

How to Resolve Disagreements With Your Spouse

Do you and your mate butt heads on a regular basis? Congratulations – you are among the ranks of the majority of American couples, who are struggling every day to deal with the many splendors of life and love.

Do you think you fight with your spouse just a little too much? Not to worry – the good news is that couples that stay married actually disagree the same amount as those who don't. The fact that they fight is not the problem – how they fight is more important.

Anger is inevitable in relationships. If two people are living together, they are bound to disagree about small, seemingly petty things – “Whose turn is it to walk the dog? Why am I always doing the laundry?” – as well as larger, more significant issues – “How can we possibly make the next mortgage payment?”

People manage their anger in different ways. Some deny it, some bury it, others nurse their anger, and others vent it at every available moment. Yet the most pernicious way of handling anger in marriage is not to handle it at all. This is when anger becomes self-perpetuating, locking husbands and wives in a vicious cycle of blame and hostility. Stuck in repetitive arguments that go nowhere, some couples dig in their heels in a vain attempt to prove themselves right and their partners wrong.

To figure out how you and your partner can switch from harmful to healthy fighting, listed below are some tips on how to battle better. **HAPPY FIGHTING!**

Stop trying to win. In most arguments, each person is a little right and a little wrong.

Plan your approach. Schedule a time and place to resolve conflict. Timing is everything. Don't bring up important issues when you are too tired or too rushed to resolve them.

Be clear and specific. Discuss one issue at a time and stay focused on the point you are trying to make.

Make suggestions. Think about resolution, brainstorm ideas, and pick one to try that seems to satisfy both of you the most. If that doesn't work, don't despair; pick another. Comments such as “Let's try to find a common ground” or “Where do we more or less agree?” Show that you're serious about negotiation.

Know your body. Learn to recognize your body's reactions to anger, and don't ignore these messages. These physical signals can serve as warning signs that buried anger and resentments need to be addressed and resolved, and will help you defuse arguments before they rage out of control.

Call a time-out. When you are so white-hot you will soon say or do something you regret, remove yourself – temporarily – from the situation. You can say, “I'm feeling very angry and I'm beginning to lose it now. I want to take a time-out.” Make a definite time and place to continue the conversation. Then, leave the room and do something physical – walk, jog, clean the garage – anything to defuse angry energy. When you're calm, ask your partner if he/she is ready to resume the conversation. If the answer is no, respect his/her feelings and wait.

Soothe your spouse. When your spouse is the one boiling over, assure him/her that you are listening and concerned, but gently refuse to be spoken to in such a hostile way. Leave the room if needed, but make it clear that you'll be available to talk once he/she calms down. You can also agree on a code word that one of you can say when tempers seem to be getting out of control. You can even choose a word that is comical to you both, which can bring a laugh and break the tension of a heated moment.

Maintain respect. Promise each other you won't be nasty, sarcastic or personally critical. Fighting fair means you will not attack each other – physically or verbally. Name-calling, cursing, screaming and blaming are off-limits. So is threatening separation or divorce.

Fight fair. Never use something that has been previously told to you in confidence as a weapon in an argument. When you do, you betray the trust your spouse has placed in you, and make it harder for your partner to feel emotionally safe in the marriage.

Acknowledge each other's feelings and perceptions – without judgment or criticism. There's no "right" way to feel and there will be times in every marriage that the couple simply will not agree. But you should always make the effort to unravel what is troubling your partner and show genuine caring for and awareness of his or her emotional experience. Phrases such as "I never thought of that" or "tell me more about what you're thinking" will help you break out of an anger stalemate.

Accept your anger. Remind yourself that it is OK to be angry, and don't feel guilty about it. Women, especially grow up believing that it is unladylike and "bitchy" to express negative feelings. But anger can be legitimate, and accepting your anger can give you strength to say how you honestly feel and find a path for change.

Work it through. Never walk out of the room until either both agree that an argument is over or have decided to table the problem and chosen a specific time to bring it up again.

Don't insist on the last word. You may win the battle but lose the war by building resentment.

And remember: A fight is *just* a fight. Understand that although you disagree, you are not enemies. No matter how much people love each other, differences will eventually trigger conflict.