

Handling Your “Hot Buttons”

Mark and Ann have fallen into the routine of having unfruitful arguments. Both of them have learned how to push the “hot buttons” of their spouse. There are certain sore subjects, explosive phrases and names that they call one another that are certain to set off an explosion. When they push these buttons, they wind up feeling angry and frustrated with one another.

We've all got hot buttons, those buttons we let others push that result in our feeling angry, hurt, or out of control. If you're to communicate more effectively at home, in your church, or at the office, you'll have to be able to handle yourself rather than allowing your hot buttons to be pushed.

In order to change your reactions, the first thing you'll need to do is adopt a new way of thinking. You'll need to come to believe that no matter who the other person is or what kind of power he or she holds over you, you have the right to be treated with respect. That means that you have a right to your opinion and your feelings. It also means that name-calling, whether you've been on the giving or receiving end, is strictly off limits.

Second, you'll need to learn to respond to the *content* of a speaker's message rather than the emotional package in which it may be wrapped. If someone says to you, “You can't do anything right! Here, let me do it myself!” you'll face a big challenge. How can you respond to the person's frustration without allowing yourself to be hurt?

This will be difficult to do, but try saying, “You're very frustrated with me, aren't you?” Or, “I regret that my performance hasn't measured up to your expectations.” If you attempt to justify yourself to your accuser, you'll probably end up in an unfruitful discussion.

If your spouse says to you, “If you really cared about me, you wouldn't...” the two of you could spend days discussing whether a person who truly cared would do this or that thing. A better response is often a simple, “When did you begin to think that I didn't care?”

Suppose a relative begins a conversation with, “You know I'd never tell you what to do, but...” There's no reason to debate the truth or falsity of their stated intentions. You could simply respond with, “Thanks for not telling me what to do. I've always appreciated that about you.”

There are several things you might say that make it easier to push someone else's hot buttons. Avoid these and you'll have more success.

“ALWAYS” AND “NEVER.” One phrase that is anathema in any close relationship is the accusation, “You always...” or, “You never...” Write it down: It's *always* a good idea *never* to say “always” and “never.” “Always” and “never” will paint you into a corner in any conversation. The focus then shifts to finding an exception, allowing the argument to go on all night.

“YOU.” Statements that begin with “you” invite the other person to be defensive. If you have an issue, bring it up in such a way that you take responsibility for it. Say, “I'm uncomfortable with your paying the bills late” rather than, “You are such a selfish deadbeat!”

“BUT.” A rule of thumb is that everything before the “but” is negated by what comes after it. “It's not the money, but the principle of the thing.” It's the money. Statements to your spouse like, “I love you, but...” may leave your partner wondering if your love is conditional. “You know I don't mind if you go, but...” sounds as if you *do* mind if he or she goes, but you haven't been direct in expressing yourself yet.

Watch those buttons! Life at work, at home and in any other aspect of your life can be much better when you do.

Jeff Hood