



# Cabin Fever Couples: Answers to Their Biggest Problems

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# The Daily Double

Here's something you can do for your relationship today. It's called The Daily Double. You earn two points today by doing two positive things on the positive list below, while avoiding doing any of the negative behaviors from the list at the end.

Let's up the ante and go for the Thirty Day Challenge. Do The Daily Double for 30 days straight. If you slip up and do one of the negative behaviors in the box at the end of this article, start over again at Day 1 until you have 30 consecutive Daily Doubles. Be sure to track your accomplishments every day. Why do this practice? Your brain cannot be appreciative and simultaneously be angry, fearful or resentful. It's like trying to breathe in and out at the same time — you can't do it.

## Ways to be positive

1. I listened to difficult comments and kept my cool.
2. I was able to recap what I was hearing in a conversation which slowed things down to a more manageable conversation.
3. I expressed compassion in a difficult situation.
4. When I felt I needed to solve a problem, I first asked my partner if they wanted advice.
5. I used some appropriate humor, which my partner appreciated.
6. I asked several questions before butting in with my reactions.
7. I took several relaxing breaths instead of negatively commenting on an annoying habit
8. I expressed appreciation at least twice today and expressed why I was appreciative.
9. I took a time out instead of continuing a downward spiral argument
10. I apologized for my part in a bad situation or conversation.
11. I went out of my way to do something nice for my partner.
12. I had kind and loving thoughts about my partner today.
13. When I had negative thoughts about my partner, I shifted to thinking about what I appreciated.

14. I emailed my partner at least one appreciation today.
15. I texted my partner at least one appreciation today.
16. I said both “please” and “thank you” today.
17. I made better eye contact today.
18. I kept my voice tone positive during a difficult discussion.
19. I told my partner how I would like them to respond to me before talking about a difficult topic. For example, “I just want you to listen with concern. No advice needed, just support.”
20. I looked for something positive in my partner today then expressed it.
21. I asked questions about my partner’s perspectives and reality.
22. I took the initiative to do something I knew my partner would value (that I don’t usually take the initiative to do).
23. I thought about how I aspired to be before having a difficult discussion, for example, to be curious about my partner’s perspective be patient, be calm, be assertive, be concise, be considerate, be understanding, etc. (Focusing on how you aspire to be is an exceptionally good way to immediately have better discussions.)
24. Today I practiced being:
  - ▶ Affectionate
  - ▶ Kind
  - ▶ Generous
  - ▶ Supportive
  - ▶ Caring
  - ▶ Curious and asking good questions vs telling or preaching
  - ▶ Understanding vs pushing my perspective
  - ▶ Thoughtful and considerate
  - ▶ Grateful for things I usually take for granted

And, if you do something positive today that’s not on the list, write it down and count it — and congratulate yourself. Another way to collect two points a day — give yourself one point if you were tempted to do one or more of the negative behaviors below, but stopped yourself.

## Today I avoided these negative behaviors:

- ▶ Interrupting
- ▶ Name calling
- ▶ Blaming/accusing
- ▶ Raising my voice inappropriately
- ▶ Being vague about what I wanted
- ▶ Criticizing what my partner wanted
- ▶ Changing the topic during a difficult discussion
- ▶ Asking blaming questions like, "Why do you always...?"
- ▶ Psychoanalyzing my partner during a difficult discussion
- ▶ Becoming resentfully compliant
- ▶ Saying "never"
- ▶ Pouting
- ▶ Withdrawing
- ▶ Acting like a victim

# Skillful Negotiation for Couples

Marriage and committed partnerships are challenging. Growing your business is a challenge. What happens when you try to combine the two?

We know firsthand how daunting it is to blend these two endeavors. We've been married and worked together for over thirty years. As psychologists specializing in marriage counseling and as directors of The Couples Institute, we should have all the skills necessary to blend business and marriage, right?



In fact, the opportunities for us to disagree are practically limitless. Fortunately, the opportunities for us to grow together are even greater. For our own personal and marital survival, we have had to develop some really effective methods to make decisions, solve problems, and negotiate better solutions.

There has been a lot of trial and error — more error than we would like to admit. But in retrospect, we seemed to have learned from these mistakes. And over the years we've had ample opportunity to try these techniques and refine them to fit a wide variety of couples and their situations.

The result is that we have developed a refined negotiation strategy that works. Really works. Negotiation can be messy and riddled with tension. Finger pointing, selfish demands, and resentful compliance are often part of the process.

Managing tricky emotions is part of negotiation. So are conflicts of values and feelings. These factors do not lend themselves to an easy list of negotiation steps.

In this article you will learn why we tell couples to stop trying to define the problem. This is a deadly mistake that couples and even negotiators make. In face, defining the problem just makes things worse.

Here's a warning. This is not a short article. We want to give you the best chance possible to negotiate workable agreements with your partner, so you will get more depth than the typical *Redbook* or *Good Housekeeping* story.

As an extra benefit, this process will help you with your business and with your children.

**These guidelines will help you avoid the three most common negotiating mistakes couples make:**

1. Caving in too quickly to avoid tension or to keep the peace
2. Stubbornly pushing too hard for your own solution
3. Failing to prepare before the negotiation with your partner

**Here are some basic concepts to start with:**



**Why learn to negotiate?**

- ▶ Conflict is inevitable for growth in your relationship.
- ▶ Many people are frightened of conflict because they can't negotiate.
- ▶ If you can negotiate, you don't need to be so afraid of conflict.
- ▶ Good negotiation leads to acceptable solutions that work for both and strengthen your relationship.
- ▶ Your communication skills automatically improve as you develop good negotiating skills



**Win-win solutions**

These are the best and are often difficult to attain. They require:

- ▶ Self-knowledge plus a very high degree of understanding your partner's values, concerns and desires.
- ▶ Respect for yourself and for your partner.
- ▶ Openness and persistence, the grease that makes negotiation successful.



**Negotiation is an ongoing process, not a one-time event**

- ▶ The more complex the situation, the higher the stakes, the more your core values are involved, the longer it will take.

- ▶ The more complex the problem, the more trial and error solutions will be attempted.
- ▶ There is no such thing as a perfect solution. Every solution sets the stage for another problem. This will likely be a challenge you would not have even attempted because you were stuck on a lower rung of the ladder.



### **The difference between negotiation for couples and other negotiations**

- ▶ The amount of self-disclosure required is higher for couples.
- ▶ Effective solutions for complex problems requires lots of openness, curiosity, and emotional risk.
- ▶ Solutions will take experimentation, re-working, and building-sometimes over the lifetime of the couple.



### **Skills required for negotiating with your partner**

- ▶ Listening
- ▶ Openness about yourself
- ▶ Curiosity about aspects of your partner's struggles
- ▶ Managing your emotional reactivity when talking about sensitive topics



### **Some things cannot be negotiated**

- ▶ Core values
- ▶ Integrity
- ▶ Spirituality
- ▶ Emotions
- ▶ Attitudes
- ▶ Trust

Do your best to separate your interest and concerns from your values. You can negotiate your concerns but not your core values or integrity. For example, it doesn't work to say, "I'll give up my spiritual beliefs for you, and you agree to not spank the children."



### **The only things you can really negotiate are behavior and decisions:**

- ▶ What someone will do.
- ▶ When they will do it.
- ▶ How they will do it.



### **How to prepare to negotiate**

- ▶ Ask yourself how you aspire to be during the negotiation. For example, calm, open, flexible honest, understanding, curious.
- ▶ By following guidelines you set for yourself, you can stay more easily focused toward a successful outcome. This is an often-overlooked aspect of negotiation. Staying conscious of your own guidelines will help keep you centered and focused.
- ▶ Write your guidelines on a piece of paper and keep glancing at them during the negotiation. You will come across like an experienced negotiator simply by staying consistent with your own guidelines.
- ▶ Create a name for your self-image of being a good negotiator. This will be your power word to call on in the future to help you get re-centered and stay on track.



### **Emotions and attitudes can interfere with effective negotiation before it even starts**

- ▶ I don't deserve it. I'm not worthy.
- ▶ If I get what I want, I will be obligated in the future to give.
- ▶ I never get what I want. My partner doesn't care about what I want. What I want is more important than what my partner wants.
- ▶ I won't let anyone push me around.
- ▶ You have to fight for what you want in life.
- ▶ Whoever wants it the most should get what they want.



### **Fears that interfere with good negotiation**

- ▶ Fear of reprisal.
- ▶ Fear of offending partner.
- ▶ Fear of disrupting relationship.
- ▶ Fear that if you really seek to understand your partner's concerns you will have to agree with what they want.



# Exercise: Effective Negotiation

**Step 1:** Before you start negotiations, quietly reflect on the following questions.

1. What do I want?

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2. How important is this to me?

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3. Why is it important?

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4. To get what I want, what will I need to do and what will my partner need to do?

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5. If I get most of what I want, what will be the positive and negative effect on my partner?

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6. How could I make it easier for my partner to say yes?

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7. I'm afraid if we don't resolve this disagreement, then the effect on my partner and on me might be

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8. If I get most of what I want, the effect on me would be

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9. If I get most of what I want, the benefit to my partner might be

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10. However, it may be difficult for my partner to give me most of what I want because

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11. I may be able to increase the benefits to my partner by

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12. I may be able to decrease the downside to my partner by

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13. Add other relevant information that has not been suggested here:

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Do not feel like you need go through these questions and statements robotically in a dialogue with your partner. But as you get mentally clear about these issues, it will make it easier to conversationally express your concerns and desires.

## Step 2: Start by stating the area of disagreement.

It is important to describe the issue as a disagreement instead of as a problem. It is very difficult to say, "The problem is \_\_\_\_\_" without pointing fingers at your partner or yourself. This actual or implied finger-pointing leads to a defensive reaction from one or both parties. The negotiation then begins to slip like a house built on loose gravel. State the disagreement in the form, "We seem to disagree about \_\_\_\_\_."

Then take turns expressing what your concerns and desires are about the disagreement.

## Step 3: Do I have concerns about your concerns?

One person goes first and expresses all their concerns while the partner listens without rebutting or defending anything. The response is simply to recap and check for understanding. It may also be necessary to ask questions for clarity. Avoid leading questions that sound like a courtroom attorney, "Did it ever occur to you that ...?"

## Step 4: Brainstorm solutions

After each person has expressed all their concerns and desires, and each of you feels understood, then it's time for brainstorming solutions. One partner proposes a solution. Make the suggested proposal in the following format:

Honey, what I suggest is \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

This suggestion works for me because \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

This suggestion might work for you because \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

### Other partner responds

If the partner agrees with the whole suggestion, then recap why it works. If the partner does not agree, then start with recapping the part that does work. The part that does work is

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

The part that doesn't work for me is \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

So my alternative suggestion is \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

This suggestion works for me because \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Add value to your offers. Keep finding ways to make it easier for your partner to say yes.

Remember — this negotiation is only an experiment; nobody is locked into a permanent solution. It is only for a period of time to see what, if anything, needs adjusting.

**Repeat suggestions until agreement is reached.**

## **Step 5:** Take action

- ▶ If action is appropriate, decide who will do what by when.
- ▶ Decide for how long you will try this solution.

## **Step 6:** Evaluation

- ▶ After the action phase come back and evaluate the results.
- ▶ If things are fine, continue for another block of time

## **Step 7:** And beyond

If it didn't work out as well you and your partner hoped, each person begins by saying, "Honey, it didn't work the way I hoped, but here is what I could have done differently." Don't start by stating what your partner should have done differently. Then repeat appropriate steps above. Good luck, and may all your problems lead to livelier collaboration.

# The 7-Step Approach to Influence Your Partner to Change

## ... and Become a Stronger Team

Everyone has something they would like to change in their partner. Unfortunately, too many partners believe, "If I want a change, my partner is obligated to do it 'if they really love me'."

Frequently this creates quite a power struggle. Here is a 7-step process to create a change in your partner.

The key to the success of this process is that it makes your partner want to change - instead of feeling coerced. Why? Because your gain will not feel like their loss.

**Here's what you do.**

**1 Make a list** of the top three behaviors your partner does that annoy you. For example, leaves messes around house; pouts; doesn't do their share of household tasks, etc. Then, select the one problem that has the best chance of your partner responding to your discomfort. You will increase your chances for success dramatically by focusing on one problem at a time. Let's go for a big one here and say the problem is that your partner is not pulling their weight around the house.

**2 Describe the problem in clear detail.** This includes what your partner does and your reaction to the problem. For example: "Honey, there is a problem I need to discuss with you.

Is this an OK time to do it? Negotiate a better time if this is not appropriate.

When you are around the house and read your email, turn on the news, get on your laptop, return a phone call without looking around and noticing the kids are cranky, squalling for dinner, and I'm up to my neck in getting dinner ready, I see you as a blind and insensitive clod.

This problem has persisted too long now little change in sight."

**3 Describe your reaction to the problem.** This means what you think, what you feel and what you do that you are not proud of when you think and feel this way.

"When you act so oblivious, I think you care much more about responding to your own needs first and foremost, and you pitch in only when it is convenient for you. I feel angry, alone, and resentful. When I feel that way I end up being chilly to you and withdrawing any spontaneous signs of affection. I don't like how I react but that is what I have been doing."

Here is the “formula” for describing the problem.

A. You have specified the behavior of “not pulling his weight” by giving specific examples.

B. You have given your reaction to it by stating, “when you do (the behavior) ...

**I think** \_\_\_\_\_ (you’re inconsiderate ... )

**and feel** \_\_\_\_\_ (angry, alone, resentful), and

**then I do** \_\_\_\_\_ (withhold affection).

It is important to let your partner know what your complete response is to the behavior that is a problem. Especially let them know what you do when you think and feel the way you do.

This really informs your partner of the consequence to them when they do the undesired behavior. Include in your reaction the meaning of the problem for you. For example, not pulling their weight represents not being loved, respected, or valued.

- 4 Be empathetic.** Tell your partner why you think that would be hard for them to change the undesired behavior.

This lets them know you see the problem from both perspectives and that you have an appreciation for what you’re asking them to change.

For example, “Honey, I think pitching in would be difficult because you feel stressed and want some time to yourself in order to regenerate. I think pitching in at the level I want is a lot to ask of you.”

- 5 Describe how you will help.** Because you’re not just going to make a request and then hope for the best, (this hasn’t been successful in the past, neither has been nagging or pleading) the next step is to describe what you will do to help your partner make the change you want.

For example, “Honey, your pitching in is so important to me that I will do \_\_\_\_\_. ”  
(Fill in here what you think will be a high motivator for your partner to make the requested change.)

- 6 Ask if they are willing to make the change you’re requesting.** They may agree to all or part or none of your request. They might say “no” to you but would be more willing to consider the change if you offered a different motivator or inducement to change. Then you can decide if it is worth your efforts.

- 7 Find out why.** Regardless of whether they are willing to change or not, ask why.

Knowing why they are willing to change will help you understand what motivates them. You will be able to encourage them more effectively along the way.

If they don’t want to change, finding out why will help you determine how to move forward.

In that case you still have 2 more options. One, you can ask if their response is a temporary or more permanent condition.

If it seems there will be no change for now, let them know the consequences - how you think, feel and act — and then drop it for now.

The second option is to go to the second problem on your list and repeat the sequence described above.

Of course the biggest improvements in a couples' relationship come when both people change and grow. But there are often things you'd like your partner to change, and this format helps you do it in a way that supports both of you.

This helps create a stronger team because any change requested is supported by the asking partner. Each encourages and supports the requested change.

It's the mark of a strong **TEAM**.

**T**ogether

**E**ach

**A**ccomplishes

**M**ore