

# Negative Interpretations

Negative Interpretations occur when one partner consistently thinks that the motives of the other partner are more negative than they really are. Take the following fictitious conversation between Debbie and Bill. Debbie thinks that Bill is uninterested in romantic activities with her. On the contrary, Bill loves romantic activities such as candlelight dinners and weekend vacations alone together. However, finances have been tight for the couple lately, and he worries that doing romantic things such as these could bust the budget.

Debbie: Honey, if we're going to go on that vacation to the Pocono's, we should make reservations soon.

Bill: I'm not sure we'd be able to afford the money for the flight and hotel.

Debbie: (angrily) You just don't want to go! You'd rather spend a weekend watching stupid football than spend a weekend alone with me.

Bill: That's not it. I'd love to go to the Pocono's and spend a weekend together, I just don't know how we could afford the house and car payments if we did.

Debbie: Yeah right! Heaven forbid you miss one of your precious games. (storms out of the room)

Even though Bill really would like to go, Debbie's negative interpretation makes it difficult for him to communicate that to her. Negative interpretations are created largely because human beings have a "confirmation bias", which means we look for information that confirms what we already think about people and situations. Because of this bias, and the nature of human communication, it can be difficult to understand exactly what someone intends based on their actions. Misunderstandings are inherent in any relationship. Negative interpretations that are isolated incidents can be easily overcome. It's when a pattern of negative interpretations sets in that a marriage can be in real trouble.

So, what can you do to fight against negative interpretations?

1. Ask yourself if you might be being overly negative in interpreting your partners' actions?
2. Push yourself to look for evidence that is contrary to the view you usually take.
3. Ask yourself if you have any reasons for maintaining a pattern of negative interpretations? Is it a style that you learned while growing up? Do you benefit from interpreting situations negatively?
4. If you are unsure of how to interpret a partner's actions, ask them about what they intended, and then share how their actions' made you feel. (See handout on speaker-listener technique for a more detailed description)