

5.1 Selfish Demands

We were all born with instincts to help us survive the trials and travails of life. Some instincts are very helpful and others are controlling and abusive. One of our more controlling and abusive instincts, especially in marriage, is making demands.

If we make a request for something we want or need, and the request is turned down, our instincts encourage us to take more forceful steps. And the first thing that comes to mind is usually a demand.

Demands carry a threat of punishment -- an if-you-refuse-me-you'll- regret-it kind of thing. In other words, you may dislike what I want, but if you don't do it, I'll see it that you suffer even greater pain.

People who make demands don't seem to care how others feel. They think only of their own needs. "If you find it unpleasant to do what I want, tough! And if you refuse, I'll make it even tougher," is what they seem to be saying.

Demands depend on power. They don't work unless the demanding one has the power to make good on his threats. But who has power in marriage? Ideally, there is shared power, the husband and wife working together to accomplish mutual objectives. But when one spouse starts making demands-along with threats that are at least implied-it's a power play. The threatened spouse often strikes back, fighting fire with fire, power with power. Suddenly, it's a test of power-who will win the battle?

If the demanding partner doesn't have enough power to follow through with the threat, he or she often receives punishment, at least in the form of ridicule. But if power is fairly equal between a husband and wife, a battle rages until one or the other surrenders. In the end, the one meeting the demand feels deep resentment and is less likely to meet the need in the future. When the demand is not met, both spouses feel resentment.

I want you and your spouse to get from each other what you need most in your marriage. I want you to meet each other's emotional needs and be there for each other when you need help. But let me assure you that demands will not get the job done.

When I ask my wife, Joyce, to do something for me, she may cheerfully agree to it-or she may express her reluctance. This reluctance may be due to any number of things-her needs, her comfort level, or her sense of what's wise or fair.

If I push my request, making it a demand, what am I doing? I am trying to override her reluctance. I am declaring that my wishes are more important than her feelings. And I'm threatening to cause her some distress if she doesn't do what I want.

She now must choose one of two evils-my "punishment" on the one hand or whatever made her reluctant on the other. She may ultimately agree to my demand, but she won't be happy about it. I

may get my way, but I'm gaining at her expense. My gain is her loss. And she will most certainly feel used.

"But you don't know my husband!" some wife might say. "He lies around the house all night and I can't get him to do a thing. The only time he lifts a finger is to press the remote control. If I don't demand that he get up and help me, nothing would get done."

"You can't be talking about my wife," a husband might say. "She only thinks about herself! She spends her whole life shopping and going out with her friends. If I didn't demand that she stay at home once in a while, I'd never see her."

Without a doubt, you and your spouse need to find an effective way to motivate each other to meet your needs. But demands are nothing short of abuse. In fact, it's usually the first stage of verbal abuse that ultimately leads to fights in marriage.

If you make demands of your spouse and expect obedience, you are being controlling and manipulative. Your spouse will try to escape your abuse, and instead of becoming responsive to your needs, he or she will have as little to do with you as possible. Is that what you want? Do you want to drive your spouse away from you?

Neither of you is a sergeant and neither of you is a private. You do not have the right to tell each other what to do, and if you try, you will find that it doesn't work. If you try to force your spouse to meet your needs, it becomes a temporary solution at best, and resentment is sure to rear its ugly head. Demands and other forms of manipulation do not build compatibility; they build resentment.

There is a wise alternative to selfish demands, and that's thoughtful requests. This approach to getting what you need from each other begins by simply explaining what you would like, and asking your spouse how he or she would feel fulfilling your request. If he or she indicates that the request will be unpleasant to fulfill, discuss alternative ways your spouse could help you that would not be unpleasant.

"I've already tried that, and it doesn't work," may be your immediate reaction. It may be that he or she simply indicates that whatever it is you want isn't something they want to do. But that's where negotiation should begin. If you become a skilled negotiator, you will accept a negative reaction and try to figure out a way for your spouse to help enthusiastically with whatever it is you want.

After I've finished explaining Love Busters to you, the rest of my Basic Concepts will show you how to negotiate successfully with each other. But remember, if you or your spouse is using the controlling and abusive instinct of selfish demands to try to get what you need, you will most certainly destroy the love you have for each other-and in the long run, you will not get what you need.