

How to have a healthy argument

TIP SHEET



The ability to deal with conflict is an important life skill because conflict is part of life. If we were all the same, there would be no conflict but it is the differences between us which create our personal growth because we are moved outside our comfort zones.

Our differences create competing wants and needs and ways of doing things. Negative feelings often arise when our needs are not being met or we are giving too much – we may feel angry, anxious, frustrated or sad. A sense of injustice is often a common theme running through disagreements. If we don't discuss these feelings, they are likely to become more powerful and lead to conflict.

How do we bring up feelings before they escalate into a conflict situation? An important message is to do so earlier than later while we are still in control of our feelings. Often, when we have heated arguments, our

feelings are controlling us.

One of the problems is that when we get into arguments we tend to look like soldiers in their opposing bunkers fighting to win the war. One of us pops up and shoots before ducking down to miss the next bullet. We aren't listening to anyone else or really seeing them or their side of the story. Instead, we are focused on our own survival.

Read our 10 tips for how to have a healthy argument.

1 Think about the argument from an 'us' perspective rather than a 'you' and 'me' perspective.

This relates to couples, work colleagues, family and friends. Prioritise the relationship.

In the excellent book 'I Win, You Win', the authors suggest that you move from arguing from a position to talking about 'interests' which include your wants, your needs, your concerns and your fears. For example, a couple may be having a fight because the female partner does not feel loved. With a 'you' and 'me' approach, she might say "you never cuddle me or tell me I'm special" which is likely to feel like a criticism to her partner who may then get defensive and respond with "there's always something wrong with me" which results in him pulling away and her feeling even more unloved.

What if she was to say "I am feeling a little unloved at the moment, I want to feel close to you and I need a cuddle in the morning and a call during the day. It worries me when we aren't as connected because this relationship is important to me." Which of these approaches would you be most likely to respond to in a positive way?

2 Take it gently.

A full blown assault usually happens when we have kept our negative feelings inside and we blow up when it happens again. We all know that you get more bees with honey but how many of us break the honey pot in a conflict situation.

3 Look at your part in the conflict.

Blame (over focusing on the other) is only part the story. Blame comes from a place of judgment but when we feel self righteous we stunt our growth and lose our connection with another person. Put yourself in the other person's shoes (empathy) and think about how it might feel for them. This is such an important skill to develop if you wish to live harmoniously with others.

4 Never put your partner down.

We all have a right to be treated with dignity and respect. It is not okay for someone to hit below the belt during conflict.

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John Gottman, a marital guru from the United States has found with 86% accuracy that contempt predicts divorce. We treat our partner with contempt whenever we leave them feeling 'put down' - it's the eye roll, the hurtful comment that attacks their person rather than their behaviour; the sneer or comment when you are out in public.

5 Speak directly to the other person - don't gossip unless you would be comfortable that the other person hears.

This relates to work, home and friendship. Most people tell at least one other person. People will respect you because they know they can trust you - being straightforward is one of the elements of trust.

6 Never transgress your bottom line.

Is it more important to you to be liked or respected? Some people will push you until you give in but what happens is they keep pushing because they know that you will ultimately relent. You may think it is only this once but it won't be.

7 Stand up if you are treated with disrespect.

John Gottman states that the less a person tolerates in the beginning of a relationship, the less likely it is that they will experience disrespectful behaviour. Don't be a cheap forgiver in these situations because the personal cost is too great.

8 Call a stop if the situation is escalating and you recognise that you are getting into your familiar negative emotional pattern.

Once our emotions are heightened, we are no longer able to have a rational conversation with another person because we are now operating from our limbic system which has also been called our 'reptilian brain' because reptiles react, they don't think through the consequences of their actions. You might choose a word to let the other person know that you are becoming overwhelmed and need time out but always return when you say you will or trust will be affected. It has been shown that 20 minutes is required for calm to return.

9 Don't make mountains out of mole hills.

Oprah Winfrey waits a day if she sees something she likes because if she still likes it the next day she buys it. This could be a good standard to use in our relationships. If something happens and it still bothers you the next day then it is worth a discussion. Below the belt fighting and disrespectful behaviour do not fall into this category and need to be addressed immediately.

10 Don't bring up issues when you are in a low mood.

Humour and kindness always work better than complaints and we are most likely to complain when we feel down.

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