

## The things I would like to be appreciated for...



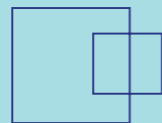
- This is definitely not the moment to be vindictive or self-pitying. Feeling taken for granted is pretty much unavoidable in any established relationship.

At the same time, it is crucial to be able to drain the potential lake of bitterness by communicating what we feel we contribute and are good at. Naturally, we long for our partner to notice and like the things that we like about ourselves.

At the start of the relationship, what was decent about both of us was very obvious. Then, with time, we became spoilt. It is the natural way in which our minds work: if we lived in the Alhambra palace, pretty soon we wouldn't even notice the stunning tiling.

We are not asking for adulation; our flaws are beyond doubt. We just need our compensating merits to be given more weight once in a while. We won't mind being criticised or corrected quite so much if we feel that, every now and then, the other person has properly grasped our upsides as well. A burst of appreciation will embolden both of us for the critical moments ahead •

## Where I'm unfulfilled in my life...

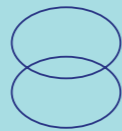


- Often we don't say clearly what is missing from our lives outside the relationship. Maybe we are disappointed that our social life isn't more exciting; perhaps we are yearning to travel; we could have problems around money, or how much time we have to give to work or to our parents. It doesn't matter how unreasonable or trivial these things might sound – the point is that they are important to us and they're not going right.

As a result, we have tendencies to become grumpy, depressed, angry or agitated. However, from day to day, we tend not to explain the origins of our moods very well. Our partner is the witness to our distress, but can't easily recognise where the distress is coming from. Therefore, they make the next most obvious move: they start to assume that we are simply mean or bad-tempered.

This is a chance to explain the background dissatisfactions responsible for some of our most acute day-to-day irritations and withdrawn moods; a chance to demonstrate that we are almost always sad or anxious, not simply mean or bad •

## When I'm upset, I need you to comfort me like this...



- Often enough, we become stuck in a poignant impasse: our partner wants to help us, but the way they offer assistance irritates us or can't soothe us. We feel neglected, but at the same time our partner concludes that their well-meaning efforts are being received ungratefully.

This is a chance to consider how both of you characteristically try to help each other – and how you would ideally like to be helped when there is difficulty in your lives.

We might find that if a partner starts to cook for us and take care of practical matters, we feel they are avoiding the real issues and are being lazy where it really counts. Or we might find that being told 'everything will all be OK' is deeply unnerving. Or it might be exactly what we want to hear. We might find agreement ('yes, it is all very difficult, it's awful, so bad') hugely useful. Or terrifying. We might feel very strongly that a certain action – being hugged or invited to lie down for a while – is essential, or patronising at just the wrong moment.

The point is, we need to explain what works for us and to hear what works for the other person. Once we have a clearer sense of how we each want comfort to be delivered effectively, we can try to adjust our style in order actually to be – rather than merely *want to be* – nice •

## When I'm in a panic, I...



- We are not trying to justify our behaviour. We are not saying that we think this is an ideal or a lovely way to react. We are just admitting that we recognise certain tendencies in our nature and are trying to explain what they are.

When we feel under threat, our instinct may be to react by becoming very controlling. Perhaps we burst into tears and announce that everything is hopeless (drowning a specific agitation in an ocean of woe). Perhaps we turn to a particularly cutting type of sarcasm, or maybe we lash out verbally and say quite horrible things. Or we feel we have to be on our own and go deadly silent.

What we are doing here is helping our partner to interpret what outwardly appear to be disconcerting bits of behaviour. We are asking them to see these, not as reflections of the whole of our nature, but as ways in which we try to cope with situations that we perceive as especially threatening to our deeper selves.

We are trying to compile our own – inevitably very strange – translation manual. We are trying to make some of the least lovable parts of our behaviour seem less alarming and more forgivable •

**I'd probably be more normal  
if the following hadn't happened  
to me in childhood...**



- It is hugely helpful for a couple to recognise that both parties are inevitably a little crazy in a variety of ways. This is not a personal failing; it is how all human beings are. No one ever quite reaches settled, mature and sane adulthood.

The problems almost always start in childhood. This question should provide a calm moment in which to explain more about what happened when we were little, and to lay out why it may make us, at points, unnaturally intense and hard to live with today.

Perhaps there was a very punitive parent, so we have grown up prone to lying about things that are awkward. Or someone was a bit depressed and we had to be cheerful and now have a tendency to be deaf to bad news. Maybe a parent disappointed us badly, and nowadays we aren't very good at trust and letting our guard down.

A knowledge of intimate histories shifts our ideas of what the other person is doing when they are annoying or disappointing. They are not just being difficult – they are struggling with the complex legacy of a past we don't know enough about, just as they don't know enough about ours •

## What I find annoying about you is...



- This sounds like a nasty theme, but, when handled correctly, it can be the gateway to greater tenderness and self-development.

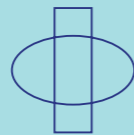
Everyone is radically flawed. Therefore, two people in a relationship will always be trying to teach each other how to be better versions of themselves. They will try to get the other person to be, for example, more punctual, less cold, more contained, less impulsive, or more thoughtful.

It is sometimes said that true love means accepting someone just as they are. But, in reality, this can't be true, or indeed wise. We should want to be taught – and to teach. The issue is how we go about this emotional pedagogical business.

When we are in the teaching role, we need to proceed with immense sympathy and tact. And when we are in the listening (or pupil) role, we need to accept bravely that someone can have a legitimate criticism of us and yet still want the best for us.

This is an opportunity to do something very rare: to level criticism without anger. And this is a chance to hear criticism as more than an attack; to interpret it for what it may truly be: a desire to help us to grow •

## I guess I'm difficult to live with because...



- We don't need other people to be perfect. What we need, above all, is a sense that they understand their imperfections; that they are ready to explain them to us; and that they can do so outside of the moments when they have hurt us.

It is a sign of being a grown-up that we can, finally, admit that we are monstrously difficult to live with. Everyone is. It's just a question of how we, in particular, are tricky.

We might, for instance, have very strong views about interior design and find any opposition to our taste quite distressing. We might be fanatically (and often anxiously) devoted to our work. We could have strong views on how long it is OK to keep a taxi waiting; whether bedroom windows should be kept open at night, or what time a child needs to go to bed (to start sketching a potentially endless list).

Recognising where we are inflexible and where we are very demanding won't solve all the points of contention. But it can hugely and decisively change the atmosphere. Both parties should never be done with the business of apologising for how challenging they each are to be around •

## What I would like to be forgiven for...



- We are in need of forgiveness, but we are often especially stubborn about things for which we need the other person to show us compassion.

Most of the time, we tell ourselves that we are not to blame, that it's our partner who should be apologising and asking *us* to forgive *them*. But in our most honest moments (perhaps at 3am, when it's very quiet and there's a full moon), we sometimes recognise that we have brought certain troubles into our partner's life. It would be strange if we hadn't. We are complex individuals; we are not remotely perfect. We must know we have let them down badly in certain areas.

Unfortunately, when we feel guilty, but are unforgiven, we have a tendency to become more aggressive and in denial about what we have done.

Therefore, we need to create an atmosphere where an admission of guilt will be met with tolerance and sympathy. At this moment, we're not asking the other person to wipe the slate clean. We're just stating something from our own side: that we would *like* to be forgiven for certain things that, we admit, we're really sorry about. We will try to do better – if we're given the chance •



## Where I'd love you to realise you hurt me is...



- We carry around wounds that we have found, understandably and inevitably, hard to articulate. Perhaps the complaints sounded too petty or humiliating to mention at the time. The problem is that when they fester, the current of affection starts to become blocked. Soon, we may find ourselves flinching when our partner tries to touch us or suggests that we make love. What we call 'loss of desire' (or more plainly 'going off sex') is often simply a kind of anger with a partner that hasn't had a chance to understand itself.

This is a safe moment in which to reveal some of these hurts, which are typically unintentional. Maybe last month there was something around money, or their mother, or the way they responded to a fairly innocent enquiry in the kitchen before work.

It is vital that the partner doesn't step in and deny that the hurt took place, start to move the blame back, or remark that the hurt is too small to take seriously. There is no such thing as a hurt that is too small. If it was felt, it is legitimate.

What matters is that each person can be heard and can lay out areas where the other wounded them more than they've been able to explain up to now.

This exercise should not reignite problems. It should help solve them once and for all – and should be repeated regularly, as often as once a week •

## A slightly weird thing about me around sex is...



- None of us is entirely normal about sex. And yet the pressure to be normal is seldom greater than in the bedroom. At precisely the moment when we long to be intimate, we are terrified that we'll come across as perverted, dirty, stunted or degenerate.

The result is that we start to lie. We shut off areas of interest. We conceal what we really want. And we may go off sex altogether or develop a fantasy life from which our partner is excluded.

It is key, therefore, to create a nurturing environment of acceptance around our sexual imaginations. Nothing should be off limits. The strangest and most offbeat fantasies should be open for discussion in an atmosphere of mutual tolerance and love. We should accept that there is – of course – a crucial difference between a fantasy and a desire for it to be acted out for real.

We grow apart from a misplaced sense of propriety. We try to be 'good' where we shouldn't. Now is the time to admit to our interestingly dark sides. We might say things like: when I was fourteen, I saw this person wearing this kind of top. Or: I feel that if someone is shouting at me, they must be really interested in me. Or: I feel that sex is very bad, so I need to be told I am very bad before I can really enjoy it.

The whole point of sex is to be liberated from the rules and demands of ordinary life. It's meant to be naughty and, if it's going well, perhaps even a bit sick-sounding •