

FIVE WAYS TO ARGUE CONSTRUCTIVELY WITH YOUR PARTNER

BY

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The divorce rate nationally hovers at around fifty percent but it is several percentage points higher in Maricopa County, according to census figures. I believe divorce is a national tragedy, as it is terribly stressful and often expensive for the involved adults, quite sad for the parents of the couple, and absolutely traumatic for the children. A major reason for this unfortunate divorce statistic is that most couples do not learn how to settle their issues.

1) Marriage involves blending two persons, of different genders (usually), who come from different backgrounds. Issues concerning power, money, in-laws, sex, roles, and the children, to begin with, are inevitable. “Discussions,” therefore, are necessary in any relationship to allow it to grow and flourish but the process must be constructive. Destructive arguing consists of raised voices, demeaning, and discounting. Such arguing leads to resentment, repression followed by explosions, and ongoing issues which never end. When the couple continually engages in destructive arguing, a sense of hopelessness develops that issues can never be managed. The goal of constructive arguing is to seek resolution or compromise—not a winner or a loser. The basic objective in constructive marital communication is to settle the issue such that both parties can accept the solution.

2) Most marital spats are spontaneous—where one party is upset and the other party is caught off guard. Resolution is rarely achieved in these “ambush” arguments. Couples must learn to make an appointment to discuss an issue. By making an appointment both parties can be calm and ready to resolve the concern.

3) During a scheduled discussion one--and only one--issue should be dealt with at a time. When most couples argue usually within seconds every other issue the couple has gets dumped into the conversation. Resolution then is impossible. When having a discussion couples should avoid “side tracking” (getting off the issue), throwing “bombs” (making an inflammatory comment) and “digging up the museum” (bringing up an old sore subject). Each partner must strive to speak only about the circumscribed topic until it is resolved. I recommend that only one issue be discussed and, hopefully, resolved during any appointment. If there is another issue, make another appointment. Early on, appointments might be held in a public place—like a park or coffee house—to ensure the couple “keeps their cool.”

4) It is much easier to settle issues when the couple learns to speak concretely. The questions that need to be considered are: “What does it look like? What would I see?” For example, if the wife tells the husband she would like him “to be more affectionate,”

the husband should not respond, “You don’t know what you are talking about, I’m as affectionate as the next guy.” The husband should instead say, “Dear, if I were more affectionate, what would it look like? What would we see?” The wife, then, could answer with whatever behavior(s) she would view as “affectionate”—hold her hand, write her a love note, bring flowers, bathe the baby, rub her back, fix the sink, arrange a date (including securing the baby-sitter), etc.

5) For most couples arguing entails over-shouting, interrupting, and negative body language. If one party is silent, they are typically not listening to their partner but are focused on their response as soon as they can get a word in edgewise. The paraphrase technique involves having one partner state their position for no more than 60 seconds while the other partner quietly listens. At the end of the minute, before the second partner can offer their rebuttal, they must first paraphrase their partner’s position. This forces the partner to really “hear.” Once they stated their partner’s view, and it is acknowledged, they get their 60 seconds to make their view known and their partner must now listen and paraphrase.

Couples who adopt these five rules quickly learn that their discussions can be constructive, issues can be resolved, and their relationship can grow and move forward. There is no such thing as a couple without issues. A healthy couple is one where the issues have been successfully resolved.

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