

How to Have a Healthy Argument With Your Spouse

Every day, a man I know makes himself a peanut butter and jelly sandwich to take to work. Every morning he lines up his peanut butter, jelly, bread and a baggie like an assembly line on the kitchen counter.

One day his wife was also making a sandwich to take to work. She took her sandwich and put it in the baggie he had lined up on the counter. He just went totally ballistic. He shrieked, "I can't believe you used my baggie! I had taken it out and laid it over here so I could put my sandwich in it, and you used my baggie!"

She was so mad she took off her wedding rings and left them at home when she went to work.

When I told this story at the Bible study I teach, every man in the room laughed because we could all relate. I certainly can! We all have those moments when our foolish pride makes a mountain out of a molehill.

But it stops being funny if it happens all the time. Or worse, if things get out of control, as they did with professional football player Ray Rice.

Obviously, the objective should be to avoid conflicts when possible, and resolve them biblically when you can't. No marriage is perfect, but knowing how to resolve conflicts in a mature, biblical way is one of the best ways you can build a safe, intimate relationship with your mate.

God has not left us to figure this out for ourselves. The Bible is full of practical wisdom for both preventing and resolving conflicts. Here are a few of the most important ways:

Commit to Deal With Your Conflicts Head On

Obviously, every marriage has conflicts, and if you try to ignore them, they will only continue to build up. A callous develops because of repeated friction. The skin toughens and develops a thick layer to protect your body. If a callous gets too big it will get ripped off, and the bigger it is, the more it hurts when it comes off! It's the same when we ignore friction points between us.

Do Not Escalate the Conflict

Hurtful words are like poison-tipped arrows that have left the archer's bow. Once in the air, they cannot be retrieved. Let go too often and they can destroy a relationship.

No matter how relaxed you are, everyone occasionally gets upset. If your spouse gets rattled, try to stay calm. Don't return fire. Be a thermostat, not a thermometer. If you don't respond in kind, the other person will probably cool off. "If the anger of a ruler rises against you, do not leave your post; for calmness pacifies great offenses" (Eccl. 10:4). Everyone gets upset occasionally. Let your spouse ventilate without you getting rattled too. If you answer humbly and calmly, the conflict may simply disappear.

Do Not Speak Rashly or Recklessly

Our words have consequences that must be considered before we utter them.

A lot of arguments and quarrels escalate because we keep saying those clever, razor-edged zingers that come to mind. Bite your tongue—the Bible calls it "an unruly evil, full of deadly poison" (James 3:8).

The old "count to 10" adage is adage for good reason. In the flare of the moment you may say things you come to regret—like our lunch pail cohort. Cool down, and add reason to your

response.

Do Not Complain About the Conflict to Others

When you do have conflicts with each other, try to work through them as a couple. Don't involve others in your quarrels in the heat of the moment. "He who covers a transgression seeks love, but he who repeats a matter separates friends" (Prov. 17:9).

Later, if the conflict remains unresolved, you may want a family member or counselor to act as a mediator, but not unless and until you both agree you need outside help. However, if there is emotional, psychological or physical abuse, seek immediate professional help.

Do Not Return Injury

"Do not say, 'I will do so to him as he has done to me; I will render to the man according to his work.'" (Prov. 24:29). It is the ultimate sign of immaturity to keep score. Jesus says to turn the other cheek. If you cannot, and the offense requires redress, look for resolution, not retribution.

Listen Carefully and Ask Questions

"Therefore, my beloved brothers, let every man be swift to hear, slow to speak, and slow to anger" (James 1:19).

Listen carefully to what your mate is really trying to say. Many conflicts happen because we didn't really "hear" what they said. Ask lots of questions to understand the "real" problem.

Focus on the problem, not the person.

On a practical level, by asking questions and then listening carefully, you can learn 1) the other person's view of the problem, 2) how the problem makes him/her feel and 3) the intensity of those feelings. Keep the focus on how "I" feel.

What “I” am doing wrong—not your mate.

Let’s say, for example, that you and your spouse ride to work together, but you regularly make your spouse run late. He or she explodes and says, “You’re driving me crazy! Why can’t you just be ready on time?” Here are a few practical ideas to resolve such a problem.

Don’t make “you” statements, like “you are such a procrastinator!” And avoid “why” questions, such as, “Why can’t you just be ready on time?” Focus on the problem, not the person. For example: Don’t say, “You need to stop losing your temper all the time.” Say, “You know, when you lose your temper it really makes me feel tense and uncomfortable.”

From there, restate what you understand the other person to be saying until the underlying issue is clear. For example, the surface issues may be about anger and leaving on time, but after talking through it, you may find that the real problems were about respect and shared responsibility.

Decide How to Resolve the Conflict

Accept your share of the blame, apologize, and ask forgiveness as necessary. “I’m sorry, I can see how I have not been very sensitive. I want to make a commitment right now to be ready on time. How can we solve this problem?”

“Why don’t we set the kitchen timer to go off five minutes before leaving time? That will give you time to brush your teeth and be in the car on time.”

Trust the Lord Will Solve Your Conflicts

Not every conflict will be resolved the way you want. The question is: Could you be wrong? The best approach is to turn to God and ask Him to put the burden of reconciliation on your spouse’s heart, or show you where you have erred.

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