



OPINION

By Dr Julie Hannan

How to stop an argument with you partner – immediately

Identify the real reason you're arguing, and don't try to change your loved one

August 22, 2024 11:00 am (Updated 12:00 pm)



'Arguments become a competition, rich with examples, about who is doing the household chores. The real problem is deeper' (Photo: Joseffson/Westend61)

[BACK TO TOP](#)

A recent study showed that if a **couple take time out during an argument** (just five to 15 seconds) then they can successfully reduce impulsive action and aggression between them.

Aggression between partners is frequently reactive in nature, impulsive, and tends to increase over the course of an argument. So this use of short breaks could be a useful strategy to **help manage relationship conflict**. But why do people argue in the first place? And can arguments ever be good?

It's important to recognise, first of all, that anger is a natural emotion. For some people it's easy to express, whilst for others it can be harder – especially if they were raised to suppress emotions. Anger is a good indicator that something is wrong and can be used as a protective factor keeping people and things that hurt us away from us and as a motivating force to challenge injustice. But when anger is discharged in a unproductive way, or is difficult to control, it can have a negative impact on your life – and frighten others, keeping them distant from you.

Most couples argue about the same things: sex, intimacy, jealousy, irritating habits, finances, how to spend free time and a lack of communication. It's inevitable that people are going to have different goals in life: we all have different experiences, hopes, dreams and desires.

Engaging in arguments as a couple can be **a sound basis for psychological growth** and mid-argument strategies are useful. But stopping one before it escalates, by understanding why we argue and what triggers our anger, can limit unhelpful repetitive interpersonal patterns, and generate new positive ways of interacting, allowing relationships to flourish.

Take, for example, how we can get caught up in repetitive petty squabbles, like a partner not unpacking the dishwasher. Again, arguments become a competition, rich with examples, about who is doing the majority of the household chores. In fact, the real problem is deeper, often rooted in hidden emotions and unmet needs, such as the desire for recognition, affection, or not feeling unappreciated. The superficial argument is a way of expressing those needs indirectly.

Understanding that “it's not about what it's about” can help stop a row before it starts, by looking beyond the surface and addressing the core emotional issues that are driving the behaviour. This approach leads to more meaningful communication and deeper emotional healing, as true needs, wants and desires begin to be explored and resolved.

Another way of diffusing arguments is by thinking about how a **solvable problem is a genuine surface-level problem**: I'll cook on a Tuesday, Thursday and Sunday, you cook on the other days. It can be negotiated and resolved. A perpetual problem is more about fundamental differences in personality. For example, one partner might like taking risks, the other is risk-avoidant. Or, you might be an introvert needing quiet alone time and your partner an extrovert, needing the company of others to refuel. Perhaps you're an eternal optimist, and your partner sees the world through a glass-half-empty lens.


Don't waste time trying to change your partner again, voicing your frustration at them and going head to head in a standoff. Instead, use your energy to keep your emotions on an even keel, and

acknowledge that your differences must be considered, respected and worked with in order for the problem to be resolvable.

Last of all, it's worth trying to distinguish between a good and bad argument. A good argument moves the relationship forwards, encourages personal growth and moves towards couple goals asking "How can we get what we want?" rather than "How can I get what I want?" It can lead to a deeper understanding of the other, improved communication and create a blueprint for disputes in the future.

A healthy argument also works towards a win-win situation, with both people getting their emotional needs met. It focuses on staying calm and respectful, asking questions to understand your partner's viewpoint better, listening with purpose, and clearly expressing your needs. There are no winners in a bad argument.

Hindsight is a wonderful thing, and being able to recognise early on that you are heading down a bad argument path, on a road to potential destruction, is a skill you can develop together. You can diffuse situations before they escalate, and direct the conversation in a more productive way.

Remember the quality of your relationship isn't about how often or not you fight. It's how you deal with conflict and resolve conflict, rather than what you fight about. Forced breaks can help reduce aggression within an argument, but heading off a potential dispute before it escalates by increasing awareness of how and why you fight can lead to a more contented, fulfilled and satisfying relationship for you both. 

Topics

Advice / **Marriage** / **Relationships**
