

Consider These Terms of Engagement Before Having Your Next Argument

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**Building
Relationship Skills**
with Linda Bloom, LCSW
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With most couples, it's not a matter of "if" there is another argument, but "when". Whether you call it an argument, a difference of opinion, a conflict, a quarrel, a row, a misunderstanding, a squabble, a spat, or any one of a number of other synonyms or euphemisms, almost all couples have them. And those that say they don't are either in denial, lying, or exceptionally evolved. There are some couples who are each so emotionally intelligent and mature, that they rarely, if ever experience conflict with each other. The other 99.9% of us at least occasionally have to contend with differences in our preferences, personalities, sexual desire levels, taste in movies, food, or politics, as well as in numerous other aspects of life in which we do not share common values or predispositions.

For most of us ninety-nine-percenters, resolving, or attempting to resolve our differences, often involves some degree of distress, struggle, suffering, frustration and/or emotional pain. And that's on a good day! But seriously, there are some guidelines, that if followed, will not only help you to avoid or minimize the reactive defensive patterns that can get triggered when emotions get over-heated but could even transform a potentially destructive interaction into an interpersonal engagement that will enrich your relationship.

We're offering a list of 30 guidelines that have worked for many of the clients and students with whom we've worked over the years, and for us personally as well. Of course knowing what they are is not a guarantee that you will always be able to follow them; old defensive habits can be slow to dissolve, so try to be patient with yourself and your partner, even if the two of you agree to adhere to them

This is by no means a complete list of all of the possible conflict-mitigating practices, so feel free to add your own. We just saying, it's worked for a lot of folks, so why not give it a try. As my uncle Louie used to say, "Waddya got ta lose?"

Here they are:

1. Be honest, but not brutally so.
2. No violence, either physical or verbal. No angry touch, no throwing or breaking things
3. No shouting or screaming.
4. Use time outs when things begin to get overheated. Either person, at any time, has the authority to call a time out, no questions asked. All time outs should have an agreed upon time at which you will re-engage with each other.
5. Don't don't let the issue go underground. Address it within 24 hours.
6. No name-calling.
7. Don't bring up old grudges. Stay with the issue at hand.
8. Strive for vulnerability, especially express fear and pain. Speak about how you feel and what you need rather than what you dislike about the other person.
9. Speak from your experience using "I" statements.
10. Keep in mind that acknowledging the legitimacy of another person's perspective is not equivalent to agreeing that they are right.
11. Avoid manipulation and excessive coercion.

12. Avoid threats or ultimatums.
13. Don't use divorce as a threat.
14. State your intention and create agreement before launching into your grievance. Slow down, pause and reflect so that you can choose your words carefully rather than blurting things out you might later be sorry for.
15. No complaints without bringing an offering for a vision of a possible solution.
16. If you don't feel comfortable discussing something explain why and what it would require for you to be willing to continue the dialogue.
17. Slow down the pace of the conversation, so that you can choose your words carefully rather than blurting things out you might later be sorry for.
18. Resist the temptation to offer unsolicited advice or opinions.
19. Using the word 'but' always feels like a reBUTal to the other person. "And" works a lot better.
20. Don't "hit and run" by opening up an emotionally-laden topic and then withdrawing from the conversation.
21. Don't compare your partner to someone else by saying things like, "you're just like your mother."
22. Don't punish with silence.
23. Avoid saying "you always" or "you never."
24. Don't interrupt, but if you do, acknowledge it, stop yourself, and then listen.
25. Don't invoke the words of others in your defense by saying things like, "All your friends agree with me".
26. Be willing to apologize when you have remorse for something that you've done or said.
27. Don't forget that none of us are perfect and we all occasionally make mistakes. Try to be forgiving and accepting of your partner and yourself.
28. Listen without contesting your partner's words. After she has spoken, you'll have your chance to state your perspective, but not until she feels that you have heard her out.
29. Make an effort to not demonize your partner by characterizing him as having malevolent intentions. Try to remember that none of us can ever know for sure what another's deeper motivations are.
30. Thank your partner. Before closing the conversation, express appreciation for making the effort to address an important issue for the benefit of your relationship.

Keep in mind that this is just a starter kit that can and should be modified in accordance with the needs and concerns of each partner in the relationship. It's important that both of you are in agreement with whatever terms you choose to commit to. It's also a good idea to put your agreement in writing and for each of you to sign it. All this notwithstanding, breaches of agreements are to be expected since old defensive patterns can be slow to dissolve. If or when this happens, acknowledge your part in the breakdown and allow your partner to express whatever feelings they may need to express. Try not to interrupt him or to get defensive when he speaks. And finally, keep in mind that nearly all breakdowns are repairable if there is a willingness on both partner's parts to accept their responsibility for doing what they can to make amends and attend to the situation that requires caring attention.

Remember that it's not the differences themselves that damage the fabric of trust and respect in relationships, but the unskillful ways in which we react to them that do the most harm. Defensive, coercive, and manipulative tactics always have a way of backfiring sooner or later, causing much greater pain and suffering to both parties than either would have to experience with honest, respectful and undefended communication.

It's true that old habits can be difficult to break, but even the most entrenched patterns are breakable, if there is a strong intention and powerful commitment to do so. So, hang in there, and get to work!

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