

***Relationship Repair for Couples: A Customer Service Approach
to Minimizing Conflict and Creating Lasting Love in Your Relationships,***

by Dr. Stephanie Weiland Knarr

Couples in intimate relationships may expect their love to unite them so completely that they will never disappoint or hurt each other. However, even though deeply in love, they remain two separate individuals with different histories, personalities, preferences, and habits. Inevitably someone will miss a cue or make an assumption, unaware of or ignoring the other's needs and desires. If the injured party is unable to express his or her feelings in such a way that the other can hear and learn how to be a more loving partner, the relationship will suffer. Making and responding to complaints are essential skills for maintaining healthy long-term relationships.

In a recently published book titled *Dr. Stephanie's Relationship Repair for Couples: A Customer Service Approach to Minimizing Conflict and Creating Lasting Love in Your Relationships*¹, the author urges couples to model their relationship maintenance and repair practices after the customer service counters found in most business establishments. Just as customers need to know where they can take their complaints, with confidence that they will be heard and their dissatisfactions resolved, husbands and wives also need to know that they will receive attentive concern from each other when disappointed or hurt or unhappy. Making complaints may sound like a negative behavior, but in fact demonstrates commitment to the relationship and a desire to make it work. Dr. Stephanie gives clear directions for expressing a complaint in a way less likely to trigger defensiveness, and she provides helpful guidance for responding positively to complaints as well.

Unfortunately, many of us have developed an automatic defensive reaction to complaints. What would happen to a business if its customer service representatives told persons with complaints that they shouldn't feel the way they do or reminded them of all the things the company has done right? Even worse, what if the customer service representative "jumped over the counter," as Dr. Stephanie puts it, and started enumerating complaints of his or her own? Sadly, bringing a complaint often triggers such negative behavior and results in a raging quarrel over who is right and who is wrong. That discourages an unhappy partner from even mentioning an unfulfilled wish or disappointment. Such couples learn that they cannot count on each other to care enough to listen deeply to concerns and to try to make things better.

When couples - or persons in other kinds of relationships - do not feel safe in bringing up their needs and feelings, they often withdraw and cease "doing business" with each other. The lack of an effective customer service counter can destroy a business - or a relationship. Just as we encourage our congregations to bring both petitions and confessions before God, we can encourage them to serve each other effectively by "speaking the truth in love" and by listening with compassion and with a desire to understand

Dr. Stephanie offers this advice for making a complaint:

1. Decide before you speak what would best resolve your complaint.
2. Start by saying something positive or expressing appreciation for the other person and ask if this is a good time to discuss an issue.
3. Calmly communicate that you know the other person did not intend to hurt you.
4. Calmly describe your complaint in no more than two or three sentences, then stop.
5. Describe the resolution you have in mind and ask if your spouse would be willing to do it.
6. If the other person agrees, express your appreciation.

Dr. Stephanie offers this advice for the person receiving a complaint:

1. Assure your partner that because you want him or her to be happy, you want to understand the complaint. If this is not a good time for this conversation, state your willingness to listen later, set a time, and be sure to follow through.

2. Listen without interrupting while your spouse elaborates about the complaint. When she or he stops, ask if there is more or ask specific questions if you are unclear about anything that was said.
3. Reflect back to your partner what you have heard and invite correction if you have misunderstood any of what was said.
4. Ask how you can resolve your partner's concern.
5. Negotiate a solution that works for you also (see next paragraph).
6. Ask your mate if the concern has been fully resolved.

Common resolutions for complaints include apologies; new "agreements" about handling chores, time management, finances, parenting, vacation planning, etc.; some action to make up for the grievance; or promises and plans for behavior change. If you have difficulty agreeing on a resolution, try brainstorming. Although Dr. Stephanie does not discuss this strategy, the "no-lose" problem-solving method presented by Thomas Gordon in *Parent Effectiveness Training*² and similar books works well -- if persons take the time to communicate clearly enough to fully understand each other's needs. Once both feel understood, they can freely brainstorm possible solutions, allowing absolutely no negative reactions or comments about any suggestions. They must write down every idea that comes up, because even the most apparently absurd idea can trigger another that is workable - especially if the mood is relaxed and open. Participants should be clear that afterwards they can eliminate any ideas they cannot accept, before choosing a solution both are willing to try. If there are no mutually agreeable solutions, they will need to go back to the first step, communicating clearly and listening carefully to increase their mutual understanding before brainstorming again. A third party may assist by coaching them through the process, but should not get involved in the details of the conversation itself.

Dr. Stephanie states emphatically that no matter how great a spouse you may be, your partner will inevitably have some complaints. She declares that "it is the job of your significant other to help you grow as a person and also to ask you to make adjustments for her own needs so that she does not end up building resentment." A partner who does not complain may have given up on the relationship. Complaining shows that your partner still believes in you and trusts you will make an effort to help resolve concerns.

This book would make an excellent gift for engaged couples and newlyweds and would be a valuable addition to the church library. I also recommend it for group study, focusing on one or more of the ten chapters at each of a series of sessions or classes. Discussion could center around what the participants found surprising, inspiring, confusing, etc. in the assigned reading. Role play practice using fictional or real situations suggested by the participants would provide for the most effective learning as they group members experience how the process actually feels. Because the skills involved apply equally well in other than couple relationships, role-play situations could include interactions between parent and child, teacher and student, siblings, classmates or co-workers. Successful relationships depend on the ability to listen to and resolve each others' complaints, demonstrating care and concern for the both parties' overall wellness as well as for the relationship itself. In Matthew 18:15, Jesus tells his followers to go directly to anyone who has caused them harm. With the guidance of Dr. Stephanie, many problems could be resolved at that level without having to call in friends and advisors to assist.

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1) *Relationship Repair for Couples: A Customer Service Approach to Minimizing Conflict and Creating Lasting Love in Your Relationships*, by Dr. Stephanie Weiland Knarr, PhD, LCMFT (Omaha, NE: Heartland East Publishing, 2015)

2) *Parent Effectiveness Training: The Proven Program for Raising Responsible Children*, by Dr. Thomas Gordon (New York: Harmony-Penguin Random House, 2000)