

# Fight Right

## Make Arguments Work for You

You may think that couples should get along all the time. But couples who learn how to argue successfully actually have better relationships. Arguments needn't be bitter or aggressive; in fact, the following tips can show you how to "fight right" and strengthen your relationship.

### THE THREE STAGES OF SUCCESSFUL ARGUING

The happiest couples go through three stages during a disagreement:

First, they say what's bothering them using "I feel..." statements about specific behaviors. Say: "I feel upset when you slam the door," not "You're so noisy!" Be positive, not negative. Say: "I appreciate it when you call me if you're going to be late," not "If you don't tell me what time you're coming home, dinner will be burnt!" Each person listens to the other's feelings without commenting, defending or disagreeing.

Second, the partners discuss the details of their disagreement. It's important that feelings about the specific issue come up, but not about old issues.

Third, the couple negotiates until they can agree. Sometimes all they can agree on is that they disagree. Negotiation includes give and take. It's not helpful for one person to say, "You're the one who wants the house clean. You clean it." Then there is no give and take.



Don't turn away, deny your partner's feelings, build arguments using "You..." statements.

### BE HONEST

One common mistake is denying the other person's feelings. Avoid statements such as "You don't feel..." Be honest. If possible, admit that you might be wrong or might have done the behavior you're discussing. You'll both feel less defensive. Don't assume your partner is "out to get you." Assume your partner wants you to be happy. "Cooperate" means "work together." A spirit of cooperation helps you work together on solving a problem, not battling each other. Put yourself in your partner's shoes. What does the problem look like now? Many couples let their arguments build: "You interrupted me again!" "Well, you don't listen. What do you expect?" Stop and count to 10, or take a 10-minute breather. You can lower the tension level to help you focus again on the real issue.

### REMEMBER WHY YOU LIKE EACH OTHER

Often children, jobs or other obligations leave couples little time together. They've forgotten how much they once liked each other. Make a list of things you enjoy doing together. Schedule a weekly date to do something on your list. Spending special time together will let you like each other more. Then you'll be less likely to argue and, when you do, it will be friendlier.



Do express feelings using "I..." statements, be honest, negotiate until you can agree.



The other half of speaking well is listening carefully. In fact, if you want to be heard, listen! Family and friends are more likely to turn to someone they know will listen to them. A good listener:

- pays attention
- asks questions
- thinks about how the speaker feels
- is patient
- responds without judgment.

### Smirk, Smile, Shrug and Slouch

You listen in your own style. You may repeat "yeah," "uh huh," "go on," or "I see" to signal that you are concentrating. You may cross and uncross your arms or legs as tension ebbs and flows. Your shrug can say, "So what?" or "I understand."

A good listener lets the speaker know he or she is there with them. Paying attention to what is said guards against daydreams, impatience or other distractions. It pays off in new knowledge, understanding and love.

### Using Your Mind's Spare Time

You can listen at about twice the speed the average person talks. That's why it can be hard to stick with it, especially if you're tired. Use the time between hearing words to get the most you can from the conversation. Think about:

- What's behind the words?
- What's expected of me?
- How accurate is the information?
- Is there something missing?
- Is there a way to put this together?
- What new thing am I hearing?

You can't always control the timing when someone needs to be heard. You may be tired or in the middle of chores. You may feel needy yourself. Good listening requires time without distraction. When possible, schedule important talks during the time periods that you can control. Let others know you don't want to be disturbed.

### Careful Listening Checklist

Here are 10 ways you can improve your listening process:

1. Take time or schedule time.
2. Eliminate distractions.
3. Look at the speaker.
4. Nod or make neutral comments.
5. Question without interruption.
6. Be patient.
7. Respond without judgment.
8. Note emphasis on words, loudness, or speed of speech to check the speaker's state of mind.
9. Repeat what you think was said. Ask about feelings.
10. Help the speaker find his or her own way.

If the person confiding in you is upset, you may want to reassure them before asking any questions. Sometimes questions can feel like the "third degree" and the speaker withdraws.

### Your Listening Shows Them How

Children learn their listening style by how they are treated. By paying attention or excusing yourself with a good reason, you can help them learn what listening is all about. Good listening skills pay off in school, work and personal relationships.

**B**uilding a good life together is a continuous process. As we move from young love to parenthood, and then on to maturity, our needs change.

Many issues—money, in-laws, sex, children, drug and alcohol abuse, or verbal, emotional or physical abuse—are common causes of communication breakdown. All of these issues are loaded with strong emotions.

Clear communication can be the glue that keeps you growing together in positive ways.

### Put a Smile in Your Style

Talking to your partner in an honest, direct way is a challenge. It's easy to fall into speech pattern traps which muddy what you want to communicate. For example, the simple habit of starting a conversation with a "why" question can put your partner on the defensive. Developing a way of talking that expresses your true feelings can be more important than your words. Your smile and touch say that your teasing is loving, not sarcastic.

### Solve Speech Problems

1. Be honest. Start with "I feel..."
2. Be aware that you might be misunderstood. Ask.
3. Be open. Your feelings can draw out your partner.
4. Be creative. Use laughter to tackle tough talk.
5. Be specific. Your partner may not understand.
6. Be sensitive to reactions. Withdrawal signals tension.
7. Be expressive when you listen. Use verbal and nonverbal feedback.
8. Be patient. Interruptions can be irritating.
9. Be careful. Offer reassurance that you are interested.
10. Be fair. Avoid sore spots that end conversation.



### Enjoy Verbal Intimacy

Since more time is spent in talking than having sex, verbal intimacy is the key to maintaining a satisfying relationship.

Verbal tricks include:

- Repeating back what's said so you're both in tune.
- Using "I" instead of "You" to express feelings.
- Listening without giving advice.

Nonverbal tricks include:

- Using a friendly, soft tone.
- Matching expression and gestures to your message.
- Being physically close to talk.

### Argue Successfully

Change and conflict are natural stages in being together. Cooperation and compromise are what can keep you together. Here are tips from happy couples:

1. Say what's bothering you by being specific. "I feel upset when you..."
2. Be positive. "I appreciate it when you call if you're late..."
3. Listen without comment, defense or disagreement.
4. Discuss details. Avoid old issues.
5. Negotiate to agreement, even if it's to disagree!
6. Be ready to be wrong or equally guilty.
7. Assume your partner wants you to be happy.
8. Put yourself in your partner's shoes.
9. Take 10-minute breathers.
10. Remember why you like each other.

# Feeling Good About Each Other *Communication* *Keeps* *Relationships* *Fresh*

If you need help, don't hesitate to call a counselor.

# Making Yourself Understood

Here's a  
Way to  
Do It Better

**W**e listen to each other with our ears, our eyes and our life experience. In fact, it's estimated that your words are only 20 percent of what you communicate. Many factors, including the locale, the time of day and simple intuition affect how well you are understood. Nevertheless, there's a trick to making sure that the message that's received is the one you send. Here's how to make sure your words are in synch with the way you say them.

## Listen to Yourself

Use a tape recorder to capture your style of speaking. Pick a time when you're relaxed and alone. Talk into the machine until you know your voice is natural. Your conversation with yourself should be long enough so that you can pick up repeating patterns of speech. To establish a natural situation, avoid reading into the recorder. When you review the recording, ask yourself:

1. How's my volume? Am I loud or soft?
2. How's my tone? Am I gruff? Do I whine?
3. Is my pitch high or low?
4. How are my speech patterns? Am I emphasizing or repeating key words?
5. How's my pace? Am I fast or slow?
6. How's my attitude? Am I a bully? Am I unsure?

## Look at Yourself

Once you've established how you sound, focus on how you look. You can watch yourself in front of a mirror. Try to become sensitive to your physical movements whenever you talk. Again, ask yourself:

1. Do I move close to my listener?
2. Do I use hand gestures?
3. What sort of facial expressions do I make?
4. Do I maintain good posture?
5. Do I dress appropriately for each situation?

## Check Your Impact

With your listener in mind, review how you sound and how you look. Make sure that your style does not interfere with what you say. For example, a gruff tone may mask a gentle nature. Too slow a pace may make listeners impatient. Closeness can be positive or negative.

During real conversations, check your impact in two ways. First, observe the other person. Is your listener moving away from you? Is your listener distracted? Does the situation feel tense?

Second, build feedback into your conversational style. Ask questions to confirm understanding. For example, if a project is due next week, confirm what day and what time of day is mutually agreeable. State your feelings and invite exchange.

## Improve Relationships

Verbal communication takes up about 50 percent of our time. It's easier to send and receive the right message when you understand the effect that your presentation has on others. Professionals in radio and television practice to make their speech patterns friendly and persuasive. So can you.

*Try recording your natural speaking voice when you're alone and relaxed. Review the recording to evaluate your speaking style.*

