

The American Counseling Association's "Counseling Corner" Weekly Columns

The Healthy Handling Of Disagreements In A Relationship

from the American Counseling Association

We all want our relationships to be warm, happy and always free of conflict, but in the real world this is often not the case. Whether it's a romantic relationship, a family relationship, or even one between friends, at times there will be differences of opinions that can lead to disagreements, and sometimes to very strong, relationship-ending fall-outs.

Virtually every relationship will have conflicts at times simply because, regardless of how much you love and respect each other, two individuals have different personalities, tastes, interests and backgrounds.

But a relationship disagreement doesn't have to be a major problem. If you learn to disagree fairly, and commit to working to find ways to resolve conflicts, a disagreement can often make a relationship stronger and help build the respect that each of you has for the other.

A starting point is identifying the real source of the dissent. It's not unusual for a couple to forget what originally prompted an argument or to find that each has a different concept about what really is the main issue.

Once you're agreed on why you disagree, it's time to work out the conflict. That doesn't mean a screaming match at bedtime, or stony silence and carefully ignoring the other person and the problem.

Instead, start by finding a time when you're both rested and able to give the situation your full attention without being interrupted by work or other people.

Set some common sense ground rules for arguing fairly. Don't, for example, simply blame the other person, insisting he or she is wrong. This just puts that person in a defensive position and all the more determined to fight.

Instead, take some responsibility for the problem yourself (after all, it's a fifty-fifty chance that you may just be in the wrong). Use positive "I" statements that talk about your feelings and thoughts, rather than "you" statements that have you telling the other person what he or she supposedly feels or thinks.

Most importantly, listen. Give the other person a chance to talk and explain. Really listen to the feelings and emotions being expressed.

When you work to disagree fairly and to resolve conflicts in a relationship, the result can be a stronger partnership with increased respect for each other. Your goal is a healthy relationship, not winning the argument at any cost.

"Counseling Corner" is provided by the American Counseling Association. Comments and questions to ACAcorner@counseling.org or visit the ACA website at www.counseling.org.

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