

I.

This feels awful. Can we
start again and really
listen to each other?

Though there were a few contenders, this deceptively simple message became the book's lead flash card for a reason. It is a very powerful intervention because, first of all, it tells the Receiver something that I can almost promise you is out of his or her awareness—that you also are not exactly enjoying the proceedings. What a notion. Think about it—when you are experiencing your partner in any way as difficult—and this could run the gamut from “just not getting it” to downright perverse—are you also thinking, “I’m sure Marty isn’t enjoying this any more than I am”? No, you are probably not thinking this. In fact, it can even feel like Marty *is* enjoying whatever “this” is. So when you present this flash card to your co-weary partner, it is almost guaranteed to quickly “de-enemy-ize” you in their eyes and surprise them with the awareness that in this unpleasant, even ad-

versarial, moment, you are *both feeling the same thing*: a distaste for what is going on.

The “really listen to each other” piece is also its own gift. The Sender is saying the greatest thing: “I know neither of us has been listening very well—and that includes me, sweetheart—and it is worth it to me to roll up my sleeves and do the thing that we both know needs to happen to turn this misery around: really get ourselves out of the way and hear each other. I’m up for it . . . you game?”

This is an extremely helpful flash card. The only caution I would use in regard to it is to choose a more self-responsible message acknowledging your own poor listening if, in fact, your partner actually has been relatively non-defensive, and the “we” in “Can we start again . . .” should be crossed out and replaced with an “I,” who really wants to listen better to a certain “you.”

2.

I know I'm being defensive. Can you say this in a less charged way so I can feel safe with you?

Even defensiveness, you shall see, has never really been The Problem. It is *unacknowledged* defensiveness that has been the killer in just about every crummy interaction you have ever had. The moment, though, one of you takes ownership of your defensiveness, notice the extraordinary amount of Presence this brings into the room. To say, “I know I’m being defensive” means making the monumental shift from showing up as a reactive person mindlessly hitting, slamming or withholding the ball, to showing up as a sane, self-aware person with a high-level capacity to make tracking his insides a priority. Once this “Inner Tracker” reveals himself through this flash card, I can say with some assurance that the person on the receiving end will immediately get calmer. I can say this because, time and again in my work with couples, in the end it turns out that the person behaving in this allegedly “charged” manner was doing so precisely because she did not trust that there was A Someone across the way who was truly receiving her.

In the meantime, A Someone who is track-

ing his own defensiveness qualifies as A Someone you can trust because, no longer putting energy into protecting himself, he has energy available to listen. Moreover, in acknowledging his own defensiveness, he is communicating something major—that he is willing to own up to what happens to be True. The Sender, after all, is not telling the Receiver to be quiet. He is both inviting her to express herself in a way that will make it easier for her to be heard, and telling her he wants to feel safe with her. A very good deal for both parties.

This card originally started out saying, “. . . Can you say this in a *gentler* way so I can feel safe with you?” But it turned out that female recipients, in particular, felt sort of put down being seen as not-gentle—which brought another whole level of defensiveness into the mix (“*So now you see me as cold and hard, is that it?*”). This is in support of a more general point: when you want to feel safer with someone, you don’t have to get them to see how badly they are behaving. Just tell them you want to feel safer with them.

3.

I wish you could
hear this as me saying
“yes” to myself—not
“no” to you.

The reason we don't have a flash card in this book that just says, "Please don't take this personally," is because it would be a wasted card. Almost no one knows how to not take it personally.

If Marjorie wants fifteen more minutes on the phone with her girlfriend, when Paul is ready to watch the DVD . . . or Marjorie is ready to watch the movie and Paul needs fifteen minutes to check his email . . . or one of them wants to meditate or go to sleep or, God forbid, finish a gripping mystery when the other wants to make love . . . it's a sure recipe for the other person to feel personally diminished or rejected or simply that they don't matter all that much to their partner. People who were severely neglected in childhood or had extremely self-absorbed parents can, frankly, have a hard time making the distinction between "yes" to myself and "no" to you. But even the sturdier among us can feel depreciated by a partner's choice, and

this flash card is meant to soften that disappointment. Relationships provide endless forced-choice moments when conflicting agendas and/or realities require us to disappoint someone we love. You have worked tirelessly to land an impossible-to-schedule appointment with a highly desirable potential client. And later that night your partner informs you that he set up, at the exact same time, a medical appointment that he wants you to attend with him. Often you'll cancel the client, of course, but there are those times when the medical condition is routine enough—and the consequences of canceling the client feel extreme enough—that you will be truly torn. Your partner will take it personally. A partner with years of personal growth work will likely still take it personally, but at least know that they are doing this. A partner who doesn't take it personally has reached Enlightenment. Short of that, we recommend this flash card.

4.

All I want is for you
to listen to me with
an open heart.

When it comes to chronic relationship conflict, underneath everything you have been trying to explain, argue for or, for that matter, avoid with your partner is this one wish: please—just take in what’s going on with me *with interest and without judgment*. I may want something that you don’t want . . . I may see something entirely different from how you see it . . . but please, see that I am not a loony tune. If you could just hear how it is for me in my skin, you’d see how my feelings or behavior make sense . . . and that is what I need from you right now.

Notice how the language here—“*All I want* is for you to listen . . .”—suggests that you are only asking for one small, reasonable thing. In reality, however, what you are asking for may be reasonable, but it is by no means small. What you are asking for is to be understood and accepted as you are. Make no mistake—the Sender of this card is asking for Everything and, because of this, will need to possess of him- or herself a fair amount of

confidence in their self-worth. For many of the flash cards, the words work alone, but this is a case where the request is so big that any accompanying energetic ambivalence on the part of the Sender (i.e., “I’m not 100 percent sure that I deserve what I am asking for”) will likely keep the Receiver’s guarded heart resistant. But if the Sender truly believes she is worth being listened to—and is not also demanding that her partner do more than take her seriously—it will be the former’s consciousness of self-worth that will inspire her partner to let down his guard and listen to her freshly.

While you might want openheartedness around everything and anything, this flash card is recommended for situations where your partner seems particularly threatened that taking in your reality will seriously undermine his. He felt totally ignored by you the night before when you were presumably going to have some time together but ended up lingering for most of the evening at a neighbor’s home or felt undermined by your

reversing a parenting decision of his. You want him to understand that you were actually offering life-saving advice to the neighbor or that you were attempting to shield your child from unanticipated humiliation. His openheartedness will be more openhearted if, once you get the floor, you are

sure he first gets that you understand his pain and the graciousness of his renewed willingness to listen.

Good to remember: hearts are forever opening and closing. An open heart has only opened one more time than it has closed. That's it . . . *only one more time.*

5.

I am upset. This doesn't mean that you are a bad person . . . It means that if you could just listen, I would feel incredibly loved.

This is a truth about relationships: though we can be oblivious to our partner's upset over something we have done, we can't stand it when our partner is upset with us.

In her classic parenting book *You Can Postpone Anything But Love* (Ambassador Press, 1985), Randy Rolfe makes the profound point that in any communication we hear the most abstract message first. This means: if your partner is agitated that you are not dressed for the wedding yet and is frantically updating you on traffic conditions on the Long Island Expressway, you are not particularly taking in messages about time management, wedding etiquette or, frankly, even his panic about being late. You mostly just hear, "Steve is upset with me."

With this flash card's "I am upset," you immediately validate your partner's reality and, at the same time, let them see that your upset is limited—not something that is spiraling

endlessly into outer space. As children many of us received the message from our parents when they were upset with us that we were somehow bad and therefore less deserving of love—and we didn't know if and when it would stop. Now that we are adults, it is still a rare person who can see their partner upset about something they have done and not feel even a little bad about themselves. This, of course, can lead to defensiveness, which is exactly what this card is meant to fend off. This flash card takes the sting out of someone being upset with you. It says: "I don't want to be upset with you . . . I want to feel received by you. In fact, I want to feel loved by you." To tell your partner that you are just a heartbeat away from feeling loved is a beautiful opportunity to meet someone more than halfway. And it gives that someone the beautiful opportunity to discover again how transformative is their willingness to just listen.

30.

When you won't
communicate with
me, I feel like I'm
nothing to you.

In the classic scenario, the male who wants to escape because his partner is overwhelming him doesn't take the time to shoot off a friendly and relational explanatory flash card before cutting off contact with his offending sweetie. He typically engages in what researcher John Gottman calls "stonewalling," i.e., maintaining a "stone face," speaking very little or not at all, and sometimes intensified by crossed arms and exasperated eye-rolling—telegraphing quite clearly "Stay away!" Women are known to react quite poorly to this stance, and they tend to get more intense, if not frantic, in an attempt to break through and reestablish contact.

Gottman, who has been observing couples microscopically for more than twenty-five years, reports that the most important variable in long-term relationship happiness is that the woman truly feels she has some power to influence her man. Some of this is because of how indoctrinated most women are into a culture of male dominance. So when

her partner refuses to even *hear* her perspective, any subterranean feelings of unfairness start arising pronto. To use an analogy that comes from relationship master Harville Hendrix, Ph.D., the hailstorm confronts the turtle.

Only hailstorms, you may have noticed, have poor track records getting turtles to leave their shells. The only way to break the stalemate here is for the Hailstorm to bravely acknowledge that she, too, has been in a sort of a shell, albeit a noisy one, using nagging and protest in order to camouflage how powerless and unimportant she really feels around you.

Note that this flash card is not a call to be heard more or taken more seriously. At this point, you are asking your tentative partner only to appreciate his impact on you. After flashing this card, you may feel so felt that you could have less of a need to communicate, literally, for days.

64.

When you treat me
this way, it feels like
you don't respect
me. Is that true?

It can feel demeaning, if not humiliating, when someone who matters to us speaks to us as if we're stupid or inadequate, as if we're inferior or insufferable. Or snaps at us with minimal provocation, rolls their eyes at something we said or walks out of the room disdainfully when we are trying to initiate a conversation. Or lies there in bed, refusing to engage, because of a misinterpreted or mishandled sexual directive. (It can feel disrespectful when they seem to prefer to wallow in their "feeling offended" rather than do what they can to reinstate their connection with us.) But it can only really, really gnaw at you if you feel so ashamed of yourself that you are unwilling to look your partner in the eye and deliver the message above. If your

partner is behaving disrespectfully, reclaim your dignity by looking them in the eye and *requiring them to take full responsibility* for their lack of respect in a direct and honest way. "Tell me straight, buster . . . if you really don't respect me, tell me straight, rather than let it leak out through your contemptuous behavior and superior tone."

Aligning yourself with this flash card helps you reclaim your dignity, because you are transmitting the self-respect of one who is not too timid to put the respect issue on the table. On top of that, the "*Is that true?*" has the energy of an innocent questioner.

How can you not respect, if not love, someone who only wants The Truth?