1.4: Relationship Argumentation

Some couples claim that they never fight. That's next to impossible in marriages where both partners feel free to express their differences. When I hear that a couple never fights, I worry that they keep their differences to themselves and allow internal frustrations to build. Other couples have frequent arguments that sometimes get very loud. However, the volume and frequency of fights aren't very telling, nor are the issues that a couple fights about. The key idea to remember is that no two people will always see things the same way, so it is healthy for couples to argue and disagree to resolve a difference between them.

The most important question is: Are the fights constructive? In marriage, you and your spouse have to referee your own disputes without help from a third party, so you need to hammer out rules and limits that work for you. The two of you can set flexible boundaries that suit your individual personalities and your marriage as long as you follow the rules of fair fighting.
The most common issues couples fight about are: sex, money, work, children, in-laws, religion, and housework, roughly in that order. If you find the same old issues come up over and over again, or, as soon as you've resolved one issue, something else crops up, then you haven’t successfully resolved the actual source of the conflict. There are a variety of challenges that interfere with successful conflict resolution:

**Unresolved issues** – Sometimes couples find they’re fighting battles that have far more to do with the past than the present. Without even realizing it, each person may have an issue from their past that since it has yet to be resolved, is still involved in the current argument. This could be a personal issue, popularly referred to as “one’s baggage” or it could be an issue between the couple arguing that was not totally resolved in an earlier argument.

**Sensitive issues** – We all have subjects that are very personal. They may be personal to us or taboo in a relationship. These subjects could refer to a physical characteristic. You may not like the way you look and if your partner brings that up, the argument can be totally derailed. Or the sensitive issue might have something to do with something that happened in the relationship like a forgotten anniversary. Bringing that up in an argument about where to go on a vacation serves no purpose.

Fighting for your deeper needs - Couples often use topics such as money, sex or housework to fight for their deeper needs within a relationship. For example, an argument over who should pay for what, may really be about where the responsibility lies and who’s got the power in this situation. Disagreements about housework may actually be about unfilled needs for respect and worth. When she says, “Why do I always have to do the dishes,” may not be so much a disagreement about housework, but instead a frustration with who has what power in the relationship.

**Hidden payoffs** – For some couples, one of the beneficial outcomes in an argument is that it may be the only time you share your real feelings. We may think that to preserve a relationship we need to keep our feelings about our partner to ourselves. By expressing these feelings, you can begin to solve your differences. Not only can the arguing release these pent-up differences, but they can also lead to a closeness that is created when we make up with our partner. Look for deeper issues when the argument starts. Are you or your spouse just letting off steam? Is there something specific that you want your partner to do?

Are your angry words an expression of serious differences or conflict or just words of frustration? When I am stressed and my wife says something to me, I might just snap with a quick, unkind comment to her. When we first were together this would start an argument. Now when she hears me snapping at her, she knows something is going on with me and begins to ask, “What’s the matter?”

**Failure to stick to the issues** – Often, since we want to win the argument, we move beyond the topic of the argument. You’re more likely to get your partner to see things your way if you avoid personal attacks and concentrate on what you’re trying to accomplish. Here is an example, if you’re upset because your wife is late, don’t say, “You have absolutely no consideration for other people.” Instead, try saying: “I feel more relaxed and have a much better time when we get to places a few minutes early. Can we do it that way next time?” Your partner is likely to respond to your needs if she doesn’t feel attacked and forced to defend herself.  

**Time Magazine: How to Win Every Argument, Eric Parker May 24, 2014**

So, you want to know how to win every argument? Stop trying.
Not that passivity is the most effective strategy but if you’re thinking about “winning” you’re already headed down the wrong path.

From a neuroscience perspective, “When an argument starts, persuasion stops.”

**When an argument starts, persuasion stops.** A group of researchers including psychologist Drew Westen conducted a revealing experiment, which Westen wrote about in his book *The Political Brain*. In the heated election campaign of 2004, the researchers found supporters of presidential candidates George Bush and John Kerry and took MRI pictures of their brains as they watched video footage of their favorite candidate completely contradicting himself. So, what happened in people’s brains when they saw information that contradicted their worldview in a charged political environment? As soon as they recognized the video clips as being in conflict with their worldview, the parts of the brain that handle reason and logic went dormant. And the parts of the brain that handle hostile attacks — the fight-or-flight response — lit up.

This is what happens when a discussion becomes an argument. It’s no longer an exercise in logic and reasoning. It’s just a fight. And being in a fight brings its own frame of mind, a whole set of attitudes, expectations, and conditioned reactions that go along with arguing. As soon as that happens, no one cares who is right and who is wrong. All that matters is who is friend and who is foe. **So, if you’re trying to win over someone whose natural allegiances are not with you, getting into an argument is a sure way to fail.**

run, it’s most important that the outcome of your disagreement doesn’t leave one of you feeling like a loser. If you yield on an issue that’s important to your partner, it’s likely that your partner will do the same for you on another occasion.”

**Not wanting to compromise** – We all have the desire to have things done “our way.” In any successful relationship, each person must think in terms of two. Both partners must be able to compromise and negotiate. Sometimes, the two of you can find a middle ground. Figure out what’s at stake for each of you — and defer to the partner whose needs are stronger. From *Making Marriage Work by Fighting Fairly*, “if your wife has had a particularly stressful year and you know that she finds spending time near the ocean relaxing, consider taking the kind of vacation she wants this summer. In the long

**Poor timing** – Constructive disagreements can easily become destructive disagreements because of timing. One person might be ready to argue, while the other is not in the correct mood to participate in the disagreement. Since the goal of a disagreement is to solve a problem, you want both participants to be ready. I have actually scheduled disagreements with my wife in order to solve a problem that is bothering us. I do not want to “ambush” her so I can win. I want the problem solved. This is also an important lesson to remember even at a work situation. Waiting until your boss is in the correct mood to bring up a problem will more likely lead to a positive outcome.

**Garbage bagging** – When people get into an argument, they often start with one issue, segue into another, and wind up throwing in everything but the “kitchen sink.” They then bring up a host of past grudges and resentments. Discuss only one issue at a time. If you’re arguing about household finances, don’t throw up her tendency to be late, or his sloppiness. When you do that, you’re sure to wind up fighting about personalities and not issues.

**Playing psychologist** – Marital arguments often give husbands and wives an excuse to practice a little dime-store psychology. Once again from *Making Marriage Work by Fighting Fairly* someone will say things like, “The problem is that you’re just like your mother,” or, “We’re not going to get anywhere until you get over your neurosis.” Your spouse needs
to feel loved and respected for who he or she is! You are not your spouse’s therapist. It’s not your job to fix his or her personal problems. Trying to do so is an especially counterproductive strategy when you’re in the middle of a fight.³

**Winning at all costs** – This occurs when an argument is thought of as a win/lose situation. Here the argument is tied to a person’s self-esteem. They must win the argument or their self-esteem is damaged. This often happens when an argument becomes heated and overly emotional. In this case, a person will include any statements they can in the argument to win. These statements can include anything they can think of to hurt their partner’s feelings in an effort to win the argument, all the while avoiding the actual topic of the argument. Not only does this not solve the initial disagreement, but also, bad feelings can occur that last well beyond the argument.

**Claiming the moral high ground** – Instead of sticking to the topic of the argument, partners may shift to which one of them is the better or more considerate person. This is a completely different argument. You may be arguing over buying one of the children an expensive toy. You state, “Well that is because I care more about our children.” Now the argument shifts to who cares more about the children. That may be an argument for another time, but for now, you will want to stick to the initial focus of the disagreement.

The outcomes to family arguments can greatly differ. In some cases, one side will see the strength of the other’s position and the argument can be resolved. In other situations, a compromise can be found. Later in this chapter we will examine the different styles of dealing with conflict.

The key for any successful relationship is to engage in constructive disagreements where:

- The goal is to solve a difference that exists.
- Each person’s position is expressed.
- The focus stays on the disagreement not on other topics or personalities.
- Personal egos and the need to win can be put aside.
- The difference is resolved and no one feels like a loser.

Everyone has a style of disagreeing. As the next section describes, this style can range from hostility to non-involvement.

Reference