

What's Your Stress Style?

Virginia Satir observed that people tend to react to stress and threats to their self-esteem with one of four different defensive communication styles: Placating, Blaming, Computing (also known as being Super-Reasonable), and Distracting (also known as Irrelevant).

We become so accustomed to using these communication styles during periods of tension and to protect ourselves that we don't even realize we are alienating our partner. Eventually, we use the style so automatically that *the style itself becomes the core problem*.

All four stress styles mask insecurities that keep us from understanding each other and create pain in the relationship.

THE FOUR STRESS STYLES

The PLACATER

Ingratiating, eager to please, apologetic, a "yes" man or woman. You'll often hear Placaters saying things like: "Whatever you want." "Don't make waves. Don't rock the boat." "Never mind about me. It's okay." The Placater derives a sense of value only from the love and approval of others. He or she has difficulty expressing anger and holds so many feelings inside, he or she tends toward depression and can be prone to illness.



PLACATER: Cowering, cringing, or bowing. Healthiest adaptation.

The BLAMER

A fault-finder who can be a dictator, the blamer controls, nitpicks, criticizes relentlessly, and speaks in generalizations. "You never do anything right." "If it weren't for you [everything would be all right]." "You're so stupid" (sick, bad, crazy, sinful and so forth). Inside, the blamer is feeling "I am lonely and probably unlovable." The Blamer is angry because he or she anticipates not getting what he or she wants or needs, and assumes that, given a problem or a threatening situation, the best defense is a good offense. Often described as controlling, disagreeable, hostile, tyrannical, nagging, nit-picking, fault-finding...the Blamer goes on the attack and resorts to anger. The Blamer is unable to deal with or express pain or fear.

The COMPUTER

Calm, cool, collected and super-reasonable, the "Computer" carefully chooses the right word, expects people to perform and to conform, avoids admitting mistakes, denies feelings, tends to cite facts, statistics, authorities and tradition. You'll often hear the Computer saying things like: "Upset? I'm not upset! Why do you say I'm upset?" "Everybody knows..." "It says in this book..." "The right thing to do is..." Afraid of emotion, the Computer operates on this principle: Given a problem or any stress, the best thing to do is deal with authority, facts and statistics, never emotions. Emotions are unreliable, unpredictable and dangerous. "I don't reveal my emotions and I'm not interested in anyone else's" People who adopt this style are often described as legalistic, militaristic, compulsive, dogmatic, obsessive, opinionated, rigid, principled, insensitive, unfeeling, lacking in empathy, sympathy or compassion.

The DISTRACTOR

Talkative, unfocused, often frantically active, the Distractor avoids direct eye contact and direct answers, and is quick to change the subject or ignore the point being discussed, as if to say: "Problem? What problem? Let's go to the movies" (or go drink, have sex, invite friends over, etc). Inside, the Distractor is frightened and distrustful and worried. The underlying principle of this style is: If I ignore the problem, it doesn't exist. Maybe it will go away or take care of itself. Confronting the problem would certainly lead to a fight, which would be dangerous and could end up with me or someone being hated, or even left. A Distractor often is described as erratic, inappropriate, talkative, frantic, hyperactive, purposeless and sometimes out of touch with reality.



DISTRACTOR: Indifferent, talking past, avoids eye contact, mind elsewhere, quick and only partial, humorously deflects topic.

COMPUTER: Super-reasonable, stiff, rigid posture, no humor and cold responses.