

How to Improve Relationships

Disagreeing with your intimate partner in relationship is healthy. How a couple chooses to resolve differences is essential. The key is respecting your partner in the process of resolving differences.

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 harmful way of handling anger in marriage is not to handle it at all. This is when anger becomes self-perpetuating.

It takes NO energy to focus on the negative. It does require a person to expend some energy to step outside of that negative emotional place in order to CHOOSE to be positive. Choosing to create a positive outcome demands risk, being vulnerable, and stepping outside one's comfort zone. Dropping one's pride and choosing growth demands courage and oftentimes someone who can help guide a couple through thorny issues, while they learn new skills to move out of unproductive cycles.

Here are some ideas to assist in healthy fighting. Some of these ideas came from Workman Publishing, 2002, others from my working with couples for 20 years, and others from journal research, workshops, etc.

Happy Fighting!

1. Stop trying to win. In most arguments, each person is a little right and a little wrong.
2. Plan your approach. Schedule a time and place to resolve conflict. Respect yourself first in order to stick by your commitments to your partner. Then respect the relationship by doing what you say you are going to do.
3. Timing is everything. Don't bring up important issues when you are too tired or too rushed to resolve them.
4. Be clear and specific. Discuss one issue at a time and stay focused on the point you are trying to make. Try to be as neutral as you can in presenting your point of view. Start with topics that are more easily resolvable. Save thorny issues for a time when your skill sets are refined or when you are in psychotherapy.
5. Make suggestions. Think about resolutions, brainstorm ideas, and pick one to try that seems to satisfy both of you the most. If that doesn't succeed, remember that both are serious about negotiation in order to create win-win and resolve conflict for the sake of building relationship.
6. 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.

7. 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.
8. Soothe your partner. When your partner 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. Remember to see the humor in ALL things.
9. 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. In fact, in therapy, if one person uses the "divorce card" as a power play then that person needs to be prepared to divorce. Such power play actions are not to be tolerated, period!**
10. Fight fair. Never use something that has been previously told to you in confidence by your partner. Your goal is to assist your partner to feel emotionally safe in the relationship.
11. 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. Either we open up our partner's Spirit or we are closing our partner's Spirit with our intentions. It takes NO energy to be negative. It takes will power and the manifestation of energy to be positive and override painful emotional states.
12. 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.
13. Work it through. Never walk out of the room until you 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.
14. Don't insist on the last word. You may win the battle but lose the war by building resentment.
15. 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.
16. Couples research indicates that healthy couples provide a ratio of 6 positive statements to their partners to 1 negative statement when interacting. 6:1
17. Healthy couples spend a minimum of 15 hours per week interacting with one another. This includes conversation, sexual intimacy, exercising with interaction and NO TV, NO children.

18. Sex: Women according to research, report that 85% of the time, need a partner who participates willingly in longer foreplay. Foreplay can be opening doors, folding the laundry, and exploring unique needs of their partner. That leaves 15% for highly spontaneous sexual play that is bold, totally uninhibited and in unique locations.
19. Relationships are in my estimation a fast-track to learning about us. Partners are inevitably going to be mirrors that point out our own weaknesses. We have choices when those inadequacies present themselves.
 - a. We can either blame our partner, or thank them for being a messenger or mirror for what is a 'blind spot' within ourselves. Again it takes NO energy to blame and run/hide. Yet it takes courage, and commitment with our partner to co-create change.
20. From my perception, most couples wait too long before going for help professionally. I encourage you to seek help sooner than later. Going for help takes risk. Shop around for therapists. Find one that you both resonate with. Many men want extremely fast results, while most women see the bigger picture and are willing to be patient and allow change to manifest while continuing therapy. So guys, drop pride and be patient.
21. A Native friend from Alaska once said, "If you want things to change, sleep with the same person every night. If you want things to stay the same, sleep with a different person every night."