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Relationship Injury and the Rejection of Change©

Asking for Change and Rejecting It When It Happens

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Most couples therapists will recognize this relationship problem.

Phyllis longs for her partner to change. "You don't support me. You leave everything for me to do. I've had it." Then, he makes some of those changes. In turn, she rejects his changes because

"He is only doing it because I asked."
"He is only doing it because of pressure."
"He should have known what I wanted."
"I don't trust it because it feels odd to have him behave differently."
"Sooner or later he will revert."
"Why do I have to threaten to leave before he makes changes?"
"Why didn't my requests for changes mean enough to him before?"
"Do I really mean all that much to him?"

By not accepting his changes, she does not reinforce it; so, indeed, it may not stick, maintain, or increase. Maybe it's that she does not feel valued and that is underneath the rejection of the change in his behavior. Apparently, she has not *felt* important enough to him before and so she may not see he is expressing that she is important to him, enough so that he changes his behavior for her. We wonder if she has unconscious memories of how she was valued or not valued growing up and in previous relationships.

Let's work to understand this common, but complex, relational paradox: *one partner asks for change, the other partner eventually changes, and yet the change is rejected rather than welcomed.* That rejecting behavior appears irrational on the surface. However, when examined intrapsychically and interpersonally, it usually reflects a mixture of defenses, emotional injuries, attachment dynamics, and learned expectations about love and value. To make it more understandable and consistent, I will use female pronouns for the person asking for change and not accepting it, male pronouns for the spouse who is being asked to change.

The Emotional Injury Beneath the Request

In many couples, a request for change is not simply the surface level behavioral request conveyed in the words. *It's an emotional appeal*. When she says, "I wish you would do X," the deeper meaning is often, "If you cared about me, you would **want** to do this. You would have done it all along. I would not even have to say it or ask. It has everything to do with whether I feel valued versus disappointed."

When the change occurs only after conflict, ultimatums, or threats of leaving, it may actually confirm an existing wound: "I was not important enough for him to change until the relationship itself was threatened. I'm not really loved. He just doesn't want to be alone." For some people, it may confirm a deeper fear of not being lovable. For some, the disappointment relates to how much less connection and love is felt in this relationship compared to the feelings she had growing up.

Further, the offer to change paradoxically becomes evidence of past neglect in the relationship! The behavior now appears strategic rather than loving.

Her Cognitive Framing Reinforces the Sense of Injury

Once that emotional injury exists, the mind may reinterpret the partner's improvement in ways that preserve the original narrative.

- "He's only doing it because I forced him."
- "I don't think he means it."
- "This isn't real; it's temporary. Don't trust it."
- "If he really loved me, I wouldn't have had to ask."
- "It's an insult to think I would fall for this when it's temporary and he just wants me to stop complaining."

These interpretations function psychologically to maintain *cognitive consistency*. By accepting the change, she would need to revise her internal story about the partner and about her own value in the relationship.

Intrapsychic Defenses

Several unconscious defensive processes may be operating:

Devaluation: The partner's change is dismissed, minimized, or discounted ("It doesn't count because I had to ask").

Projection of motive - "mind-reading": The partner's behavior is interpreted as manipulation, compliance, or fear rather than genuine caring. "You are just doing it so I don't complain." Attributing motives to the other person. Projection means assuming our feelings and suppositions actually apply to the other person. Further, this process makes the present impasse about him and not about her reluctance to consider this as an opportunity for change.

Anticipatory disappointment: Expecting the partner to revert prevents the risk of renewed hurt. If one assumes the change is temporary, one is emotionally protected when the other reverts to the old behavior..

Confirmation bias: The mind selectively notices evidence that confirms the belief that the partner does not truly care. The confirmatory bias can be satisfied by remembering times he did not meet the requested need or a belief he does not sincerely mean it now. That can maintain mistrust.

Attachment and Developmental Memories

All these dynamics are often set up by early life experiences. The most relevant ones are around being loved, cared about, neglected, or being treated inconsistently. These experiences affect the ability accept and appreciate change, the tendency to interpret events in line with the discussion in this article, or with trust or mistrust. We are built to look for and trust consistency even when that consistency is negative.

Just as it did in childhood, attachment functions in close relationships. We can show patterns of secure and insecure attachment in childhood and those will repeat in intimate relationships in adulthood. Couples can support or interfere with the development of secure patterns in their relationship. We find troubled couples experience attachment wounds and show behaviors which interrupt effective attachment patterns. The dynamics in this article are prime examples.

The Interpersonal Reinforcement Problem

From a behavioral perspective, rejecting the partner's change has an unintended consequence: it removes reinforcement for the new behavior.

The partner experiences:

* "Nothing I do is good enough."
* "My effort isn't recognized."
* "Why keep trying?"
* "This reminds me of my critical father and I won't have it" which leads to withdrawal or hostility.

A Chain Analysis of the Dynamic

This can create a negative cycle The sequence often unfolds something like this:

Stage 1 – Chronic dissatisfaction
She experiences repeated disappointments and begins to feel unimportant. She asks for change, which may have happened repeatedly before. She may do it ambiguously, such as, "You never give me any support."

Stage 2 – Escalation
Requests for change intensify, sometimes culminating in threats or ultimatums.

Stage 3 – Partner behavioral shift
He perceives he should make a change and he changes. He changes behavior in response to perceived relational risk.

Stage 4 – Meaning attribution
She interprets the change as coerced or inauthentic. She distrusts or dismisses it.

Stage 5 – Emotional withdrawal
Because the change feels artificial, she withholds appreciation or trust.

Stage 6 – Reinforcement failure**
His motivation declines, and the change may weaken. He feels discouraged. His belief he can't satisfy her is confirmed. Change fades.

Stage 7 – Narrative confirmation
She concludes that the partner never truly cared. Her belief that "he always reverts" becomes confirmed.

Thus, the interpersonal system re-stabilizes around pessimism, mistrust, and damaged attachment.

The Core Psychological Question

So, we understand that beneath the surface conflict is usually a deeper question about value and significance.

Am I important enough to you that you would change willingly?
Do you desire me, or are you merely complying?
Do you really know me?
Are you here for me?
Do I matter?

Deeper emotions are not usually going to be resolved by some small behavioral change!

Emptiness	Depletion	Hurt
Sadness	Bitterness or resentment	Disappointment

Until the deeper questions and emotions are addressed emotionally—not just behaviorally—the partner's improvements may not repair the original wound.

Therapeutic Focus

Couples work often becomes most productive when the discussion shifts from behavioral compliance to emotional meaning:

✔ Did the therapist work to put the deeper messages into clear words? Show empathy?
✔ What did it feel like when the requests were ignored?
✔ What meaning did each partner attach to the delay in change?
✔ What does the change represent to each person now?
✔ Beyond offering her a change in behavior, how can you let her know her importance to you the way she, by her intense emotions, is saying you are important to her.
✔ When did you last feel connected and on

the same team? What was different then?
✔ What change would actually give some hope you are a positive trajectory?
✔ How can you show you (female) appreciate his first step without thinking you are letting your guard down?
✔ How can you (male) understand she may be cautious because she wonders when the other shoe will drop?
✔ Can each partner see how earlier experiences, especially around attachment or trauma, are being activated?
✔ Can each partner explain how their own attachment experience is showing in their behaviors?
✔ Can each stop turning away from attachment and behavior by moving towards one another with affection?

When the injury about not feeling valued is acknowledged and repaired, the partner's behavioral changes can begin to be experienced as genuine rather than coerced.

In short, the rejection of positive change is rarely *only* about the change itself. It usually reflects unresolved injuries about importance, trust, and emotional recognition. Until those underlying meanings are addressed, improvement in behavior alone may not feel convincing or safe to the injured partner.
