

CHAPTER 6

Giving Better Back

Giving better back is a practical tool that will help you when you are most upset with your partner. When he or she is critical, judgmental, unfair, unreasonable, controlling, disconnected, disrespectful, or selfish, you can respond with more connection, calm, clarity, and compassion than you are getting.

You probably remember moments between you and your partner when everything seemed broken. Maybe your partner was angry, unfair, or unaware of your needs, and you couldn't find your way back to connection. Giving better back will help you make those broken moments whole, and allow new experiences to replace repetitive old patterns.

When your partner is doing something you don't like, it's so easy to think, "He is so hurtful. I have to get angry back or go off in a huff to show him how bad he is." Instead, you can respond with better energy than you are getting. "Better" can mean many different things. Perhaps you will be more connected, more direct, more confident, or more compassionate than your partner. Better doesn't necessarily mean saying "nice things," or saying what you think your partner wants to hear, but rather saying or doing things that make you feel more whole or more present.

Whenever you are feeling poorly treated and you hear yourself thinking, "She doesn't deserve anything good from me because she isn't giving me anything good," I suggest you turn it upside

down and think, “What could I give back that would be better than I’m getting?” When there is:

Criticism, you can be curious
Agitation, you can be calm
Judgment, you can be compassionate
Anxiety, you can be confident
Fear, you can be courageous
Confusion, you can be clear
Distance, you can be connected
Repetition, you can be creative

Giving better back is a good way to show your partner what you want by doing it. Your actions and attitude—connected, compassionate, clear—show your partner how it feels to be treated well. Your generosity is likely to be infectious. Your partner may think, “I like how it feels when she treats me this way. I want to treat her the same way.”

Giving Better to Your Partner Is Also Giving Better to Yourself

Giving better back is as much for you as for your partner. When you send negative reactions to your partner, no matter how justified you feel and no matter who started it, you actually generate that same negativity within yourself. Blame, shame, and rejection don’t just fly out toward your partner and leave you. They cause agitation or tension that remains with you. When you remove negativity from your response to your partner, you are also removing it from yourself. You will like yourself better and will feel more serene. Giving better to your partner is also giving better to yourself.

If Only You Would Do What I Want

You might think, “But I feel so much better when my partner does what I like. Why can’t he or she just do it?” Often when people think

this way, they spend their time explaining, persuading, arguing, and demanding that their partner do what they want. Elizabeth, who sat in my office with her husband, Peter, thought this way.

Elizabeth: I feel so good when Peter listens to me. When we went to a couples workshop and he did the listening exercise, my whole body relaxed.

Elizabeth had an innocent, plaintive expression on her face. She was yearning for something that seemed so simple and basic to her. She went on:

Elizabeth: I came home the other day, and I told Peter the washing machine broke and I was frustrated. He said, "Did you call the repairman?" I told him I just wanted him to listen to me for a moment without solving the problem. Then he thought I was criticizing him and telling him he could never do anything right. Why can't he just listen for a minute?

It made sense to me that Elizabeth wanted to be heard. She was the forgotten, self-sufficient child of a widowed mother of three who used alcohol to cope with the stress. Elizabeth recalled her mother telling her, "I thought you didn't need me."

Peter's face was dark as Elizabeth talked. I wondered if he was getting lost in his private maze of childhood memories. He had told us that he remembered his father telling him in many different ways that he was not good enough. I wondered if he was translating Elizabeth's words to mean "I failed. I'm not good enough." With Peter lost in confusion, anger, and inferiority, Elizabeth wasn't going to get the listening she wanted. I could imagine her getting angry, hopeless, and disconnected from Peter. Neither of them wanted this. I remembered asking them in the beginning of the session what they wanted to walk away with, and they both had said, "Hope."

After we went through the "giving better back" process, Elizabeth said to Peter: