



How should you respond when your partner criticizes you?

Cut out the card along the dashed line (6 by about 4 inches). Say one line, then stop and listen. Use your own words when they come.

Responding to criticism

1. Pause: "Give me a second. I want to hear this, not just defend."
2. Find the true part and own it first.
3. Turn it concrete: "What would you like me to do differently?"
4. Disagree with the facts later, calmly, without a counter-list.
5. Insults are a line: "I'll talk about it, not while you're calling me names."

All the lines, and when to use them

You're right about the part where I left the gate open. I'm sorry. I'll check it before I leave from now on. (The criticism is fair, or at least partly fair. Agreeing with the true part, quickly and specifically, takes most of the air out of the argument.)

Okay. Give me a second. I want to actually hear this and not just defend myself. (You feel the urge to argue rising. Saying it out loud buys you time and tells your partner you are trying.)

What would you like me to do differently next time? (The criticism is about your character ("you're so thoughtless") and you want to steer it toward something concrete you can act on.)

I want to fix this, and I'll listen to all of it. Can we leave out "selfish," though? It makes me want to argue instead of listen. (They are using a label that you cannot accept but the underlying complaint may be fair. You set a limit on the word without dismissing the issue.)

I don't agree with all of it, but you have a point about how often I've cancelled lately. Let me think about that. (You see some truth and some exaggeration. Naming the part that rings true keeps you honest without signing up for the whole charge.)

Is this about tonight, or has it been building for a while? (The reaction seems bigger than the thing that set it off. There may be a backlog, and it is better to hear it than to argue about the size of tonight's mistake.)

I'm too wound up to answer well right now. Can I come back to this in half an hour? (You can feel yourself about to counterattack. A short, named pause is better than a reply you will have to apologize for.)

I've been thinking about what you said last night. Some of it stung because it was true. (The next day, after a criticism you brushed off in the moment. Coming back on your own shows you took it seriously.)

I'll talk about what happened. I won't keep talking while you're calling me names. (The criticism has turned into insults or mockery. You stay open to the issue and closed to the abuse, and you can leave the room if it continues.)

Phrases to avoid

"Well, you do it too.": A counterattack turns one complaint into two, and now neither gets resolved.

"That's not true, I always...": Arguing the exception keeps the focus on whether you are guilty instead of what your partner needs.

"Fine, I'm a terrible person.": Collapsing into self-blame looks like accountability but makes your partner comfort you instead of being heard.

"You're being dramatic.": It dismisses the feeling and starts a new fight about how they are reacting.

Silence with an eye roll: It says the complaint is beneath a reply. That reads as contempt, which the Gottman Institute calls the single greatest predictor of divorce .

If you are afraid of your partner, scripts are not the answer: call the National Domestic Violence Hotline at 1-800-799-7233 or text START to 88788. In danger, call 911.