

FIVE WAYS TO ARGUE CONSTRUCTIVELY WITH YOUR PARTNER

BY

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The divorce rate hovers at around fifty percent which, I contend, is a national tragedy. A major reason for this statistic is that most couples have not learned how to settle their issues.

- 1) “Discussions” are necessary in any relationship to allow it to grow but the process must be constructive. Destructive arguing consists of raised voices, demeaning, and discounting. Destructive arguing leads to resentment and ongoing issues which never end. With constructive arguing the goal is resolution or compromise—not a winner or a loser.
- 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 should make an appointment to discuss an issue.
- 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. No “side tracking” (getting off the issue); no “bombs” (making an inflammatory comment); and no “digging up the museum” (bringing up an old sore issue). Each partner must strive to speak only about the circumscribed issue until it is resolved.
- 4) It is easier to settle issues when couples learn 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 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, then they get their 60 seconds and the other partner then must 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 flourish.

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