

**HRIC  
HELPFUL  
HINTS**

**COUPLES**

## Learning to Disagree and Raise Concerns More Effectively

### The Harsh Start-up VS the Softened Start-up

How you start a conversation predicts how it will end. Research by Gottman shows that the first three minutes of a conversation will predict the outcome of a conversation 96% percent of the time! So, how you start very often dictates how you finish. So, what can you do? Soften that start-up!

A soften-start up does not mean candy-coating or holding back what you want to say, but rather it is a way of phrasing the concern so that the message will actually be received. When we blame, judge, or criticize, our partner's defensive wall goes up. Whatever message we may want to get through is now seen as an attack. So, how to soften a start-up to a conversation?

#### Here are some tips to soften that start-up:

- Complain but do not criticize. For example:

Criticism	vs	Complaint
You never do what you say you are going to...		I'm upset that you didn't... can you please take care of it?

- Use "I" instead of "you" statements
- Describe the facts—what is real and in front of you, not your interpretation or assumption of what is going on. For example:
  - You are late (this is a fact)
  - You are selfish, or You don't care (this is a judgement)
- Refrain from judgement
- Be polite
- Deal with the issue as it arises (do not store it up)
- Express positive needs
- Use of "always" and "never" are "almost, never effective!" They can derail an argument in no time because there is "always" that one time where it was not true.

Harsh start-up:	"You are so rude, we are supposed to be at dinner but you are glued to your phone..."
-----------------	---

Softened start-up:	"Our time together means so much to me, can you please put your phone away..."
--------------------	--

Harsh start-up:	"You never have time for me and the kids... you are nicer to your coworkers than you are to you me and the kids..."
-----------------	---

Softened start-up:	"I feel like we are not getting the family time we need, can we make a commitment this week to spend quality time together as a family?"
--------------------	--

Harsh start-up:	"You act like money grows on trees, you don't have a clue how to manage money..."
-----------------	---

Softened start-up:	"Growing up, my family struggled, and so financial security is so important to me. Can we work on a budget?"
--------------------	--

Harsh start-up:	"You overreact about everything, why do you have to be so hysterical!"
-----------------	--

Softened start-up:	"I feel like this argument is getting off-track from what is important, can take 15 minutes to break and then come back to it?"
--------------------	---

While these tools can be extremely effective for couples, they can only work if the couple is in a place where they both can recognize that they both have a role in what may be ineffective or negative relational patterns.

There is also the issue that the soften start-up will not work if there is sarcasm or contempt in the person's body language or tone of voice. **Eye-rolling, mocking, sarcasm, mimicking tones** (vocal tone)—all of these non-verbal signals communicate much more loudly and clearly anything that could be in spoken language. These signals often indicate the presence of contempt in a relationship which can be incredibly corrosive to the health of the relationship. Contempt creeps into the relationship when people feel unappreciated, unaccepted for who they are and feeling dismissed or unimportant by the partner. **In relationships with contempt, defensiveness, and criticism, it is important to see a professional therapist trained in marital therapy to work through these issues and get to the root of what may be troubling the relationship.**

**Contact Us**  
(+971) 4 365 8498  
(+971) 50 778 2785  
[hric@hricdubai.com](mailto:hric@hricdubai.com)  
[www.hricdubai.com](http://www.hricdubai.com)



---

HUMAN RELATIONS  
INSTITUTE & CLINICS  
DMCC

---