

The best soft start-up has four parts: (1) “I share some responsibility for this . . .” (2) Here’s how I feel . . . (3) about a specific situation and . . . (4) here’s what I need . . . (positive need, not what you *don’t* need). Instead of pointing your finger at your partner, you are pointing your finger at yourself. To convert a negative need to a positive one, focus on your negative emotions and look for the longing behind those feelings. If you could wave a magic wand, what would you wish for? What is your recipe for your partner to be successful with you right now?

In order to be effective, a soft start-up doesn’t have to be very diplomatic. But it must be devoid of criticism or contempt. In a healthy but volatile marriage, which can be very confrontational, the wife may say something like, “Hey, I know I can be a slob sometimes myself, but I’m really angry that you walked by the laundry basket last night without stopping to fold any sheets. I didn’t like having to fold them all myself.” Or: “I feel really strongly that we need to go to church together more often. This is very important to me.” These are soft start-ups because they are direct complaints rather than criticisms or contemptuous accusations.

HARSH START-UP QUESTIONNAIRE

To get a sense of whether harsh start-up is a problem in your marriage, answer the following questions.

Read each statement and circle T for “true” or F for “false.”

WHEN WE BEGIN TO DISCUSS OUR MARITAL ISSUES:

1. My partner is often very critical of me. **TF**
2. I hate the way my partner raises an issue. **TF**
3. Arguments often seem to come out of nowhere. **TF**
4. Before I know it, we are in a fight. **TF**
5. When my partner complains, I feel picked on. **TF**
6. I seem to always get blamed for issues. **TF**
7. My partner is negative all out of proportion. **TF**
8. I feel I have to ward off personal attacks. **TF**
9. I often have to deny charges leveled against me. **TF**

10. My partner's feelings are too easily hurt. **TF**
11. What goes wrong is often not my responsibility. **TF**
12. My spouse criticizes my personality. **TF**
13. Issues get raised in an insulting manner. **TF**
14. My partner will at times complain in a smug or superior way. **TF**
15. I have just about had it with all this negativity between us. **TF**
16. I feel basically disrespected when my partner complains. **TF**
17. I just want to leave the scene when complaints arise. **TF**
18. Our calm is suddenly shattered. **TF**
19. I find my partner's negativity unnerving and unsettling. **TF**
20. I think my partner can be totally irrational. **TF**

Scoring: Give yourself 1 point for each “true” answer.

Below 5: This is an area of strength in your marriage. You and your spouse initiate difficult discussions with each other gently—without being critical or contemptuous. Because you avoid being harsh, your chances of resolving your conflict or learning to manage it successfully together are dramatically increased.

5 or higher: Your marriage could stand some improvement in this area. Your score suggests that when you address areas of disagreement with your spouse, one of you tends to be harsh. That means you immediately trot out at least one of the four horsemen, which automatically prevents the issue from being resolved.

Although the wife is usually responsible for a harsh start-up, the secret to avoiding it is for both partners to work together on the first four principles. Do this, and the wife's start-up softens as a matter of course. So if your spouse tends to raise issues harshly, the best advice I can give is to make sure she (or he) is feeling known, respected, and loved by you, and that you accept your partner's influence. Harsh start-up is often a reaction that sets in when a wife feels her husband doesn't respond to her low-level complaints or irritability. So if you comply with a minor request like “It's your turn to take out the garbage, please,” you avoid having the situation escalate into “What the hell is wrong with you? Are you deaf? Take out the damn garbage!”

If you are the one more responsible for harsh start-ups in your