

2-MINUTE TIP: COUNTER-CLAIMING IN RELATIONSHIPS

MANAGING COUNTER-CLAIMING IN CONFLICT

Overcome the an Unproductive Conflict Style

- I use "counter claiming" to describe when person A, usually a spouse/partner, brings up a complaint or concern, then person/partner B does not say "You're right" or "Let's discuss it," but rather responds with a complaint or criticism. E.g., Wife: "You didn't remember my birthday and my feelings are hurt." Husband: "Like you always remember everything that's important to me." Or "So, you forgot to pick up my dry cleaning and you were late for the concert we had tickets for." The pattern of responding to a complaint by countering with a complaint – instead of engaging with the original concern—is a common, but destructive, mutually-critical, communication style.
- Other terms for the pattern: Cross-complaining, tit-for-tat, counter-criticism, deflecting (avoid responsibility by shifting focus), whataboutism (“but what about when you...”), reciprocal criticism (batting grievances back and forth into escalating conflict), defensive retaliation (protect the self while striking back).
- Psychological Reasons: 1) Genuinely not knowing how to validate or repair. 2) Defense when complaint feels like personal attack, triggering shame or inadequacy. So, the person redirects by pointing out the partner’s flaws – “If I’m guilty, then you’re guilty too.” Gottman classifies defensiveness as one of the “Four Horsemen” predictive of marital breakdown. 3) Projection of Responsibility so rather than accepting fault, project responsibility back onto the partner --“You’re no better than me.” 4) Desire for Symmetry and fairness, “If you call me out, I’ll call you out.” Avoids feeling one-down. 5) Emotional Vulnerability since “You’re right, I hurt you” requires openness and repair. 6) Poor Communication Skills/Learned Patterns from families where blame and criticism were common, a person may have learned that “counterattacking” is the way to manage conflict. 7) Self-Protection Against Perceived Power Imbalance In short: cross-complaining often functions as a defensive, self-protective maneuver that derails repair and instead escalates conflict, turns off empathy, erodes closeness, and leaves both partners unheard.

Better Responses

Think that REPAIR, Closeness, Dependability, and Trust are more important than self-defense. Pause – Take a breath before responding. Acknowledge – “You’re right, I can see how that hurt you.” Stay with it – Address your partner’s concern. Postpone yours for another time. Return later – Once repair happens, bring up your own need at a calmer moment.

Tip: The fastest way to end counter-complaining is to replace the reflex to defend with the choice to **LISTEN AND REPAIR FIRST**.

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