

As couples therapists, my wife, Ellyn and I hear every kind of ineffective communication. Under stress, people do a lot of unpleasant or nasty things to their partner. Most ineffective reactions can be classified into one of five categories. Although we use all of them once in a while, most of us have favorites we use when feeling threatened, fearful, inadequate or some other kind of emotional pain.

These reactions are basically ineffective coping mechanisms developed to reduce emotional pain. But their ineffectiveness doesn't stop us from reflexing to them when the stress gets high enough.

Being able to recognizing the five major categories can help to recognize your habitual patterns and start to break them.

Five Categories of Ineffective Communication

1. Withdrawal – Stonewalling, becoming stoic, giving minimal responses, or exiting in the middle of a heated discussion.
2. Blaming – Accusing, finger pointing, yelling, trying to dominate the discussion.
3. Resentful compliance – Over-accommodating to your partner in order to avoid tension or potentially nasty discussions.
4. Whining – Complaining, competing for the victim position, being very indirect about what you want.
5. Confusion – Inability to think clearly, going blank.

To create a flourishing relationship, we have to resist using these ineffective coping reactions. If you can't resist, the only other solution is to find a partner who doesn't do any of these – even when they're up to their neck in alligators!

Which one of these patterns do you commonly use when the stress gets too high? To post a comment, click the "comment" link at the top of the article, right under the title on the right hand side.

Next time we'll talk about the two basic emotions that are the basis of these reactions.

Until then,

Pete