

How To Fight—and How Not To

Learning to argue productively will keep you from damaging your relationships with loved ones.

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TOP PICKS

When you get right down to it, most arguments follow a pattern that's all too familiar. Boiled down, the essence of many quarrels goes something like this: I'm right. You're wrong. And I absolutely positively will not back down or change the subject until you admit it.

So many arguments are so pointless. They start over something small and dumb: He forgot to pick up milk on the way home. She criticized him in front of his mother. He made plans without asking her first.

But they quickly escalate: You never listen to me. You're inconsiderate. You're mean. You're a loser.

In the midst of one of these arguments, you often find yourself demanding that your partner agree with you, insisting that she accept your interpretation of the facts, relentlessly pushing your point.

It's mindless, it's not going to work, and you know it. But you can't stop.

At the moment, it seems absolutely unacceptable that this other person—whether it's a mother, a husband or a best friend—disagrees. It's an outgrowth of the basic need that we all have to be close to and understood by the people we love the most, says psychologist Anthony Wolf, Ph.D. During arguments, that feeling can get out of control.

Arguments aren't inherently bad. Conflict is often how we sort out what we really want from what we're willing to compromise on. In good arguments, the terms may not exactly be kind and gentle, the language not always respectful and there may not be closure, but the argument has a beginning and an end.

Stupid arguments are something else. They take the shape of loops, endlessly replaying the conflicts in your relationship without resolving them, says Wolf, author of *Why Can't You Shut Up?: How We Ruin Relationships—And How Not To*. In the heat of the moment, the subject of the argument leaps from the original disagreement over how you parked the car to some global indictment of how selfish you are to how you're just like your mother.

Winning the argument becomes the most important thing in the world. At that point, we'll say anything—even when it's mean, humiliating and damaging to the relationship.

How can you get out of this cycle? First, you have to recognize the number one warning sign: The feeling that you absolutely *must* get your partner to see it your way. "The feeling is, 'I can't shut up, I can't move on, and I can't leave it,'" says Wolf. "Recognizing that feeling and giving it a label allows you to be able to step outside of it." It comes from an irrational but powerful fear of being alone—of being misunderstood or abandoned by people we count on the most.

When you start to feel that you must at all costs get the other person to agree with you, you know you must stop arguing. Follow these guidelines:

- Think: Is there anything that could be gained from the argument at this point? If the answer is no, it's time to stop talking, no matter how angry you are.
- Don't repeat yourself. Making your point once is much more powerful than repeating it over and over again. This applies in work situations too. Think of yourself like a lawyer presenting a brief. Say what you think, then keep your mouth shut. "Anything further that you say at this point is going to screw up your best chance at a good outcome," says Wolf.
- Don't respond to retorts that are designed to make you angry. Ignore them. If your partner or father or friend baits you by saying something like: "You're just like your mother" or "You always say that!" recognize it for what it is and tune it out.
- When you hand out advice, don't require the other person to recognize it as the most brilliant suggestion ever. Just say it and move on.

Above all, get used to the idea that the best outcome of an argument is that it ends. Don't cling to the unrealistic expectation that you'll be able to resolve the problem or get the other person to see it your way. Conciliation doesn't happen when two people are face to face, says Wolf. It happens in your own head, hours or days after the fight.

Maybe you'll be able to resolve the issue a couple of weeks later, when the feelings have died down. But many arguments never do get settled. That's normal. "In the best relationships, there remain serious pockets of unresolved bitterness," says Wolf. Learning how to argue—and learning how to stop—will prevent these disagreements from damaging your relationship.