

6.1 Emotional Honesty

Reveal your emotional reactions, both positive and negative, to the events of your life, particularly to your spouse's behavior.

Some people find it difficult to openly express negative reactions. They may fear that their response will be interpreted as criticism. Or they may feel ashamed of their own reactions, telling themselves they should not feel the way they do. They may want unconditional acceptance from their spouses and consider that their negative reactions prove their own inability to be unconditionally accepting. Whatever the reasons, many spouses try to avoid expressing their negative emotional reactions.

While positive reactions are easier to communicate, many couples have not learned to express these feelings, either. This failure not only misses an important opportunity to accurately communicate basic feelings, but it also misses an opportunity to deposit love units. Whenever your spouse has made you feel good, if you express those feelings clearly and enthusiastically, you'll reward your spouse for having made an appropriate adjustment to you. That, in turn, makes your spouse feel good.

If you want to meet each other's emotional needs, and you want to overcome Love Busters, one essential ingredient is an honest expression of your emotional reactions to each other. What makes a marriage successful is your willingness and ability to accommodate each other's feelings. And without the facts about those feelings, an otherwise happy couple can become very unhappy as the events of life change.

The conditions that existed at the time of your marriage were partly responsible for the love you had for each other. Those conditions made it easy for you to meet each other's emotional needs, and tended to ward off Love Busters. They may have made you feel perfect for each other, because you did not have to do much to make each other happy.

But if you are like most couples, those conditions changed right after your marriage and have continued to change right up to the present. If you have not been able to adjust to those changes, you are probably very disillusioned about your compatibility. What had seemed effortless at first may seem impossible for you now.

But adjustment in marriage is not impossible. In fact, it may be quite a bit easier than you think. Because of the way your brain is put together, you have the ability to make remarkable adjustments to each other throughout life, as your environment changes. But in order to be successful, you must do four things:

First, you must realize that these changes will take place, whether you want them to or not. Many of the circumstances surrounding you cannot be controlled and will be changing constantly.

Second, you must stick to your goal of meeting each other's most important emotional needs, and avoiding Love Busters regardless of the change in conditions. A change can be very distracting,

and can cause both of you to lose sight of your primary objectives in life. Don't let these changes cause you to lose sight of each other.

Third, you must be totally committed to making all of your decisions jointly and enthusiastically. Changes in circumstances require new decisions, and each must be made with each other's feelings in mind. Otherwise, the changes will leave one of you in the dust. Don't go on in life unless you are both on board.

And finally, in order to make the best decisions, you must be radically honest with each other about your emotional reactions to the changes in your lives. The best decisions take the emotional reactions of both of you into account simultaneously, but without an honest expression of those reactions, you will be missing the target.

While some couples may fail to make a successful adjustment after feelings are honestly explained, failure is almost guaranteed when the need for adjustment is never communicated. Always take each other's complaints seriously. As I mentioned earlier, your emotional reactions are a gauge of whether you are making a good adjustment to each other. If you both feel good, you need no adjustment. If one or both of you feel bad, a change is indicated.

But let me also explain what honesty is not. It is not selfish demands or disrespectful judgments or angry outbursts.

Expressing a feeling is not the same as expressing demands. If you try to tell your spouse what to do, you are not revealing an honest feeling; you are making a demand. If your spouse does something that bothers you, the correct way to express it is simply say that it bothers you. The Policy of Joint Agreement would take over from that point to help you try to resolve the problem.

If you tell your spouse that he or she is wrong about something, you're not being honest, you are being judgmental. While you should be free to express your beliefs and opinions, you should respect your spouse's beliefs and opinions. If you try to "straighten out" your spouse, you are not being honest; you are making a disrespectful judgment. The expression of feeling should not carry judgmental baggage with it.

It goes without saying that angry outbursts are not expressions of honesty, either. When people have them, they often think that they are being honest, but that's their Taker trying to rationalize what is actually cruel and destructive. Whatever it is you have to say when you are angry is not worth saying. Keep that basic principle in mind so that you will keep your mouth shut when you feel angry. When you have recovered from your anger, it's safe to tell your spouse what was bothering you.

Failure to express negative feelings perpetuates the withdrawal of love units. It prevents a resolution to a marital conflict, because the conflict is not expressed. Negative feelings provide evidence that a couple has not yet achieved a successful marital adjustment. More work is needed.

But positive feelings not only offer proof for a successful adjustment, but they also provide a reward to the spouse that has been successful. Don't neglect to tell each other how you feel when you are happy.

Now we're ready to look at the second part of this Policy of Radical Honesty. This part faces the reality that history often repeats itself.