

Marriage Help: Break the Cycle of Negative Communication

By Richard Nicastro, Ph.D.

Working with couples in conflict sometimes makes me think of my old boomerang days. As a kid, with a little practice, I was able to get the boomerang to glide through the air, turn around and fly directly back to me. And then, like many fickle kids, once I mastered it I hung up my boomerang and didn't think about it again.

Until...

I thought about that old boomerang during a coaching session with a couple struggling with intense conflict. When the husband threw criticism at his wife, criticism came flying back toward the husband. Like a boomerang in action, criticism always brought a return of criticism. I suppose I shouldn't have been surprised. After all, I've never seen someone respond to criticism with, "You know, you're absolutely right. I've been a total idiot lately and I need to be more considerate." Criticism makes people defensive and uncomfortable, and people often deal with that defensiveness by finding something they can criticize. Therefore, criticism begets criticism.

The communication boomerang effect: what you send to your partner will come back to you.

Then something remarkable happened. In the midst of the negativity that was boomeranging back and forth, I noticed that whenever one spouse said something that was almost compassionate or kind, the negativity weakened and on a few occasions, kindness was returned. I started to observe this positive boomerang effect with other couples: Compassion and positive sentiments frequently led to exchanges of additional positive sentiments.

When I pointed these patterns out to couples (how sending out positive or negative energy often returns positive or negative energy), most had no idea that this was happening—couples tend to lose perspective in the heat of arguments. I'll bet that most couples don't realize the power of the boomerang effect--what you send out into the relationship will, sooner or later, come back to you.

Inoculate your marriage or relationship against cyclical criticism

The concept of the boomerang effect is simple but the implications for your marriage or relationship are far-reaching. By making a conscious effort to send out positive energy (in the form of loving statements, support and validation), you are creating an atmosphere that will invite the return of positive energy. This will deepen intimacy and, over the long run, inoculate your relationship against the stresses that befall all couples.

Problems arise when couples enter into *long-term* cycles of negativity and hostility. Everyone is vulnerable in falling victim to these negative cycles. When resentments and hurt feelings accumulate, sending out a few loving sentiments will *not* immediately bring a positive return. It's a mistake to give up when this occurs, even if you've spent an entire week or month being loving, kind and supportive. Many couples give up too quickly at this point and revert back to negativity and/or emotional withdrawal.

The negativity that erodes relationships occurs over months or years and it will take patience to tip the scales back to the positive. But if you're patient and consistent, you'll be surprised to find that sooner or later something good will come back to you. (Still, despite this probable positive return, it's important for you to send out the positive feelings without expecting anything in return. When you do something kind just to get something in return, the kindness of your act is

automatically weakened. Also, your partner can often sense your hidden "agenda." So do and say beneficial things for your partner's and your relationship's sake, not because you are looking to be recompensed. A healthy relationship should be all the "return" you need on your investment.)

Obviously, you don't have to wait for problems to arise before you throw the first positive boomerang your partner's way. Regularly sending out positive sentiments today, when things are going well, can protect your relationship tomorrow.

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Author Bio

Over the past fifteen years Richard Nicastro, Ph.D. has helped couples build stronger, more fulfilling marriages and relationships. Dr. Nicastro has lectured at several universities and now conducts workshops for couples on a wide range of issues. His relationship advice has appeared on television, radio and in national magazines. A member of the International Coach Federation, Dr. Nicastro is passionate about coaching and believes that healthy relationships can add meaning and fulfillment to our lives. His goal is to guide individuals and couples as they implement the skills that will allow their relationships to flourish.

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