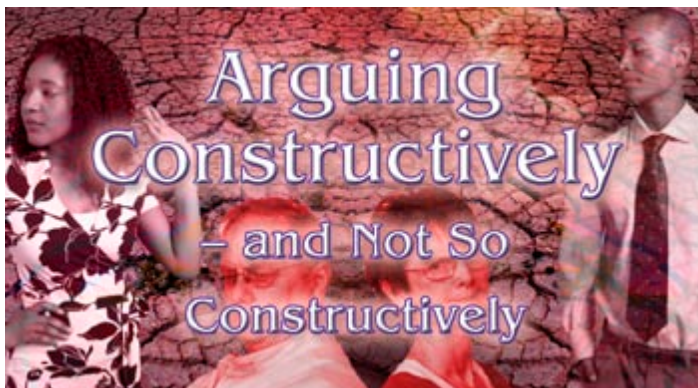


EMOTIONAL WELLNESS MATTERS

VOLUME XVIII, NUMBER 6



A Good Argument Has Its Up Side – But Only If We Fight Fairly

All couples argue. This is a normal and expected part of any relationship. Of course, some relationship experts say that arguing is healthy, while others say beware. While an occasional argument might be unavoidable and can even ultimately clarify boundaries within the relationship, a pattern of habitual fighting left unchecked puts the relationship at risk.

Granted, when couples first meet, they may experience no conflict. This is the infatuation stage of a relationship when both people may feel they have met the *perfect* partner, and happiness reigns supreme. But as time goes by any relationship is molded not only by the similarities between the partners but also by the differences that bring interest, mystery, and complexity to the relationship. A healthy argument can clarify each partner's needs and allow each to maintain a sense of personal integrity within the relationship. Each person can hold on to the qualities that made him or her attractive to the other in the first place. The difference between a happy and an unhappy relationship is often due to *how* the partners argue.

Some people avoid arguments out of apprehension that their underlying anger, which can get trig-

Family Behavioral Health Service, LLC

Dedicated to the goal of improving the life and mental health of all those we serve through quality treatment programs, personal empowerment and ongoing support.

Bill Elwood, LPCC-S, MAC, CCMHC, SAP

Linda Elwood, LPCC

Associates:

Thomas Gigliotti, LISW-S

Peter Kontos, DO

Kathleen Toohig, LPCC

Susan Kahan, LPCC

Susan Marder, LPCC

Desiree Morrison, LPCC-S

Ron Colonna, LPCC-S, LSW, CCMHC

Steve Smith, LICDC

Gregory Hoefler, LPCC

Teresa Eicher, LISW-S

6559 C Wilson Mills Rd. Suite 102

Jefferson Park Office Complex

Mayfield Village, Ohio 44143

440-460-0140

Fax: 440-460-5413

www.fbhslc.com

admin@fbhslc.com

**This newsletter is also available
on our website**

Also look for us on facebook

gered during an argument, will go out of control. Others find it difficult to argue since they feel inadequate within the relationship. Some people were exposed to bitter arguments during childhood and they don't want to repeat the pattern of their unhappy parents during their own adulthood. When people just *hate* to argue, for whatever reason, they frequently make up prematurely without resolving the issue in order to avoid conflict. Or they may resort to fighting unfairly to gain power over their partner instead of coming to a compromise and strengthening their commitment to the relationship. When goodwill and trust are damaged, the probability of using dirty fighting techniques increases. If a relationship reaches the point where arguments are frequent and damaging, the couple may need to make a commitment to resolve the problem and try more productive methods of relating on difficult topics. Relationship therapy, which focuses in part on establishing new communication patterns, aims to facilitate this goal.

Arguments are not necessarily a sign of a failed relationship or that love is fading. They are often just a sign that the partners are expressing their own individuality, and this is healthy.

It helps to ask whether the arguments usually lead in a downward spiral toward bitterness and stalemate or whether they lead to better communication and greater intimacy. And it is helpful to examine the *themes* of the arguments. Couples may find that they always argue about the same issues time after time without ever resolving the underlying problem. It helps to see that arguments about money are rarely about money – they're usually about *power*. Arguments about kids are usually arguments about *control*. When we argue about chores, we are often more concerned about *fairness*. Sexual arguments are usually about *intimacy*; and arguments about jealousy and fidelity are usually about *maturity*. By identifying these underlying themes, we can usually communicate more directly and with a more positive outcome.

Clarify Your Level of Commitment to the Relationship

If arguments begin to have a deteriorating effect on a relationship and no resolution appears in sight, it is time to examine the level of commitment each of the partners has to the relationship. This is sometimes a basic issue that remains unresolved by two partners. People avoid this topic out of fear that their partner may be on the verge of bailing out, so they never get a good reading on how the partner feels about the degree of intimacy and longevity they ought to have in the relationship. Many arguments, in fact, stem from the fact that one of the partners feels that the other is less committed, and this gives rise to unresolved anger, fears of being abandoned, control attempts, and trying to change the other person. At this stage we may even see our partner as the enemy, a competitor, and someone who is not to be trusted. Problems arise when each person sees the commitment differently or when their expectations are unrealistic. Unhealthy commitments assume that one person is responsible for the other person's happiness. A solid first step in working on conflict in a relationship is to clarify the degree of commitment each party feels toward the other. An adaptive commitment to a relationship assumes that there are two mature, independent people whose needs, wants, and motives can change over the years – and this is precisely why communication about the commitment is necessary. It should be an open topic which can be brought up on occasion. Couples who have been together for decades often attribute their success to the commitment they have made to the relationship.



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Constructive Relationship Guidelines

In addition to reaching a good understanding of the nature of the commitment, there are several other guidelines that can be explored when a couple decides to bring their arguments to a more constructive level.

It is better to be close and happy than to be right.

Blaming each other and trying to change the other person's opinions are both counterproductive. When we assume that one person is right and the other person is wrong, we put the person who is "wrong" on the defensive. Get out of this right vs. wrong framework altogether. Accept the fact that you simply see the issue differently.

Become aware of your impact on your partner.

Arguments start when we say something without realizing how our partner will take it. Your partner may blame you for starting an argument when that is the last thing you had in mind. One goal of relationship therapy is to uncover what people mean when they say things – and what it means when they hear certain things.

You can't change past history.

Although you may feel hurt by something that happened in the past, the only options people have are to work for better circumstances in the present and the future. Of course, you may want to talk about things which have bothered you in the past, but holding a grudge usually interferes with the productive resolution of current problems – those things which you can do something about. Work on one current problem at a time, not a list of things from the past. Discuss the problem while it is relevant.

State your needs as specific requests for positive behavior change.

It is not helpful to criticize the person's character – this simply puts our partner into a defensive stance. Labeling the person with words like "crazy," "immature," or "slob" does not solve the specific problem you need to address, and it ensures that you will not be heard. These words

are only meant to hurt. Let your partner know that it is a specific behavior that bothers you, and behaviors can be changed.

Use effective communication techniques.

Use "I-statements" when you want to convey how you feel. Take responsibility for your own feelings and assume that your partner is responsible for his or her own. When you say, "I feel left out at parties," you and your partner can work on this constructively together. But when you say, "Buster, you take the cake – you don't care one thing about me when you're around your friends," your partner is seen as the enemy and resolution of the problem becomes difficult. When you use generalized words like "should," "ought," "always," or "never" you become like a parent and this places your partner in a childlike role where constructive discussion between two equal adults becomes virtually impossible. Making sure that your nonverbal message matches your verbal communication also facilitates an effective conversation.

De-escalate arguments that are getting out of control.

It is not helpful to threaten the other person either verbally or physically. Any sort of violence is unacceptable. Time-outs are a perfectly good way to give both parties a chance to cool down so that the problem can be resolved later after the heat has dissipated. Recognize the triggers that set off an argument, as well as the process of escalation, and take immediate steps to get things under control. Put your energy into resolution of the conflict. A component of relationship therapy is to clarify this destructive process and to learn tools for resolving problems and restoring personal integrity and mutual respect.

It is a wonder that relationships are as successful as they are. We seldom get any kind of formal training in how to manage relationships well. One lesson that many of us have never learned is that differences of opinion and polarized perspectives are to be expected and are normal and healthy. However, serious differences that lead to hurtful, destructive arguing require attention. Fortunately, help is readily available.

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Dirty Fighting – Communication Patterns to Avoid

When you use dirty fighting techniques to win an argument, both you and your partner ultimately lose!

Escalating – Here you quickly move from the main issue of the argument to questioning your partner’s basic personality, and then move on to wondering whether the relationship is even worth it.

Timing – This involves catching your partner off guard, like looking for a time when your partner is least able to respond or least expects an argument (before he or she leaves for work, or late at night, or during a favorite TV show).

Crucializing – Exaggerating the importance of an issue by drawing conclusions of great magnitude regarding the relationship. “This proves you have never cared about me.”

Brown Bagging – Here you avoid sticking to the original issue. You bring up as many problems as possible, and in great detail. An overwhelmed person can never communicate effectively.

Asking Why – This technique treats your partner like an irresponsible child – “Why don’t you love me like John loves Helen?” – making your partner feel incapable of an adult relationship rather than focusing on the issue at hand.

Cross Complaining – When your partner complains about something, this is the technique of raising a complaint of your own. “I forgot to take make up the bed? How about all the times you haven’t taken out the garbage?”

Over-Generalizing – Using words like “never” or “always” will force your partner into defending his or her overall actions rather than looking at the issue at hand. “You have never done your share in our relationship.”

Blaming – This dirty fighting technique makes it clear that you are not at fault and that you are simply the victim. Here, you never admit that you play any part in the difficulty and that you will never make any changes. Let your partner know that he or she is entirely at fault and that if the relationship is to get any better, it is your partner who will have to change.

Mind Reading – This method lets your partner know that you are the expert in how he or she feels or thinks. This way you won’t have to deal with any issues at all. “You don’t really feel angry right now.” This deprives your partner of all rights as an equal.

Pulling Rank – This avoids addressing the real issues— you just avoid the conflict by saying that you bring home more money, or you have more friends, or you have more education, or you do more around the house. It assumes that there’s no need for equality in a relationship.

Giving Advice – Whenever your partner wants to talk over a problem, act like you are the expert. You tell your partner how to act, think, and feel – and you always have the better answer. If this is ever questioned you can say that you were only trying to be helpful.

Labeling – This involves using negative terms like “neurotic,” “alcoholic,” “immature,” or “paranoid” whenever you want to give the impression that your partner is at fault. It suggests that your partner is inherently flawed rather than focusing on behaviors that can change.

Rejecting Compromise – This means sticking with the philosophy that only one of you can win.

Family Behavioral Health Service, LLC

6559-C Wilson Mills Road
Jefferson Park Office Complex
Mayfield Village, OH 44143