Translation Tool 2: Avoiding criticism

Criticism is one of the four icebergs that can sink an otherwise loving relationship. What IS criticism, and why is it so dangerous? Criticism is expressing your frustrations in a way that suggests there is something wrong with your partner. Being on the receiving end of criticism often feels like a personal attack. Instead, if you focus your complaint on the situation you find intolerable, rather than your partner, there is less chance he or she will feel the need to defend themselves and more chance the situation will be resolved.

How to turn it around

There are two keys to turning around the negative patterns and habits that sink so many relationships. First, try looking at a problem as something you can work on together, rather than something caused by one or other of you. Secondly, avoid the word "YOU!" which automatically raises your partner's heart rate. According to research by Dr John Gottman, if someone's heart rate exceeds 95 to 100 beats per minute, they become physiologically incapable of responding with empathy and understanding. This means the problem will only escalate, leaving you more frustrated. Instead, learn to feel what you feel and express it authentically and in a way that gives your partner options. People rarely enjoy being told what to do, but hearing how you feel and what you need, gives them the choice to be the hero/heroine and solve the problem.

Many people expect their partner to mind-read how they feel and what they need. This is unreasonable when you are often unsure yourself. So first take time to really FEEL* what you feel, then practise expressing yourself simply, using the formula: **I feel… about… what I need…** So, if you are upset with your partner, use the table below to find alternative ways to express yourself.

Instead of expressing blame and criticism, or telling your partner what to do…	**… feel what you're genuinely feeling and say it in a way that gives your partner space to respond positively:**
Why did you do [x]?	I feel sad/afraid/lonely/confused* when [x] happens
You always do [y]	I feel sad/afraid/lonely/confused* when [y] happens. How can we stop it happening again?
What's going on with our relationship?	I feel sad/afraid/lonely/confused right now and I don't want that kind of relationship. What do you think?
What are you feeling?	I feel *
You never listen to me	I feel sad/frustrated* when I can't express myself fully. When's a good time to talk more?
What do you mean?	I feel* about […]
You neglect me	I miss you. How can we spend more time together?
You push me away	I feel distant. What can we do to get closer again?
There's so much tension between us	I feel* about […] I need […]
You are emotionally shut down	I feel so happy when we're close to one another; I long to connect with you more.
I need you to do this or that	I don't want to do this/I want to do that. What do you think?
What if we (you) did that? Can we (you) please do that?	I don't want to go there; do that, see that, feel this, feel that, listen to this, be there, be here, stand here, tolerate this, have this, worry about this, think about this, take charge of this, plan this—what do you think?
I hate you when you do/don't do [z]	I feel upset/angry/furious/hurt when [Y] happens. What can we do about it?
Not noticing when your partner does something nice	Thank you. I like how you look, I love this place – I feel so good here, I feel so good with you, that feels so good, etc.

* I feel... afraid, angry, anxious, annoyed, amazed, apathetic, aroused, ashamed, bored, blank, contempt, curious, depressed, despairing, disappointed, disgusted, dread, elated, envy, fearful, frustrated, furious, glad, grief, guilty, happy, hatred, horror, hostile, hurt, hysterical, indifferent, jealous, loathing, lonely, panic, rage, regret, remorse, sad, scared, shocked, shy, surprised, terrified, upset, worried.