

When There Isn't Enough To Go Around: Trench Warfare in Relationships

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"All I'm asking for is a little bit of help and consideration," says Ellie, shrugging her shoulders in exasperation. "He leaves his stuff all over the house, even when I nicely ask that he put things away. He simply doesn't give a damn!"

"I can't do anything right," says Mark in response. "Even if I were to put every scrap of everything away, she would still find something else to get on me about! She's just into control or has OCD or something. But I know, I can't win!"

Two sides of the same coin. Ellie: If you loved me you would pick up after yourself, help out more, appreciate what I do. Mark: If you loved me you'd lighten up, not make a big deal about every little thing, and appreciate all that I am already doing!"

Ellie and Mark are presenting a fairly common problem. The "If you loved me thinking" can be filled in with endless possibilities – call me during the day, initiate sex, listen better, not hound me about the extra beer I had on Thursday night, not criticize my mother, etc. Each thinks the other doesn't care and is unreasonable. It's turned into trench warfare, bunker mentalities with each lobbing shells, or occasionally making full-out assaults in an effort to rouse the other out of his position. The problem is that there isn't enough positive anything to go around. They are locked in a power struggle with each one feeling that they are absolutely right and life will only get better when the other person changes.

Relationship-wise they are dead in the water.

This can go on for a long time. They'll occasionally get distracted by the kids or some crisis, or they will go on vacation and actually get along. But it never lasts long; once they hit home, the old patterns will grab hold and not let go.

They need to get out of the power struggle and trenches. It is the pattern and the lack of positives that are ruining their lives. Someone has to stop and do something different.

What to do? Here are some ideas:

Speak up about how you feel. The conversation isn't about defending yourself and coughing up evidence why the other person is wrong. You need to talk about how you have been feeling – unappreciated, criticized, ignored. Say what you need – more appreciation, less nitpicking.

Acknowledge that you both probably feel the same way. Say: “I think you probably feel the same – not appreciated, not cared about? Yes?” If the other gets off into evidence and wrongdoings, try and stick to the common emotions. Avoid the courtroom stuff.

Map out clear concrete goals. Find out what are the 3 things that the other person wants you to do – not 300. Understand exactly what you need to do – what is picking up? What is helping out? By when? You want to know. Agree to do these with no excuses.

Let the other know what you want. Again 3 not 300. Concrete, clear - see if he will agree.

Do it. Do your 3 things whether or not the other person does theirs. You are shooting to be a best partner you can be.

Ramp up the positive. You're trying to change emotional climate. Notice what is good, not bad. Give compliments, high 5's – any little thing you appreciate, say it. Again, don't expect a payoff, just do it.

Schedule business meetings. Check in once a week to see how things are going. This is not a time to slam the other person, but instead think of it as a business meeting at work where you are checking on the status of projects. Stay open-minded, be willing to revamp the timeline or tasks.

The key here is you getting out of the trench, stopping this tit-for-tat. Measure success with difference, a lighter mood -- these tell you that are breaking the grip of the pattern.

It's time to call a truce. Start now.

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