

What does it mean when a therapist tells a client or couple to avoid making ‘dirty positive’ comments?

A “dirty positive comment” is a remark that starts out sounding complimentary but slips in a criticism, judgment, or subtle dig that undermines the goodwill. In couples counseling, therapists understand these type of comments create confusion: the receiver hears a “nice” statement wrapped around something hurtful.

They typically are ‘Yes, but...’ comments. The criticism always follows the compliment.(Abraham Maslow was famous for his “Hierarchy of Needs” suggests that negative remarks are seven times more powerful than positive remarks.) This means a positive paired with one negative is NEVER seen as positive. Thank before you speak! It would be better to stay silent than make a dirty-positive comment. And it would be even BETTER to make a positive remark about **what** you like and **why** you like it!

They tend to erode trust, as a listener learns to brace for the negative part even when the sentence begins positively. These comments also allow the speaker to disguise frustration, anger, or resentment as humor or honesty, which can make it harder for partners to address the real issue. Over time, this pattern can make compliments feel unsafe or insincere. Therapists often encourage couples to notice when they’re mixing praise with a jab and to practice offering clean, honest, straightforward appreciation instead.

Here's a few examples!

	Dirty-Positive Comment	What this comment communicates	Instead say something similar to this positive, concrete comment	What this comment communicates
Between Couples	“Dinner tastes great tonight, even though you usually overcook things.”	The ‘compliment’ is immediately canceled by a reminder of past failures. The brain prioritizes the criticism, creating defensiveness and reducing trust.	“Dinner tastes great tonight. I really appreciate the effort you put into it.”	This reinforces the partner’s effort and competence, which strengthens emotional safety and encourages more positive contributions.
	“You look really nice in that outfit, even if it’s not the most flattering one you own.”	The hidden comparison triggers insecurity and makes the compliment feel conditional.	“You look really nice in that outfit. It suits you beautifully.”	This builds confidence and connection by offering admiration without evaluation or ranking.
	“I appreciate you helping with the chores, even though you missed a bunch of spots.”	This signals that the partner’s effort is inadequate, which discourages teamwork and creates resentment	“I appreciate you helping with the chores. It really lightened my load.”	This validates the contribution, which increases cooperation and strengthens the sense of partnership.

At Work	<i>You did a good job on this report, even though it took you longer than it should have.</i>	The mixed message creates anxiety and confusion about performance expectations. The employee hears “you’re slow,” not “good job.”	<i>You did a good job on this report. Your attention to detail really shows.</i>	This reinforces competence and motivates continued high-quality work without triggering fear or self-doubt.
	<i>Your presentation was solid, even if you rambled a bit at the end.</i>	This subtly asserts superiority and can damage peer trust. It shifts focus from success to flaw.	<i>Your presentation was solid. You explained the key points clearly.</i>	This builds collegiality and mutual respect, which improves collaboration and team morale.
Parent to Child	<i>Your room looks clean today, even though it's usually a disaster.</i>	Children internalize labels quickly. This reinforces a negative identity (“messy kid”) even when they succeed.	<i>Your room looks clean today. Nice work getting things organized.</i>	This rewards the desired behavior, increasing the likelihood the child will repeat it and feel proud of their effort.
To an In-law	<i>This dessert is delicious, even though it's sweeter than I normally like.</i>	In-law relationships are sensitive to tone. This comment signals judgment and can reinforce tension	<i>This dessert is delicious. Thank you for making it for us.</i>	This builds warmth and reduces the sense of being evaluated, supporting a more harmonious relationship.
Between Friends	<i>You look great in that photo, even though it's not your best angle.</i>	Friends expect emotional safety. This comment highlights flaws and can create self-consciousness.	<i>You look great in that photo. Your smile really stands out.</i>	This strengthens connection by celebrating the friend without critique.
	<i>I love hanging out with you, even if you're always running late.</i>	This mixes affection with resentment, making the friend feel guilty or defensive.	<i>I love hanging out with you. You're always fun to be around.</i>	This keeps the focus on the relationship's strengths, reinforcing closeness and goodwill.
Casual acquaintance	<i>Your dog is adorable, even if he looks a bit scruffy.</i>	People are sensitive about their pets. This feels like an insult disguised as friendliness.	<i>Your dog is adorable. He has such a sweet expression.</i>	This builds easy rapport and avoids unnecessary tension with someone you've just met.

~This information brought to you by Clifton Fuller, LCSW-S, LMFT-S, LPC-S



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