

ARGUING DOESN'T WORK, YET WE STILL DO IT!

By Ginger E. Blume, Ph.D.

Arguments lead nowhere. Nothing gets settled. We feel frustrated, mistreated, and totally unheard during heated exchanges. Yet, when disagreements arise, our first impulse is oftentimes to metaphorically “put on the gloves” and engage in an all out argument! My theory is that we persist in this ineffective verbal behavior for at least three reasons.

Three Reasons Why

Sometimes, we argue because we simply don't care if we destroy a particular relationship or not. This can occur when we view the relationship as very short-term or when we have come to place little value on the relationship. When we're thinking about relationships in this way, the consequences of destroying the relationship become totally irrelevant and letting it rip can actually feel “good”---but only temporarily. “I told him where to get off,” is the typical boastful announcement of the initiator of such an argument. Perhaps, the motivation was to teach the other a lesson, show them they we're wrong, prove that their view was unfair, etc. We've all behaved poorly in situations like this when we've determined that the relationship has no long-term value and we simply don't care what the other person thinks.

A second reason we engage in the useless behavior of arguing is because we may not know what else to do. Whenever we feel really angry, our primitive emotions (fight or flight) will eventually rule our behavior. Our thinking will be irrational, but we'll be unaware of “how irrational” at the time. Without the necessary skills to calm down, we might be aware of feeling out-of-control, yet be helpless to stop escalating the argument. We'll be on a roll, and unfortunately, it will be down hill from there! Later, most of us will be filled with guilt and shame for losing our temper and harming an important relationship. To ease our guilt, we'll usually spin numerous rationalizations such as, “He was at fault, what did he expect me to say!” or “She deserved to feel bad, after all, she had no right accusing me of cheating.”

A third cause for engaging in useless arguments is rooted in our misperceptions or faulty assumptions. This is perhaps, the most common reason we argue rather than try to understand and tease out each partner's contributions to the issue at hand. How can we stop this unproductive behavior? It won't be easy, but it is doable. Lets consider some key ingredients to sorting out our hurt and angry feelings.

We often argue because we assume *they* are the problem: they're controlling, irrational, selfish, lying, mean, etc. When we think this way, it isn't surprising that we end up in a heated conflict. Don't forget, *they* think *we* are the problem, too! We're all looking at the situation from our own unique perspective. Hence, round and round we go. Once locked into arguing, we're blocked from exploring the other person's story. When the ability to understand the other person becomes blocked, a breeding ground for conflict is formed.

Assumptions cause trouble

In order to move out of this deadlock, we must realize that the assumptions we're making about the other person's intentions are oftentimes wrong, no matter how real and right our assumptions may seem. Here are some key ways to keep our assumptions from ruling our behavior. First, we need to acknowledge that we can't assume **intentions** from the **impact** they have on us. For instance, just because another person's words hurt our chance for getting that job promotion we wanted (impact), it doesn't necessarily mean that that was their intent.

We tend to attribute bad intentions to others, yet treat ourselves with much more charity. For instance, if your spouse forgets to pick up the dry cleaning, you assume he doesn't care about your needs. If *you* forget to pick it up, it's because you're stressed out at work and simply forgot amidst your rush to get home to fix dinner. When we're the one accused, we know that we rarely intended to annoy, offend, or harm others. Usually, we're also self-absorbed and unaware of the negative impact our behavior may have had on others. Of course, sometimes we're hurt because others truly did intend to hurt us, but these situations are more rare than we typically imagine!

Since we all make assumptions as a way of making sense out of our world, we can't eliminate them. However, when you make assumptions, try to hold your beliefs as tentative "hypotheses." Share the upsetting impact the other person's words had on you and then inquire about their *real* intentions. Remember, your assumptions are mere guesses about their intentions and are subject to disproof or modification. When you explore intentions, try to relieve the other person from having to be extremely defensive. Be generous and give others the benefit of the doubt, the way you give it to yourself.

Second, just because the other's intentions weren't negative doesn't mean we have to ignore or deny the negative impact on us. Just because the other person didn't mean to hurt you and perhaps, even apologized, doesn't mean you don't have a right to feel badly. Ultimately, it is of major importance to openly discuss your feeling while accepting the other didn't mean to hurt you.

Blame versus Contributions

Finally, it is crucial to distinguish between the need to assign **blame** in a situation and the need to sort out **contributions** to the problem. Unfortunately, most arguments revolve around the issue of blame. Who made the mistake? Who is the bad person? Who should be punished? Who is owed an apology? When we're focused on blame, we're focusing on making judgments about these key questions with the goal of placing ourselves blameless.

In contrast, when we focus on contribution, we're focusing on understanding the role each person has played in the misunderstanding. We're looking to establish understanding of the self and of others. When we're focusing our energies in this way, we're looking forward toward future change and problem solving, rather than backward towards whom was at fault.

It is rare that a problem is one-sided. For instance, even when a spouse has had an extra-marital affair, it usually involves contributions from both partners. Did the betrayed spouse refuse to listen to his/her partner? Did the spouse who committed adultery constantly work late and refuse to help relieve his/her partner's loneliness? Once both of the couple's contributions are sorted out, they have a fair chance to repair their marriage and make necessary changes. And lastly, contributions to an existing problem are not always equal. Yet, whether one person has 20% responsibility and the other has 80%, they still share joint responsibility for both the problem and the solutions.

This article can begin you on the road to reducing destructive arguments in your life. Remember that it will take hard work and persistence. Consider reading, Difficult Conversations by Stone, Patton, and Heen for additional information on this topic.

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