

I've been a couples therapist for 30 years: Any of these 6 phrases is a red flag in relationships

Story by Rachel Glik, Contributor 10-27-25

I've been a [therapist for over 30 years](#), and so many of the couples I meet with simply don't see how their [words](#) and body language — even if they are not yelling — [are disrespectful](#).

I've seen couples who have a hard time repairing trust that was broken during embroiled and ugly fights. Others lose a sense of trust by the [sarcastic digs](#), [eye rolls](#), [interrupting](#), or [belittling](#).

It's vital to examine the kinds of communication that [go under the radar as disrespectful](#). Awareness is the first step in taking accountability for your words. While the types of phrases below can seem innocent on their own, over time they can leave a partner feeling diminished and unloved — and the whole relationship in troubled waters:

1. Phrases that [humiliate your partner](#), name-calling, or speaking disparagingly — directly or to others [in public](#)

Examples:

- "Really, second helpings?"
- "Oh, he always does that."
- "Don't pay attention to him."

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2. [Sarcasm and mocking tones](#) intended as insults

Examples:

- "Great job on yelling at the kids."
- "Is that what you're wearing?"
- "Yeah, like that's worth bragging about."

3. [Manipulative language](#) that twists reality

Examples:

- "It didn't happen that way."
- "I never said that. You understood it wrong."
- "You're crazy if you really think that."

4. Moralistic statements that insult, correct, criticize, demean, diagnose or label

Examples:

- "You spoil him way too much, because your mother spoiled you."
- "You're so selfish."
- "That's a narcissistic thing to say."

5. Blame shifting

Examples:

- "I hate yelling, but you frustrate me so much."
- "You're making me feel guilty."
- "Maybe if you tried harder, I wouldn't have to step in."

6. Blocking compassion by advice, interrogation, one-upping or correcting

Examples:

- "How come you didn't talk to me about this sooner?"
- "Why don't you just ignore her?"
- "I've done this a dozen times. It's not that complicated."

How to be a more mindful communicator

While this won't solve all your problems, one tool I like to give couples after their first session is the almighty pause.

Whether it's stepping away, going outside to breathe and relax, or developing a silly code word together when things get tense. The idea is to do whatever it takes to shut the reactive system down which typically requires elongating the space between your angry reactive feelings and the urge to spew these feelings out with your words.

The pause could mean a minute, five minutes, or five days. This slowing down mechanism benefits us greatly in relationships because it makes us less prone to the judgmental words.

Essentially, the work before you open your mouth is the most important and influential part of having conversations that heal versus destroy your relationship. Pausing and preparing is about connecting within for energy before you reach for energy from your partner. We are all in training here!

Rachel Glik is a licensed professional counselor with over 30 years as a couples and individual therapist. She has taught and created workshops for organizations such as: YPO, The Kabbalah Centre, Onevillage, University of Missouri and Psychotherapy Saint Louis. Rachel is also the author of "A Soulful Marriage: Healing Your Relationship With Responsibility, Growth, Priority, and Purpose."

