



IS YOUR ADVICE HELPFUL OR HURTFUL?

Ask Yourself these Four Questions

Dr. Laura Dabney —the Intimacy MD

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Our practice has seen a remarkable uptick in couples counseling this year. We have our theories about why the increase, but the more interesting observation is that our couples aren't bringing any new issues in with them through the door. In other words, our couples experience the same struggles and find themselves in conflict over the same issues as couples always have. High atop that list: helpful versus hurtful advice.

It's a common scenario—one partner offers unsolicited advice to the other, only to find out that his or her partner doesn't find it helpful at all. In fact, they find it critical and hurtful. Cue the resentment, unhappiness and discontent.

If this sounds familiar, or even if you're just curious about whether you've been guilty of offering unhelpful advice in the past, here are four questions to ask yourself before offering up any future guidance.

1. Were you specifically asked for your advice before giving it?

Until you're asked for your opinion, it's best to keep your mouth shut. Unsolicited advice is rarely helpful and more often than not, it actually harms a relationship by driving an emotional wedge between partners. There are, of course, appropriate occasions to offer unsolicited advice, but they mainly occur between individuals in a hierarchical relationship like boss to employee or parent to child. In these relationships, one person is specifically responsible for guiding the success of the other. Not so, however, in a relationship of equals. When you give unsolicited advice to your partner, you are really telling that person, "I want you to [look/act/speak] this way." That's not love or respect; that's control.

2. Is your advice honest?

Believe it or not, the topic of exercise comes up in couples counseling more often than you might expect. For example, one partner may offer unsolicited advice to the other about her exercise patterns, but disguise his advice as concern. He says, "I'm just worried for your health" or "I'm just concerned for you." Truth test, folks: That's not honest. Yes, the partner may be concerned for the other's health, but his choice to comment on his partner's behavior is not a demonstration of concern, it's a demonstration of control. Again, it's equivalent to saying, "I want you to do what I believe is best." In contrast, it would be honest for him to say, "It makes me worry when you don't exercise because I want us to live a long, healthy life together." This way, he gets to be honest about his real concern without pointing blame at the other.

3. Are you an expert on the subject?

People like to be problem solvers. The straighter the line to a solution, the better. It's a terrific skill to bring to a relationship, except when an issue isn't actually yours to solve. Case in point: One of my couples recently complained that they'd been fighting more frequently over the subject of work. When we dove into the events leading up to their fights we discovered that the wife had a habit of telling her husband what he needed to do to solve his problems at the office. She was full of advice. Problem was, she had no exposure to his profession. She'd never done the sort of work her husband performed, nor had she ever worked in the same type of setting. When advice isn't founded on anything more than opinion, it effectively tells the other person, "I'm smarter than you." It minimizes the other—and that's nothing more than a straight line to relationship breakdown.

4. Is your advice constructive or destructive?

If advice is a means to solving a problem (a conflict), then let's first take a quick look at the two types of conflict: constructive and destructive. The constructive type tends to be cooperative in nature; its goal is to help preserve the relationship. The destructive type, however, is demonstrated through negative behaviors such as being argumentative and hostile. Advice, whether solicited or not, can be categorized in the same way. Destructive advice is accusatory and hostile. It focuses on what the other person is doing wrong. In contrast, constructive advice seeks to find opportunities for resolving an issue.

Putting it all together

So, what does an example of effective advice look like? Let's put the four questions to work on our exercise example from earlier.

Say your wife asks you about how she can exercise more effectively.

1. Were you asked for advice? Yes, your wife made an explicit request.
2. How can you be honest? State your limits of expertise; unless you're a personal trainer or physician, be clear that your knowledge is based solely on personal experience and/or light research.
3. Are you an expert? Again, see item 2 and don't pretend to know more than you actually do, even if you do so with the best of intentions.
4. Give constructive advice and listen: "I can tell you that doing less exercise more frequently worked for me. But everyone's different. What have you tried and what is frustrating you?"

Bottom line: Does your advice leave your partner feeling better about herself and the future, or worse?

Want to learn more?

Call now for your free, 15-minute consultation with a member of Dr. Dabney's team. Geography is never a problem and your access to one of the nation's top relationship experts is unparalleled.

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About Dr. Laura Dabney, the Intimacy MD

Relationship stress is no match for Dr. Dabney. Every week, she works with patients in dozens of cities across the United States, helping them break the patterns of past relationships and beat a path to a happier, healthier future. She owns a leading clinical practice in Virginia Beach and has been Board Certified in Psychiatry. Download her latest articles, read real-life case studies and learn more about her offerings at www.DrLDabney.com.