their behavior to their character, or who they *are*, rather than to situational factors. The reverse is typically true when we evaluate our *own* behavior.

Attribution research also shows that there are differences in how we explain successes and failures. We tend to see our own successes as the result of personal and enduring qualities we possess such as character, conscious effort and intelligence—reflections of who we are as people. Our failures, however, we tend to attribute to external, changeable or situational factors, such as timing, not paying attention, the environment, or chance. Unfortunately, we sometimes fail to extend the same courtesy to others.

This is not suggesting that it’s okay to give credit where none is due, or make excuses for bad behavior. We are accountable for negative intentions or lack of effort. The point is that we often take much less into account when judging the actions of others than we do when judging our own actions. Why is this so?

One reason might be that when we judge our own behavior we have more information to guide our conclusions. That is, we know our own intentions. We know how we felt at the time. We know what was going on in our head and in our heart. We know our past experiences.

When we judge others however, we don’t have access to this information. All we have is what we *see or hear*—the behavior of the other person. So we base our conclusions on limited information to begin with. Then we filter that information through our own perceptual limitations—our biases, our past experiences, our blind spots, our own agenda—to come up with an explanation that may have very little to do with the actual causes.

Attributions in Marriage

Now let’s apply these principles to marriage. Undoubtedly, your spouse does things that please you, things that puzzle you, things that annoy you, and things that anger you. Whether you are aware of doing so or not, like most people, you make up stories to explain this behavior.

One way to tell the difference between distressed marriages and happy marriages is by listening to the stories that spouses come up with for explaining each other's behavior. Consider the following examples.

- He avoids me because he doesn't want to be with me.
- She nags so much because she's bossy.
- She argues with me because she's stubborn.
- He lost his job because his boss is a jerk.
- She was late because she got stuck in traffic.
- He got angry because of the hurtful thing I said.
- She got angry because she is insecure.

Some of these explanations for upsetting events focus on the other person's intentions and enduring personality characteristics (i.e. he doesn't want to be with me, she's bossy, she's insecure). Other explanations focus on situational or temporary causes (i.e. she got stuck in traffic, his boss is a jerk, I said something mean).

In happier marriages, spouses tend to treat each other with a forgiving, gracious spirit, by giving their partner the benefit of the doubt when things go wrong (i.e. attributing failures to changeable situations, temporary setbacks, external factors, or unintended results) and credit when things go right (i.e. attributing positive behavior to internal, enduring traits and positive intentions).

In contrast, spouses in distressed marriages tend to be *less* generous and *more* judgmental in their perceptions of each other. For example, if George comes home late Susan attacks him for being thoughtless and inconsiderate. She doesn't take into account situational factors such as a demanding boss or an unhappy home life. If Susan has been pleasant and encouraging, George chalks it up to chance rather than giving Susan credit for conscious efforts to communicate better.

Here are some other examples. Notice how the same event can invite different reactions.

Negative Event: Susan Ignores John.

Happy Marriage

At first, John isn't sure that she heard him. She seems distant. He tells himself something must be wrong (temporary) but he tries not to jump to conclusions. He reminds himself that Susan usually has goodwill toward him. He asks her if she wants to talk or if she'd rather be left alone.

Distressed Marriage

John tells himself she is ignoring him because she is selfish (a stable, personal trait) and intends to punish him because he won't do things her way (negative intention). He decides to "play her game" and ignore her too.

Positive Event: John cooks dinner for Susan.

Happy Marriage

Susan tells herself that he is doing it because he is kind and responsive to her needs (stable, personality traits), and because he wants her to feel loved (positive intention). She notes that he is acting on something meaningful to her.

Distressed Marriage

Susan says to herself that he is only doing it because she asked him to (situational), and because she isn't talking to him anymore, not out of a sincere desire of his heart (a temporary, *external* force is making him do it).

We can summarize these ideas in the following charts:

Happy Marriages

<p><i>How You Explain Your Spouse's Positive Actions</i> Example: When your spouse remembers your birthday</p>	<p><i>How You Explain Your Spouse's Negative Actions</i> Example: When your spouse forgets your birthday</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Enduring, internal factors • Sustained effort • Positive intention • Stable character & personality traits • Competence 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Changeable or situational factors • Chance • Unintended forces • Accidental or momentary factors

Distressed Marriages

<p><i>How You Explain Spouses' Positive Actions</i> Example: When your spouse remembers your birthday</p>	<p><i>How You Explain Spouse's Negative Actions</i> Example: When your spouse forgets your birthday</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Changeable, situational factors • Chance • Unintended forces • Accidental or momentary factors • Ulterior motives 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Enduring, internal factors • Sustained effort • Negative intention • Stable character & personality traits • Incompetence

Exercise 1

This exercise is to help you become aware of how you tend to judge your partner's actions compared to your own actions. First, think of five positive things your partner has done lately in the marriage. Write them in the left column. Then in the right column, write down why you thought your spouse did them.

Positive Things My Partner Did Recently

Why My Partner Did That

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

4. _____

5. _____

Now think of some things your partner has done lately that annoyed you. Write them down in the left column. On the right-hand side, write down why you thought your spouse did them.

Things My Partner Did that Annoyed Me

Why My Partner Did That

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

Now think of five things *you* have done lately in your marriage that are positive. Write them down in the left column. For each one, write the underlying reasons for your behavior on the right-hand side.

Positive Things I Have Done Lately

Why I Did That

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

4. _____

5. _____

Now think of several things *you* have done lately in your marriage that annoyed or upset your spouse. Write them down in the left column. For each one, write the underlying reasons for your behavior on the right-hand side.

Negative Things I Have Done Lately	Why I Did That
1. _____	_____
2. _____	_____
3. _____	_____

Take some time now to reflect on your responses to this exercise. Use the charts on page 4 to help you. Do you judge yourself and your partner by the same standards or by different standards? Are you prone to give your partner credit for things that go right and the benefit of the doubt when things go wrong? Or do you tend to be harsh and critical of your partner? Do you tend to be harsh and critical of yourself? Which was easier to think of, the positive things about your partner or the negative things?

In the space below jot down what you learned from this exercise:

Exercise 2

Based on what you have learned so far and what you know about yourself, use the following scale to rate how harshly or fairly you tend to judge yourself and your partner.

1. How fair am I to myself when I evaluate my negative behavior:

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Not Very Fair					Very Fair				
I put myself down. I assume the worst about myself. I focus on my deficiencies. I personalize my failures.					I try to be balanced. I don't beat myself up. I try to take situational factors, not just personal ones, into account				

2. How fair am I to myself when I evaluate my positive behavior:

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Not Very Fair							Very Fair		
I discount my efforts. I don't give myself credit. I attribute my successes to situational causes outside of my control.							I give myself credit where it's due. I acknowledge my efforts, strengths, and successes easily.		

3. How fair I am to my partner when I evaluate my partner's negative behavior:

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Not Very Fair							Very Fair		
I put him/her down. I assume the worst intentions. I take things personally. I focus on his/her deficiencies.							I try to be balanced. I try to take situational factors into account. I try to give him/her the benefit of the doubt		

4. How fair I am to my partner when I evaluate my partner's positive behavior:

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Not Very Fair							Very Fair		
I discount my partner's efforts. I don't give him/her credit. I assume he/she didn't mean it or was lucky.							I give him/her full credit where it's due. I acknowledge his/her efforts, strengths, and successes easily.		

If any of your ratings are less than eight—no one is perfect at this—what could you begin to do to improve? Write down three specific things you plan to do to cultivate a more gracious, forgiving spirit.

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

Its Not What Happens; It's How We Explain It

In marriage it's not the broken toilet or the bounced check that causes problems. It's what the broken toilet and the bounced check *mean* to each of us and how we *react* to each other's view that stirs up trouble. Specifically, two things must happen for contention to occur: 1) we *choose* perspectives about events that limit our ability to see possibilities, solutions or goodness in each other, and 2) we refuse to accept our partner's perspective as valid and real.

An example will make this clear. Think of messy bathrooms. A lot of wives see messy bathrooms and think, "Who does he think I am? He's such a slob. He doesn't know how hard I work. I married a man who thinks that housework is a woman's job." She creates these stories in her mind to explain his behavior, and these stories, in turn, create angry feelings in her.

If she shares these feelings with her husband, there is a remote chance he will respond positively. He might say something like, "I've never seen myself as lazy or chauvinistic, but I can see how it appears that way. In fact, maybe there are times when I do take the easy way out." If this happens and she graciously accepts his effort to acknowledge her perspective, then they'll have a discussion, but not a fight.

In reality, however, a lot of husbands hear such a complaint and say, "There you go again. You're always so critical. I can never do anything right. You never appreciate all that I do for our family." So he creates these stories in his mind to explain her behavior, and these stories, in turn, invite angry feelings for him.

The problem escalates when they both decide to share these ideas with each other. Not only have they chosen these unhelpful perspectives but she refuses to appreciate how picked on he feels, and he refuses to see how overwhelmed and devalued she feels. They create a climate of contention. The fight is on.

But fights aren't always verbal. Some couples never say anything to each other when there's a problem, particularly if they view confrontation as bad. Still, they silently choose to think in unhelpful ways and silently resist each other's reality.

For example, he will just come home one day and find his messy shaving gear sitting on his pillow. Thinking she's making a big deal of nothing, he'll stubbornly set them aside on the nightstand by his bed. After he shaves the next morning he'll "forget" to put his stuff away again. The next time it might be his wet towel on his pillow.

Now you might say, "Okay. I can accept that sometimes I get it wrong and blame and criticize my partner. But I'm hearing that things would still be okay if my partner would just listen to me and not get defensive." This may be true, but it overlooks an important fact. No one is perfect. We drop spaghetti down our shirts. We miss the freeway exit. Some of us struggle to get up in the morning. It doesn't feel good to be judged and evaluated on our weaknesses. We all have bad days. We all need to know that our loved ones still respect us and think highly of us even when we make mistakes. This message is hard to hear through blame and criticism.

Some might say, “I don’t understand this idea of *choosing*. I don’t choose how I see things. I don’t *choose* for my husband to be lazy. He *is* lazy.” Or, “I don’t choose for my wife to be bossy. She *is* bossy. I’m just telling it like it is.”

The problem here is that “lazy” and “bossy” are interpretations of behavior, not objective facts. Whether we’re aware of choosing or not, when we make up our minds about how to see the world we have still chosen among many possible ways of seeing the world. When we insist that one particular view is the “right” view, and we have it, we automatically blind ourselves to countless other, potentially more helpful, less one-sided ways of seeing.

Perception—our ability to observe and distinguish things— is so much a part of our daily experience that we are often not aware of perceiving. We assume we’re seeing things as they *are* without realizing that what we see filters through our personal biases, our life experiences, our core assumptions about life, even our physiology.

Our inability to separate ourselves from the very tools that allow us to perceive—our body and our mind—places certain limitations on our abilities to perceive “accurately.” This is a sobering thought when we appreciate how much perception influences our emotional responses, our actions, our thoughts, and our choices. Our perceptions determine what is real to us. Sometimes we simply, “do not see that we do not see¹.”

When we act on accusing attitudes and limited perceptions *as though* such explanations were indisputable, the result is often contention and hard feelings. If you say your spouse is defective, lacking in character, poorly adjusted, or inadequate instead of acknowledging your partner’s reality and what is happening *between you*, then you’ve put in place an unnecessary barrier to resolving issues.

Your spouse may still respond positively. He or she may patiently move that barrier aside to find out what is really bothering you. This kind of a response, however, takes a great deal of self-control, personal awareness, and humility. We do well to aspire to this level of compassion and caring, but it probably doesn’t happen as often as we might hope.

It’s much more likely that your spouse will feel attacked, angry, and misunderstood because the perspective you’ve chosen is critical and blaming. He or she may react by getting defensive or counterattacking. When this happens, the gap between you that represents your perceived differences will grow wider, even though it may not have been that wide to begin with.

As this manner of relating *becomes a habit* for both of you, you’ll become polarized. Over time, your friendship and feelings of goodwill toward each other may gradually weaken until the bonds are no longer strong enough to hold you together. This is what precedes most divorces—not chronic fighting, but a state of lonely disconnection.

Does this mean that we should never form our own conclusions? No, we are always forming conclusions. We can’t get away from that. It just means that we must be aware of the

¹ Maturana, H. R., & Varela, F. J. (1998). The tree of knowledge: The biological roots of human understanding. Boston: Shambhala. (P. 19).

consequences of coming to a particular conclusion. We must stay open-minded to the possibility of other views that are more useful, that open up more possibilities for solutions. We must learn to appreciate that there is always more than one possible explanation for what we see happening. The most helpful explanation may not be the one we are so sure about.

Often the best thing we can do is let go of the need to be right and leave behind the hollow victories and the bitter defeats associated with this need.

Remember that this isn't about finding the one "true" explanation. It's about finding one that fits the situation well and allows each other the most freedom to expand and connect and grow.

Self-Assessment

It may help to reflect on the following questions:

- a. Do I find it difficult to truly enjoy my spouse because I am too busy defending myself, being right, or trying to avoid negative feelings?
- b. Have I adopted a rigid set of rules about what my partner is supposed to say or do in certain situations?
- c. Do I frequently feel let down, resentful or disappointed when my partner doesn't follow these rules?
- d. Do I feel more and more sensitive to my partner's complaints? Do I take things personally?
- e. Do I frequently interpret things from a negative viewpoint?
- f. Am I prone to complain about negative things in the relationship, no matter how minor they are, while staying silent about the positive things that happen?
- g. Are my perceptions fueled by an innocent victim mindset? (Example: "Poor me!" Feeling unfairly treated if your spouse complains about your behavior).
- h. Are my perceptions fueled by a righteous indignation mindset? (Example: "How dare you!" Feeling personally slighted if your spouse offends you unintentionally).

If you answer yes to any of these questions then your perceptions may be part of the communication problems between you and your spouse. The answer is to strive to see things in ways that invite solutions and possibilities, not certainties and problems; and to work hard at accepting each other's reality as valid.

The next section outlines some ways you might work on seeing things differently: 1) check your perception, 2) accept the distinction between intent and impact, and 3) assume goodwill.

Strategies for accepting your spouse's views as valid will be covered in more detail in later articles.

Strategies for Seeing Solutions and Possibilities

Strategy 1: Check Your Perception

The word “check” has a double meaning here. It means developing the habit of examining your perceptions to see if they are helpful. It also means keeping your perceptions “in check” so that they don't cause problems in your relationship. The idea is to consciously avoid choosing perspectives that are likely to create bad feelings in you and that invite bad feelings and resistance from your spouse.

Take Candice and Greg for example. Candice gets upset that Greg works long hours at his job and spends a lot of time with his friends. She resents that he leaves her to do all of the housework and to look after the kids. It seems like he's never home to help her.

Greg gets upset when Candice scolds him with an acid tongue and harsh criticism. He resents that he can't seem to please Candice or do anything right.

Unfortunately, the way they explain these events makes the problem worse. Greg tells himself (and Candice, frequently) that she is a harsh and critical person who is only happy when he is miserable. As a result, he makes little effort to see things from her point of view and figures that it doesn't matter what he does because it will never be enough. So he doesn't do anything. In fact, sometimes he deliberately withholds support just to punish her. Unfortunately, his belief that Candice just likes to make him feel bad may help him justify his behavior, but it doesn't help Candice to soften her heart toward Greg.

It isn't much better for Candice. She tells herself (and Greg, a lot) that he is selfish and irresponsible and that he just expects her to do everything. Unfortunately, this perception of Greg invites Candice to take actions that further maintain the distance between them. For example, she refuses to do anything to ease his stresses. She refuses to treat him kindly when he is home because she is afraid Greg will think everything is fine. Her belief that Greg only cares about himself may help Candice make sense of what is going on, but it doesn't help Greg to come home and make things better.

What if both partners looked for possible alternative explanations that pointed toward solutions and toward things they could do to improve the situation? For example, Greg might stop his negative thinking long enough to see that she wants to feel appreciated and that she needs his time. He might consider the possibility that underneath the sharp exterior, she is afraid that he just doesn't care about her anymore and doesn't want to be with her. Candice might see that because they have been fighting a lot, their home life is not much of a refuge. Perhaps Greg is never home because he doesn't feel respected and appreciated.

These explanations may be more hopeful for both partners because they point toward possible solutions they can implement—for Candice to affirm Greg and show kindness and appreciation for him when he is home, and for Greg to give Candice more of his time and undivided attention. Each person's change also makes it easier for the other person to continue changing. Candice being softer opens space for Greg to feel safe to come home and pay more loving attention to her. Greg being more attentive opens space for Candice to be gentler and more respectful in her communication.

Test-of-Seven Questions

Here is a test of seven questions to ask yourself in order to check the usefulness of your beliefs and perceptions about your partner. For example, you might ask yourself, "When I think this way about my partner, am I making this about trying to understand him or am I making this about judging him?" If your beliefs are helpful and useful, you should be able to answer "yes" to all seven questions in the first column. Even one "yes" answer in the second column is reason enough to choose a different perspective.

When I think this way about my partner ...

Helpful	Or	Unhelpful
1. Am I making this about trying to understand her (or him)?	Or	Am I making this about judging her (or him)?
2. Am I taking appropriate responsibility?	Or	Am I assigning responsibility and justifying myself?
3. Am I assuming goodwill and positive intent?	Or	Am I assuming the worst?
4. Am I looking at my partner through a wide-angle lens (seeing the whole person)?	Or	Am I looking at my partner through a narrow lens (seeing only a limited part that bothers me)?
5. Am I focusing on doing right?	Or	Am I focusing on being right?
6. Am I focusing on solutions and possibilities?	Or	Am I focusing on problems and certainties?
7. Am I open-minded to other views?	Or	Have I made up my mind?

Be as honest as you can. These can be hard questions to accept. Many of us struggle at times with softening our hearts toward someone who has hurt us, whether intentionally or unintentionally, but doing so opens doors to healing, positive feelings, and possibilities for reconciliation that remain firmly shut when we otherwise refuse to change how we see things.

The following exercises are designed to help you work with this idea of checking your perception and adopting more useful ways of thinking about events that happen in your relationship.

Exercise 3

The Event:

“We were at a dinner party with my mother and step-father. My mother can be hard to get along with. She has strong opinions about things and insists on being right. My spouse got into an argument with her. It was over something trivial. My spouse wouldn’t back down and their argument got heated. My mother is capable of not talking for months when she’s mad, so I asked my spouse to stop being unreasonable. I got yelled at later that I wasn’t being supportive. *This all happened because my partner is stubborn and won’t make sacrifices for me.*”

Notice what this spouse believes about why the event happened (the last line in italics). Check this explanation using the test-of-seven outlined above. Does it pass the test? In the blank space that follows, write a possible alternative explanation that does pass the test. In other words, what might be a more useful way to think about this situation? Remember it isn’t about finding the “correct” view. There probably isn’t one. It’s about finding a view that helps your partner feel understood and points toward solutions.

Alternative Explanation:

Perhaps my spouse didn’t back down because _____

Exercise 4

Now it’s time to apply this principle to your own situation. In the spaces below, write down two or three perspectives about your spouse that you’ve been buying into lately, that are related to your issues as a couple. These might be thoughts you have had during an argument. For example:

“My spouse just wants to have his own way all of the time.”

“My spouse just doesn’t like to see me happy.”

“She would rather control me than hear me.”

Then compare these perspectives against the test-of-seven questions. Does each one pass the test? That is, for each perspective, can you honestly answer “yes” to all of the questions on the helpful side?

My Perspective(s) About My Spouse

Does it Pass the Test?

- | | | |
|----------|------------------------------|-----------------------------|
| 1. _____ | <input type="checkbox"/> Yes | <input type="checkbox"/> No |
| 2. _____ | <input type="checkbox"/> Yes | <input type="checkbox"/> No |
| 3. _____ | <input type="checkbox"/> Yes | <input type="checkbox"/> No |

If your perspectives pass the test, great! This means that you probably do make an effort to be fair and soft-hearted toward your spouse. If they don't pass the test, what is it about your point of view that you think may be harsh or unfair? Jot down your answer in the space below.

If you feel that you are holding unhelpful or limiting beliefs about your spouse, what might be some *useful* alternative beliefs that would help explain what happens in your marriage? What else could be going on? In the blank spaces that follow, write two or three possible alternative explanations for your spouse's behavior. Make sure these explanations can pass the test-of-seven questions outlined above.

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

If you get stuck, use the following questions to guide you:

- Am I making it too personal?
- How can I take more responsibility for my part in the problem?
- What positive thing was my spouse trying to achieve?
- How is this thing I'm upset about related to the things I love about my spouse in the first place?
- What has my partner told me in the past about being in this kind of situation?
- If I were in my spouse's shoes, how would I feel?
- What am I forgetting about the good things?
- How can I focus on solutions?
- What is a more positive, helpful way of thinking about this situation?

These questions are intended to help you shift your mindset. In practice, however, you don't have to rely on yourself. Since the best explanation for your spouse's behavior is often the one

your spouse offers, a good place to start is to ask your spouse. Then be prepared to *accept the answer*. It may not be the final answer, but at least it's a starting place. Perhaps through dialogue you will each discover deeper reasons for your respective reactions. But let *your spouse* discover those reasons. Try not to get caught up in looking beyond the mark and interpreting hidden meaning beyond what your spouse tells you. You'll never come to mutual understanding by overanalyzing each other, because you'll be too busy defending yourselves.

Strategy 2: Accept the Distinction between Intent vs. Impact

One of the most troublesome distinctions that couples fail to make is between one's *intent* in communicating and the *impact* of one's communication. When we communicate with our partner, we do so with a certain intention. An intention is a determination to act in a certain way in order to bring about a desired result. We may not always be aware of our intentions, but they are there, nonetheless, guiding our actions. Consider the following examples:

- "I intend to strengthen my marriage."
- "I intend to be less defensive with my spouse."
- "I intend for you to feel loved and appreciated."

Our intentions can be positive or negative, hurtful or helpful. For example, our intent might be to inform, to persuade, to soften, to connect, to validate, to understand, or to encourage. On the other hand, our intent might be to hurt, to distract, to win, to refute, to punish, to protect ourselves, to control, or to dominate. There are numerous other examples.

Impact refers to the *result* of our communication, that is, how our partner receives our message. When we send a message with a specific intent, and our partner receives that message in the way we intended, then we are communicating effectively. Notice that this means we can *effectively communicate* a negative message as much as we can a positive one. Misunderstanding occurs when our intentions don't match the impact of our message. Let's look at the following example.

Example: Mark and Claire

Mark and Claire both intend to enjoy a pleasant night out with each other at a dinner party. Mark wants to be a few minutes early so he can arrive at the party feeling relaxed, and avoid the embarrassment of walking in late. He feels irritated that Claire is writing notes to the babysitter when she isn't even ready yet, *perceiving* that she's overly concerned about details that aren't important. He complains that she worries too much and isn't trying hard enough to leave on time.

Claire wants to ensure that the preparations are made for the babysitter so that they can have a worry free night. She feels instantly annoyed, *perceiving* that Mark would rather complain versus asking what he could do to help her so that they can leave sooner. She snaps back that she is going as fast as she can. After a short, but tense exchange at the house, they sit in stony silence on the way to the party.

What Mark *and* Claire wanted overall was a pleasant night out with each other. What they got was a night filled with tension and distance. Notice that neither of them had any initial negative intent, but the way they perceived each other's message and the way they chose to act on those perceptions set the stage for the quality of their evening together.

Remember that we are always communicating a message. Even when we are trying *not* to communicate, we are communicating a message. Therefore, we must try to take into account not only the message we are trying to send, but *how* our message might be received.

Consider the following examples. In each case, someone sends a message. There could be several possible intentions for each message—some positive, some negative. Each message could evoke any of the perceptions listed on the right, regardless of the intention. Of course, how the message is received will depend partly on how it was sent; on the relationship history; on the setting; and on the receiver's own biases, assumptions, life experiences, and physiology.

Communication	Possible Intentions	Perceived Message (Impact)
1. John walks up to Kelly, hugs her, and says, "I love you."	To connect and be close To communicate love To seek reassurance To get something	"John loves me." (Feels loved) "John wants something. (Feels suspicious) "John is insecure." (Feels contempt)
2. Sally ignores Jim when he walks in the front door from work.	To concentrate on a problem To accomplish another task To punish or hurt Jim	"Sally is angry at me." (Feels defensive) "Sally is giving me the silent treatment." (Feels angry) "Sally didn't hear me come in." (Feels neutral) "Sally has something on her mind." (Feels curious)
3. Jason frowns a bit as he asks Janet, "Have you gained weight?"	To express concern To broach a sensitive topic To shame Janet	"Jason is not attracted to me." (Feels rejected) "Jason thinks I'm fat." (Feels judged) "Jason is finally acknowledging a major problem for me." (Feels relieved).

Communication	Possible Intentions	Perceived Message (Impact)
4. Clark just shrugs when Mary asks him how his job hunt is going.	To avoid confrontation To express discouragement To maintain distance To contain angry feelings	“Clark hasn’t been looking.” (Feels annoyed) “Clark seems discouraged.” (Feels sympathetic) “Clark is blowing me off.” (Feels angry)

In all of these examples, the receiver attaches meaning to the message. It may not be the meaning the sender intended, but it is the *receiver* who determines the meaning, not the sender.

When we fail to take into account that the impact of a message may be very different from the intent behind it, we tend to make troublesome mistakes in our thinking that prolong the misunderstanding and conflict.

Mistakes Made by Senders of a Message:

Mistake #1. Stubbornly insisting that because you did not *intend* the message to be taken the way it did that your spouse’s feelings are invalid and unreasonable. You say to yourself, “Only a monster would make someone feel the way you say you are feeling. I know I am not a monster. Therefore, it is not valid or reasonable for you to feel that way.” It’s only a step from this conclusion to perceive that your partner is manipulating you emotionally.

Mistake #2. Assuming that if you validate your partner’s feelings, you are admitting that your intent *was*, in fact, malicious when it wasn’t.

Mistakes Made by Receivers of a Message:

Mistake #1. Stubbornly insisting that your own emotions and perceptions reflect the actual intended message. If you *feel* hurt, you insist that your partner must have intended to hurt you. If you *feel* rejected, you insist that your partner intended to reject you. No amount of reassurance from your partner convinces you that their intent was anything other than what it felt like to you.

Mistake #2. Believing that it trivializes your feelings or challenges your right to have them if you accept that your partner’s intentions were good.

Mistake #3. Refusing to believe that you can or should change the way you feel.

How to Avoid These Mistakes

When your message is misinterpreted:

1. Accept the possibility that you are communicating a different message than intended. Remind yourself that the meaning of any communication lies in how it is *received* not how it is sent. If your partner attaches a specific meaning to what you have said or done then accept that your partner's feelings are real and stop trying to talk your partner out of them. Instead, consider ways you might communicate your message differently.
2. Express compassion for your partner's feelings. Show that you can appreciate how they feel, even if you didn't mean to offend. Apologize for the misunderstanding.
3. Accept responsibility for your actions. As honestly as you can, evaluate whether your actions were unreasonable or hurtful. In the end, good intentions aren't enough if you were out of line in some way. When you aren't getting the results you intend you may need to adjust your behavior so that you *do* get your intended message across.

You aren't admitting to being a "bad" person by apologizing for impacting your partner negatively, even if you meant no harm. You are showing a willingness to bring the results you get back in line with your intentions.

4. Try not to be defensive about your intent. It is unimportant by itself. Use the information about how your partner received the message to help you adjust your message. If you acted in some way that was unreasonable or offensive, or if you failed to act in some way that was positive, then you aren't being honest with yourself or with your partner by being defensive.

Often there is *some* way that you could have acted better, or *some* way you could have communicated your message more clearly. It's often this underlying dishonesty about your actions that further incites hard feelings in your partner.

When you are injured by your partner's message:

1. Accept the possibility that you are misinterpreting the message. Remind yourself that just because you *feel* hurt or rejected doesn't mean that your partner's intent was to hurt or reject. Nor does it mean that your feelings are invalid or any less real. You have a right to your feelings. Be open, however, to the possibility that holding on to certain feelings may not necessarily be helpful or point toward solutions.
2. Accept responsibility for your feelings. You can change your feelings by changing the way you see things. Your focus determines your reality. Your feelings are never directly implanted on you by anyone else.

Let's say George has been waiting thirty minutes for Lisa to pick him up from work. When she finally arrives she apologizes for being late. She explains that she couldn't get away sooner and that once she did leave she got stuck in traffic.

George can choose to feel indignant about it, thinking, "How dare she leave me there!" He can choose to feel mildly annoyed about it, telling himself that it's inconvenient but not worth getting upset over. He can choose to feel hurt about it, thinking that Lisa doesn't care about him. He can also choose to be understanding, thinking about how hard Lisa works.

How he chooses to respond to this event is up to him. Lisa can not make him have a certain feeling and is therefore not responsible for his feelings.

This is not to say that Lisa can do whatever she wants and blame George if he gets offended. Lisa *is* responsible for her actions. She can call George ahead of time to say she'll be late. She can be more mindful of the clock and give herself plenty of time to get there. She can be up front with him beforehand about how much she has to do so that they can decide if he should make other arrangements. She can change these things, but she can't change his feelings. Only he can.

Sometimes our reaction is so fast and seems so connected to the event that it's hard to accept this principle that we choose our feelings. Perhaps it's too much of a *reaction* to be considered a choice. We can, however, at any point step back and say to ourselves, "Okay, it made sense to feel this way at the time, but I don't have to *continue* feeling this way. Maybe there are other perspectives to focus on, and more useful actions I can take that will help me change this feeling and find better solutions."

As you work on taking a step back and choosing your focus after the fact, you will find that it becomes easier and easier to make conscious choices and prevent the initial reaction *before* getting into trouble.

Many times, your reaction to your partner's behavior will be reasonable in light of what happened. Most people would understand if you felt angry, annoyed, or hurt if your partner was an hour late. There are times, however, when you may *overreact* because of personal sensitivities that make it hard to judge the situation fairly. When this happens, take a step back and try to reflect on where your feelings are really coming from and what is triggering them so that you can work on changing them. Your partner shouldn't have to take responsibility for altering behavior that would be considered reasonable to most other people just to avoid triggering your emotions and anger.

3. Express your feelings and needs assertively. Don't wait for your partner to guess that something is wrong. Assertiveness is balancing respect for yourself with respect for your partner. It means expressing yourself in a direct, up front way that preserves both your dignity and your partner's dignity.

Start by acknowledging your partner's efforts or good intentions. Then, without blaming your partner, calmly describe the situation that happened and how you felt when this happened. Finally, state what you want to happen in the future.

For example, "I know you worked hard today and I know you didn't intend to be late (acknowledging good intentions), but I could have taken the train if I'd known you were going to be so late (stating what happened isn't necessary here as both spouses already know what happened). Maybe you can call me if you're running behind so I can make other plans or at least go back inside and wait."

4. Cultivate a forgiving spirit. Give your partner the benefit of the doubt. Try not to get caught up in accusing your spouse of ill intent or punishing your spouse for offending you. People do better when they feel encouraged to do better, not when they feel condemned. Try to think of the positive intent that may have motivated the behavior, even if the behavior was negative for you.

A Caveat

The ideas presented in this book are meant for situations where someone's intentions are basically good, but misinterpreted. There are times, however, when spouses truly intend to harm each other. Sometimes, partners intentionally punish each other by doing or saying things that they know will hurt. Some of these exchanges are situational and happen at the tail end of hostile, escalating conflict when one or both partners feel backed into a corner and threatened. In this case, our negative intentions come from our primitive brains telling us we are in danger, inviting us to lash out. Such intentions overshadow any good intent we may have initially had about the original issue that sparked the argument.

Other couples with a long history of hostile conflict and emotional distancing have so much resentment and hurt built up that they truly act with negative intent toward each other much of the time even when they are not backed into a corner. These problems are beyond the scope of this particular article but will be discussed in later articles.

The following exercises are designed to help you deal with situations where initial misunderstood intentions were good, or at least not negative, but the impact was negative. The idea is to let go of hard feelings and to take responsibility for your actions in the wake of misunderstanding.

Exercise 5

Think of a recent situation where your partner did something that upset you. It could be something that happened recently. Think about how you felt and what you were thinking when this situation happened. In the blank space below, write in the feeling you had and the thought you were focusing on. For example:

I chose to be angry by focusing on how disrespectful he was of my time.

(feeling) (thought or interpretation)

I chose to be angry by focusing on all of the times he has been late in the past.

(feeling) (thought or interpretation)

After you have done that see if you can think of other feelings you *could* have chosen instead and the corresponding thoughts that may have accompanied those feelings. For example:

I could have chosen to be calm by focusing on how it was out of my control.

(feeling)

I could have chosen to be patient by focusing on how hard my spouse works.

(feeling)

Try to think of several different possible feelings you could have chosen. The idea is to expand your awareness of options and to realize that there may have been other ways to look at the situation. Don't get discouraged if you can't immediately identify other feelings. You might have to give it some real thought if you are not used to this process.

The Situation: _____

My response to this situation:

I chose to be _____ by focusing on _____.

(feeling) (thought or interpretation)

Other possible responses:

I could also have chosen to be _____ by focusing on _____.

(feeling)

I could also have chosen to be _____ by focusing on _____.

(feeling)

I could also have chosen to be _____ by focusing on _____.

(feeling)

I could also have chosen to be _____ by focusing on _____.

(feeling)

Exercise 6

Think of a recent situation where you felt falsely accused of negative intent. Describe the situation and what you did that upset your partner. Then write down how it impacted your partner. Then write down what your positive intent actually was (there might have been more than one). Finally, write down what you could have done instead or what you need to do differently in the future so that your partner can more clearly see your good intent. Is there *some* way you could have acted differently to ensure that your message was more accurately received?

Situation: _____

What I did: _____

How it impacted my partner: _____

What my intent actually was: _____

What could I do differently to ensure that my intent matches the impact of my message:

Strategy 3: Assume Goodwill

This strategy is about giving your spouse the benefit of the doubt. Having made the distinction between positive and negative intent, it is important to realize that most people's behavior—even negative behavior—is usually motivated, on some level, by positive intent.

It is rare to find someone who's deepest, most core intentions are to take advantage of others, or bring harm to others. Admittedly, there are times when our immediate intentions are to hurt or to punish. When we find ourselves in the grip of "fight-or-flight" reactions, for example, feeling highly threatened, we often experience the urge to strike back or to hurt. If there has been a long history of hurt and rejection in our life sometimes we develop a revenge mindset where we seek to get even.

Generally, however, people rarely set out in relationships to intentionally hurt each other. Therefore, when you get hurt, instead of looking for ways that your spouse meant ill will or malice toward you, make the assumption that your spouse has overall goodwill toward you. Realize that your spouse does not likely wake up each morning planning ways to make your day miserable.

Even when your spouse behaves badly, try to think of positive intentions that might have motivated that behavior. One person's solution to a problem can often be another person's problem. Try to think of your spouse as doing his or her best to deal with a difficult situation in

the best way he or she knows how at the moment, even when the outcome is negative. The story of Mark and Claire discussed earlier is a good example of this.

Sometimes your partner's positive intentions are directed to someone or something other than you. This doesn't mean that your partner's intentions toward you are negative. Take Sally and Jim for, example. They've been dating for a while. Jim worries that his kids from his previous marriage don't receive enough of his undivided attention, so on Saturday he takes his sons to the Fair. He doesn't think Sally will mind.

Sally assumes she and Jim will be spending the day together. She feels hurt about not being invited. Jim's intention is to spend time with his sons. But this doesn't mean that he *intends* to disrespect Sally by not taking her. Had he talked to her about it beforehand she may have felt more important to him, but the fact that he did *not* talk to her doesn't automatically mean that she is not important to him (unless he did it repeatedly, knowing it bothered her).

If you are offended or hurt by something your spouse did, try to give them the benefit of the doubt. Your spouse will likely feel better about receiving feedback from you when you first acknowledge his or her positive intentions.

For example, Sally might say, "I appreciate that you wanted to spend time with your sons. That's important. You love your kids and that's part of what I love about you." This can help Jim feel appreciated and understood and more open to feedback.

Then she might calmly describe what happened and how it made her feel. For example, "When you didn't call me or invite me it made me feel like I wasn't important to you. Maybe you didn't mean that way, but that's how I took it."

Listen to your partner's side of things and accept what your partner has to say. Don't get caught up in looking beyond the mark, trying to interpret your partner's "true" motives. Instead, make a request for how you would like things to be different in the future. In the above example, Sally might say, "I guess I just assumed that we were going to be together. In the future, I would like it if we communicated our plans with each other ahead of time."

Exercise 7

List one or two things your spouse has done lately that you took personally. (Any actions that were clearly motivated by negative intent—such as verbal abuse or physical abuse—should not be used for this exercise). Next to each one, write down three positive intentions that might have motivated your partner's actions. Consider intentions that you had not thought of at the time.

Example:

What I took Personally

My wife told me to calm down and stop yelling when I was disciplining the kids

Possible Positive Intentions

To maintain harmony
To preserve my relationship with my kids
To keep things from escalating

What I took Personally

Possible Positive Intentions

1. _____

2. _____

What difference do you think it would make if you made it a habit to assume goodwill in your partner instead of insisting on the worst?

Exercise 8

Make a list of five things your partner has done lately in the marriage that is evidence of his or her goodwill toward you.

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

4. _____

5. _____

Next time something upsets you, remind yourself of these things before you get too caught up in assuming the worst about your partner. Think about the good things your spouse does and compliment your spouse for them on a daily basis.

Individual Work: My Plan

Complete the Exercises. If you haven't done so already, spend some time working through the eight exercises

- Exercise 1 & 2: Use these exercises to help you become more aware of how fair you are to yourself and to your partner when you explain things that happen. Are you gracious and open-minded or harsh and critical? Resolve to work on giving your partner credit for things that are right and the benefit of the doubt when things go wrong.
- Exercise 3 & 4: Use the test-of-six questions to help you evaluate whether your perceptions and beliefs about your partner are helpful and lead toward solutions. You can work on memorizing these questions or post them on your fridge to remind you to step back and try to see things from a different point of view.
- Exercise 5: Use this exercise to help you see that dwelling on hurt or angry feelings is a choice you make. You can accept responsibility for your feelings without having to blame your partner. Stop and ask yourself, what else could I choose to feel in this situation? How else could I see it?
- Exercise 6: Use this exercise to help you take a step back and think about how you are coming across. Are there ways that you might be sending the wrong message? Do you need to alter your behavior so that your intended message is received more clearly? Taking responsibility for our actions is often the first step to real, lasting change.
- Exercise 7: Use this exercise to practice looking for positive intent behind your spouse's behavior. Looking for positive intent helps make it easier to assume goodwill. It also makes it easier for your partner to hear you when you are upset. Strive hard to avoid assuming the worst in your partner.
- Exercise 8: Use this exercise to practice focusing on positive qualities in your spouse. See if you can add to this list every day. Resolve to notice things that you love and appreciate about your partner. Remember that what you distinguish is what becomes real to you. As you distinguish the good, the good will grow, especially when you share what you notice with each other. When your efforts are acknowledged you feel encouraged and even more motivated to please the other person. As this happens, you'll start to notice even more good. Kind words of affirmation are essential in creating a climate of closeness, trust and cooperation.

Areas of Strength. Select two areas of strength that you have noticed about yourself in relation to the ideas presented here. Write down how you will use each of these strengths to help you improve your relationship.

1. Strength: _____

How this will help me: _____

2. Strength: _____

How this will help me: _____

Goal for Improvement. Now select a specific goal for improvement, based on what you've learned through these exercises. Write it down. Then write down two things that you will do or think about to work on achieving that goal. At least one should be something that you can do every day.

Each week come back and review your goal and evaluate how far you have come. When you feel that you are succeeding with that goal, then add a new goal and start again.

Goal: _____

My plan:

a. _____

b. _____

Couple Work: Our Plan

1. Try reading this book together or separately and then talk with each other about what you've read. The exercises are designed for individual work, but you can have a good discussion with each other about the content.
2. Discuss with each other:
 - a. What stood out to you the most from these articles?
 - b. What did you like or not like about what you read?
 - c. What did you relate to the most when you were reading?
 - d. What did you learn that was surprising, new or helpful to you?

3. If, after reading this book and doing the exercises, you have had a change of heart about something, talk to each other about it. If you think you understand your partner's point of view better, tell him what you're seeing more clearly. If you feel you have been unfair in your judgments about your partner, acknowledge this and apologize.
4. Share with each other your individual goals for improvement. Ask each other for help and support by keeping an eye out for your efforts and encouraging each other. Ask each other – in a spirit of cooperation – for any suggestions or feedback about your individual plans.

Review

- When we evaluate the causes of other people's behavior we tend to make what is called a fundamental attribution error: we are more likely to highlight the person's character or disposition as the cause, and less likely to take into account situational factors.
- In happier marriages, spouses tend to treat each other with the same generous spirit with which they treat themselves, by giving their partners credit when things go right, and the benefit of the doubt when things go wrong. In contrast, spouses in distressed marriages tend to be *less* generous and *more* judgmental in their perceptions of each other.
- Our perceptions determine what is real to us. Even when our perceptions are limited, we act as though they are true reflections of "reality."
- Our inability to separate ourselves from the very tools that allow us to perceive—our sensory organs, our memories, our belief systems, our histories—place certain limitations on our abilities to perceive accurately.
- Three strategies for dealing with the problem of perception
 1. Check your perception. Develop the habit of examining your perceptions to see if they are accurate or fair. Keep your perceptions "in check" so that they don't cause problems in your relationship.
 2. Accept that intent is not the same as impact. One of the most troublesome distinctions that couples fail to make is between one's *intent* in communicating and the *impact* of one's communication. Misunderstanding occurs when your intentions don't match the impact of your message.
 3. Assume goodwill. Instead of looking for ways that your spouse meant ill will or malice toward you, make the assumption that your spouse has overall goodwill toward you. Try to think of your spouse as doing his or her best to deal with a difficult situation in the best way he or she knows how at the moment, even when the outcome is negative for you.