

Different Endings Simulator

Joe and Sue were in a big argument Saturday afternoon. He was going through the credit card statement and noticed an \$86 charge for the local Holiday Inn last month. In fact, it was the week he was out of town for work. His jealousy took over and he yelled at Sue, accusing her of cheating on him and lying about it. She denied going to the motel but had no explanation why the charge showed up on their bill. She insisted it must be a mistake, but was pretty upset that he'd questioned her faithfulness then didn't believe her. Sue left for the rest of the afternoon, returned that evening, and offered no explanation about the charges or her whereabouts.

The next day, Sue called the credit card company and the Holiday Inn to try to figure it out. The motel manager asked if Sue had possibly eaten at the restaurant next door. He said the motel owner had recently purchased the restaurant, and they started running all of the restaurant transactions through the motel's credit card provider so they showed on customer statements as "Holiday Inn". He admitted that some of their customers had been confused when they received their statements. Sue checked her work calendar and determined that was the day she'd taken her team to lunch for a work outing.

Feeling vindicated, she went back to Joe and told him what happened. Joe felt awful. Sue had never given him a reason to not trust her and he knew that the words he said, the volume and tone he used, and the fact that he refused to listen to her original explanation must have been hurtful and possibly scary to Sue. He apologized for jumping to conclusions, for yelling, and for the things he said. He knew, however, the damage was going to take some time to heal.

Joe knows he wants to have a close, loving relationship with his wife, and he knows he wants his interactions with her to build that relationship--his different ending. He also knows that becoming upset, yelling, and making false accusations like he did that day were not going to help him get to that ending. Still, the situation did look suspicious and Joe thought it was reasonable to ask her about it. Ignoring it would have eaten him up, so that would not be a good ending. Joe thought Sue got defensive and sarcastic pretty quickly, which didn't help the argument. He understood how his approach might make someone defensive, so he decided to give Sue grace for her less-than-perfect response and focus on his part of the argument since that was the only part he could control anyway.

As Joe imagined the actions and dialogue that it would have taken to get to a different ending, he envisioned that he'd first need to calm himself down when he was hit with that initial wave of jealousy. While he was still going to have a voice in his head telling him his wife was cheating on him, he'd also have a voice that was going to doubt the cheating story. The second voice would remind him that Sue had always been faithful and he had no other reason to question her fidelity. He then imagined himself thinking curiously about the charge rather than jumping to a conclusion.

With this curious mindset, he saw himself approaching Sue gently: "Hey honey, I'm

looking at the credit card statement and there is a charge here for the local Holiday Inn for the week I was out of town. I have to tell you, I'm struggling because one of the stories I'm telling myself is that you went there with another man. But I don't want to jump to conclusions too quickly. Can you help me understand this charge on the statement?"

Since he already knew Sue didn't know about the restaurant/Holiday Inn connection on the day of the argument, he expected she'd still deny that she was there and not have a good reason for the transaction. He even pictured her being a bit defensive, even though he took a softer approach in this simulation. He saw himself listening without interrupting, then responding to her defensiveness with reassurance: "I'm not accusing you, and I'm going to trust that you are telling the truth. I just wanted you to know that I could use some reassurance if this was not a secret rendezvous."

He anticipated that the two of them could move into problem solving mode. With both of their emotions at lower levels, their creativity and problem solving skills would be much more available than if they were in lizard-brain mode. One of them could contact the Holiday Inn and get the records behind the charge, then share it with the other. If the billing was a mistake, they could dispute it with the card company. Sue may even acknowledge how the circumstances look bad and why he'd feel jealousy. Maybe they'd laugh about it later. Addressing the issue in this kind, respectful, and cooperative way left them feeling good about their ability to communicate and the trust they had in their relationship.

Will Joe really be able to pull off this textbook-perfect response if he's faced with a similar situation next week? No. But by simulating a different ending, Joe is more likely to self-soothe first, use a soft and curious approach, listen, give grace, respond to defensiveness with reassurance, and move to problem-solving mode more quickly. Each time he practices in the simulator, he'll be more likely to perform well in the heat of the moment.