

## Arguing Successfully

Chances are you have had arguments with your intimate partner. Arguing, or disagreeing is a normal part of an intimate relationship. While you might wish arguments would simply go away, that is an unrealistic standard for most relationships. Since arguments happen, we might as well talk about them. In fact, you can learn ways of arguing that will greatly improve both how you feel about arguing and the outcome of your arguments.

If the outcome of most, if not all of your arguments is an improvement in your relationship, you do not need to read any further. Count yourself among the fortunate few who have mastered this skill. If, however, your arguments often end without resolution, you definitely need to continue reading. Unresolved arguments leave unresolved feelings that become like bricks in a wall between you and your intimate partner. If you continue building a wall, brick after brick, you eventually create a wall that is so thick and so high you'll never be able to get through it.

All too often when lovers argue they become intimate enemies. That is, even though you have an intimate connection, you may find yourselves suddenly, and without warning, enemies on opposite sides of an argument. If you have experienced this switch from intimacy to enemy, you know how incredibly painful it can be. Longing afterward for the loving connection you lost, you instead find yourself sitting in an awful, distant, angry and hurt space with the person who means the most in your life. In this space you wonder, is this the end? Will I have to go through the loss of another relationship? Will we continue to be enemies in the same house, wandering around in isolation, trying to ignore each other? Or will we somehow repair the damage and move on? What can I say to him/her? What can I do to make this pain go away and get back to where we were before this happened? Some, or all of these questions may have gone through your mind when the result of an argument alienated you from the one you love.

Most of the emotional wreckage in relationships caused by bad arguments can be prevented simply by following the rules and guidelines for successful arguments, rules that are presented in simple form in this chapter. ***Success, however, comes only through the application, in the heat of the moment, of these principles and guidelines.*** If you don't know the rules and guidelines, you will probably repeat self-defeating patterns. Just knowing the guidelines for success, though, is not enough. You have to apply these guidelines consistently. All too often we become defensive, and react in ways that create a defense producing cycle with our partner. That's why, ***if you haven't read and learned to apply the material in the chapter on defensiveness, you need to do so before attempting to master successful techniques for disagreement.*** Defensiveness, and defense-producing behavior can derail any argument, and send it into a place where you do not want to go with your intimate partner.

**If you haven't read and learned to apply the material in the chapter on defensiveness, stop and read it now. Then resume this chapter after you are comfortable with the information on defensiveness.**

Assuming you know how to recognize and disarm defensiveness, let's talk about how to argue. Following is a step-by-step recipe. Feel free to try it out, and to modify it to fit your own relationship. Every relationship differs. Thus, it is impossible to come up with a recipe that perfectly fits all relationships. This one gives you the "bare bones", and is meant for experimentation. It gives you a good starting point, and calls your attention to the main pitfalls. It also gives you some good suggestions about how to avoid these pitfalls in the ways that you approach disagreements.

*Remember, an effective argument ends with an improvement in your relationship. It is extremely important that both of you be committed to this outcome, and that you measure your arguments by this standard.*

**Step One:** An effective argument begins with the recognition that there is **a** problem. Before you bring up a problem with your partner, do your homework. Don't approach your partner until ask yourself, "***What is the problem?***" Notice the way the question is worded. "***What is the problem?***" ***Too many arguments go awry because the participants a) don't mutually understand the problem, and b) don't stick to one solvable problem.*** In the initial heat of an argument, couples throw multiple problems into the mix. Soon they are talking about everything and nothing. So first, ask yourself what is the problem, and write it down. Write on a sheet of paper, "the problem is \_ \_ \_." Writing the problem down is important because when you have to state something clearly enough for another person to understand it, you always clarify our own thinking. **State clearly, in writing, "the problem is \_ \_ \_."**

**Step Two:** Once you have stated a single problem, look at the problem and ask yourself, "is this a problem that is potentially worth arguing about?" Sometimes, when we clarify and look at a problem, we realize that it is trivial, or perhaps has nothing to do with our relationship. For instance, we may have just "gotten up on the wrong side of the bed", i.e., we're in a bad mood, and that is the problem. We may have had a bad day at work, or someone else may have hurt our feelings or made us angry. If we take out our feelings on our partner, it will make life much worse for both of us.

Let's assume you have a problem that is worth at least talking about, and that may have the potential to turn into a disagreement. Before you approach your partner, ask yourself, "What is one reasonable request I can make of my partner that will solve the problem, or at least make it better?" Write down this request. Make sure your request is both clear and reasonable, i.e., if your partner were to make this request of you, you would consider it reasonable.

After accomplishing Steps One and Two, you are ready to approach your partner.

**Step Three:** Approach your partner and say you have something that may be delicate that you need to talk about. Ask when would be a good time to talk. Many arguments go

awry because of poor timing. For example, you may have been late for an appointment when an argument occurred just prior to leaving. Chances are the embarrassment of arriving late exacerbated the problem that gave rise to the argument. Or maybe you have had trouble sleeping after an argument. When you have argued just prior to bedtime you have lost a night's sleep. The sleep loss affected your performance at work the next day and added to the negative feelings from the argument. Work with your partner to create a time and space that will give you the best chance of concentrating on each other, the issue at hand, and following the argument all the way through to a successful conclusion. This means, for example, that you need to take the landline off the hook, let your cell phone take a message, turn off the television, and if you have children, make arrangements for them so that you won't be interrupted. Taking the time to negotiate a time and create a safe space is a very important prerequisite for a successful argument.

**Step Four:** The person who is bringing an issue to the table begins the argument by stating the issue concisely and offering the reasonable request to his/her partner. If your partner agrees both with the issue and the request, a commitment ensues that automatically leads to a successful conclusion. In this case, all that is left is for your partner to follow through with the commitment. However, your partner may disagree with your definition of the problem, or may think your request is unreasonable or unworkable. Here is where the discussion and negotiation process can get complicated, and where defensiveness can get you off track. Remember, you must stick to only one issue or problem, and you must find agreement on the problem. Having done so, you can move to an exploration and discussion of solutions. Finally, pick a solution on which the two of you can agree.

**Step Five:** You must both agree that if negative feelings become so powerful that you are tempted to become aggressive or otherwise provoke your partner, you need to ask for a break so that you can let your feelings subside. When we experience intense anger or fear, we tend to adopt either aggressive or defensive postures that not only derail a potentially successful argument, but also may damage our relationship, leaving wreckage or baggage that hampers future attempts at intimacy. You cannot underestimate the importance of this step. *The essential message is S T O P before you damage your relationship.* Take a break. Wait until your feelings have subsided and you can think clearly again. *Don't ever prevent your partner from withdrawing in order to protect your relationship.* On the other hand, *don't ever use withdrawal as a means to avoid dealing with your partner's issue.* Be honest and sincere in your engagement. As soon as you can be reasonable again, re-engage with your partner. Faithfully following this step requires a commitment and cooperation on the part of both partners. *If you don't adhere to this step, your arguments will become toxic to your relationship.*

**Step Six:** Stay with the argument until you reach a mutually agreed solution. The criteria for a successful solution is that a) you both agree that the solution is fair and reasonable; and b) you both agree that the solution will lead to an improvement in your relationship. If you are unable to reach a successful solution within the time frame allotted for your argument, find another time when you will resume. *Continue until you have reached a successful outcome.*

**Step Seven:** After a reasonable amount of time has passed, check in with each other. *Discuss whether or not you have followed through with your agreement.* Also discuss whether or not the solution has proven to be satisfactory as implemented. If the answer to either of these questions is negative, go back to the drawing board. Modify your solution and reach another agreement. *Continue with this process until you both agree the problem has been solved.*

## **Men and Women Approach Argument Differently**

The literature indicates that men and women tend to relate to argument differently. Remember, however, that research presents broad generalizations drawn from large samples of men and women. Research washes out individual differences, or exceptions. Many women will approach argument more like men, and many men will approach argument more like women. We don't all fit the general findings of the research. Expect exceptions as well as stereotypes in your intimate relationship.

**Men:** The literature indicates that men tend to seize and hold the floor. In other words, men try to dominate discussions, particularly where there is a disagreement, or argument. Men will attempt to dominate discussions by talking louder than women, talking over women, and using body language and posture to intimidate women. This is not a conscious process for men. Men tend to dominate as a reflex, often without even realizing what they are doing. Men want to win the argument, and tend to be less aware of the effect the argument is having on their connection, or the feelings of their partner.

**Women:** Women, on the other hand, operate in many ways in a directly opposite manner. Women tend to be more oriented toward non-verbal, e.g. facial expression, tone of voice, and posture. Women are also much more oriented toward connection. Women tend to focus more on the question, *“how are we connecting”*, or, *“what is the quality of our connection with each other in this situation?”* than on the question, *“who is winning the argument?”*

**Implications: In an intimate relationship, when one person wins an argument, the relationship loses.** This conclusion is extremely important. What it means is that, even though one person may feel like they are the winner, both people are losers. The reason is that when power or dominance enters a relationship, intimacy decreases. Thus, if your goal is to achieve and maintain intimacy, arguments with winners and losers produce the opposite effect.

In athletics and in the work place men, and now women to a large extent, are oriented toward winning, being on the winning team, getting the promotion over the other person, etc. In many ways our entire culture is progressively oriented toward “coming in first”, as we say. You almost certainly observe this effect in the way people drive. Women drive as aggressively as men. More and more on the highways, as a culture, we flaunt personal safety in order to be first, or to get ahead of the person in front of us. When we come home and enter the intimate space of our relationships, we undoubtedly

carry this attitude with us. But it doesn't work at all at home. In fact, it produces the opposite effect to the one we desire. Thus, men and women alike need to root out this tendency to win or be first in our intimate relationships.

## **Exercise One**

Here is an exercise that will help both you and your partner learn to root out the tendency to try to win, or be number one. It is called Pillow Talk, and is an exercise in conflict resolution.

1. Find an open floor space in your home. Place four pillows on the floor in the shape of a diamond.
2. Let the pillows represent four different approaches to an argument. Designate the pillows as pillow 1, 2, 3, and 4. Pillow 1 represents the position: "I am right and you are wrong". Pillow 2 represents the position, "You are right and I am wrong". Pillow 3 represents the position: "We are both right and we are both wrong". Pillow 4 represents the position: "There is more to this than who is right and who is wrong".
3. Pick a topic to argue or disagree about. Designate one person as the talker and the other person as the listener. Begin the exercise with the talker sitting on Pillow 1 and the listener sitting opposite the talker, on Pillow 3. In this exercise the talker must take the position represented by the Pillow on which he/she is sitting. The talker must explain, for example, while sitting on Pillow 1, why he/she is right, and the listener is wrong. When the listener is satisfied with the talker's explanation, move the talker moves to Pillow 2, the listener moves to the Pillow opposite the talker, and the exercise continues until the talker has explained to the listener's satisfaction, each of the 4 positions represented by the 4 Pillows.
4. Pillow 4, of course, is the most important Pillow. On Pillow 4 the talker must explain what more there is to this argument, or issue, than who is right and who is wrong. It is at Pillow 4 that the couple transcends to position of being right or wrong and begins to look at the question of: "How can we resolve this issue so that the relationship is better for the resolution?" This resolution must take into account the needs and feelings of both partners, as well as the needs of the relationship.

## **Now It's Time To Try Out The Recipe**

By doing the Pillow Talk Exercise you should now be able to understand and recognize a successful resolution to an argument. It is only with this understanding, and a mutual agreement to strive for a successful resolution, that you are ready to apply the recipe for a successful argument. "The proof is in the pudding," as they say. So, let's try the recipe by doing Exercise Two. Remember, this recipe is only a beginning. Your task is to revise it to fit your own relationship. Like two cooks in the kitchen, your task is to try it out, talk about the result, revise the recipe, and keep trying until you find a recipe that fits your tastes and needs. Make it your own, and use it as often as you need to

address differences of opinion and issues in your relationship. Important issues should never be “swept under the rug”. They will come back to haunt your relationship later. The unresolved feelings will also sit under the surface and create distance between you and your partner. Deal with issues in a timely manner and resolve them. In this way, you will start each day with a clean slate, and feel as connected as you possibly can be.

## **Exercise Two**

1. Agree with your partner on a time to do this exercise. Make sure it is a time when you will not be interrupted, and when you both will have the time to see it through to a successful conclusion.
2. First, agree on an issue. You can use any issue that you mutually agree would work in a trial argument. If you are unable to find a particular issue, discuss the following problem: “how can we change the way we each argue so we avoid making matters worse?”
3. Follow the recipe for a successful argument. Stay with the recipe until you have reached a successful conclusion.
4. Debrief, by discussing how the argument went. Make suggestions and come to an agreement regarding how the two of you would like to amend the recipe to better fit your relationship.