

To **BREAK OUT OF DEFENSIVENESS**, first **CALM** and **SOOTHE YOURSELF**, then listen to your partner's words **NOT AS PERSONAL ATTACK** but as **IMPORTANT INFORMATION**. Give up distress-maintaining thoughts and **TRY TO EMPATHIZE AND UNDERSTAND** your partner. "Research shows that if you are genuinely open and receptive when your partner is expecting a defensive response, your partner is less likely to criticize you or react contemptuously when disagreements arise."

**FROM DEFENSIVENESS TO STONEMOUNTING** When exhausted and overwhelmed one partner stops responding at all, and the marriage slips from being marred by poor communication to being "virtually destroyed by none". The stony silence does not produce the "neutral" or "not making matters worse" that is hoped for; rather it conveys **DISAPPROVAL**, **ICY DISTANCE**, and **SMUGNESS**. (Because they are more easily psychologically overwhelmed by marital tension, men are more likely to become stonemounters.)

To **STOP STONEMOUNTING**, be aware that in any interaction there are one of three behaviors: **ASSERTIVENESS**, **PASSIVITY** OR **AGGRESSION**. We know that aggression such as criticism and contemptuous put-downs are destructive in a marriage, but you need also to be aware that **PASSIVITY** is just as destructive because it **deprives your partner** of the relationship and **withdraws your presence and attention** and treats your partner as if they do not exist. Passivity is very provocative and even invites aggression as the other person tries desperately to **get through to you**. **Assertive communication** on the other hand lets your spouse know where you are and gives them feedback without putting them down or pushing them around.

So, **CRITICISM**, **CONTEMPT**, **DEFENSIVENESS** AND **STONEMOUNTING** are so deadly to a marriage because they **INTERFERE** with a couple's communication and "**CREATE A CYCLE OF DISCORD AND NEGATIVITY** that's hard to break through if you don't understand what is happening."

In every marriage there are some interactions that don't go well, in a healthy marriage the couple has **WAYS OF REPAIRING** the relationships, getting back on a healthy track, clearing up the misunderstanding. In an unhealthy marriage the couple allows themselves to slip from hurt or misunderstanding or disagreement down the slippery slope of criticism, contempt, defensiveness and stonemounting. After these behaviors turn the relationship sour then the **ULTIMATE DANGER** arises: "partners seize on powerful thoughts and beliefs about their spouse that **CEMENT** their negativity"; e.g. "She'll never be satisfied, I can't do anything right" or "After all I've done for him how dare him criticize me". Watch for these distressing thoughts of **INNOCENT VICTIMHOOD** OR **RIGHTEOUS INDIGNATION**, these thoughts can become negative inner scripts about your partner and your marriage and under stress can lead to **FLOODING** (being so overwhelmed by your partner's negativity and your own reactions that you experience "system overload"). Swamped by distress or upset, you may become hostile, withdrawn or defensive and constructive discussion is impossible. Holding on to those thoughts is **DISTRESS MAINTAINING** and leads to **DISTANCE AND ISOLATION**. Another choice is using **SELF-SOOTHING** thoughts and **UNDERSTANDING** comments.

If a couple does not break out of the distance and isolation cascade, they fall into four stages of withdrawal from the marriage: 1. You see your marital problem as severe; 2. Talking things over with your spouse seems useless; 3. You start leading parallel lives; 4. Loneliness. Finally, "nothing foretells a marriage's future as accurately as how a couple retells their past." Are you looking back for the positives or the negatives: so do you look back and see:

1. **CHAOS** or **SENSE OF CHOICE AND CONTROL**
2. **DISAPPOINTMENT** or **THE GLORY IN THE STRUGGLE** (Pride in overcoming obstacles)
3. **SEPARATE LIVES** or **WE-NESS** (Joint undertaking remembered with affection)

#### **FOUR SIMPLES THINGS YOU CAN DO TO HELP YOUR MARRIAGE**

1. Learn how to calm yourself, take a time-out if necessary, re-write your inner script with self-soothing, validating and understanding thoughts, use relaxation methods that work for you.
2. Speak and listen nondefensively, listen to and acknowledge your partner's point of view. Choose a positive mindset about your spouse and introduce praise, admiration and appreciation.
3. Validation. Accept your partner's feelings; let him/her know you understand and take responsibility for your part, apologize and compliment.
4. Keep practicing! Rehearse being nondefensive, validating, changing your inner script from what you **FEAR** to what you **HOPE**. If you really learn these skills you will have them when you need them most.