



FEATURE

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ARE YOU FIGHTING FAIR?

Conflict is integral to our genetic makeup; otherwise the global village would long be living in blissful accord. **By Natasha Liviero**

History has proven peace to be an impossible feat for humanity. No matter how much you love someone; there will always be issues on which you disagree. Interestingly, conflict itself is not bad. It is how you handle it that matters. If you always agree with others, you are people-pleasing and compromising your own thoughts and values, a behaviour that becomes destructive in the long run. “It’s good to disagree as this shows independence, assertiveness and freedom of thought,” says Clinical Psychologist, Gabrielle Fourie. “Arguing allows individuals to stand up for their values and morals. It is also better to argue about something as soon as it becomes an issue than to sweep it under the carpet. This way no baggage develops and lots of little ‘discussions’ can take place rather than one huge disagreement that could land up with long-lasting consequences.” Psychologists warn against avoiding conflict altogether as it manifests in inappropriate ways. For example, it could be directed at an innocent party or expressed in a mean-spirited manner. It may also render a person feeling repeatedly hard done by, which may ultimately result in depression setting in.

HOW TO MAKE AN ARGUMENT HEALTHY

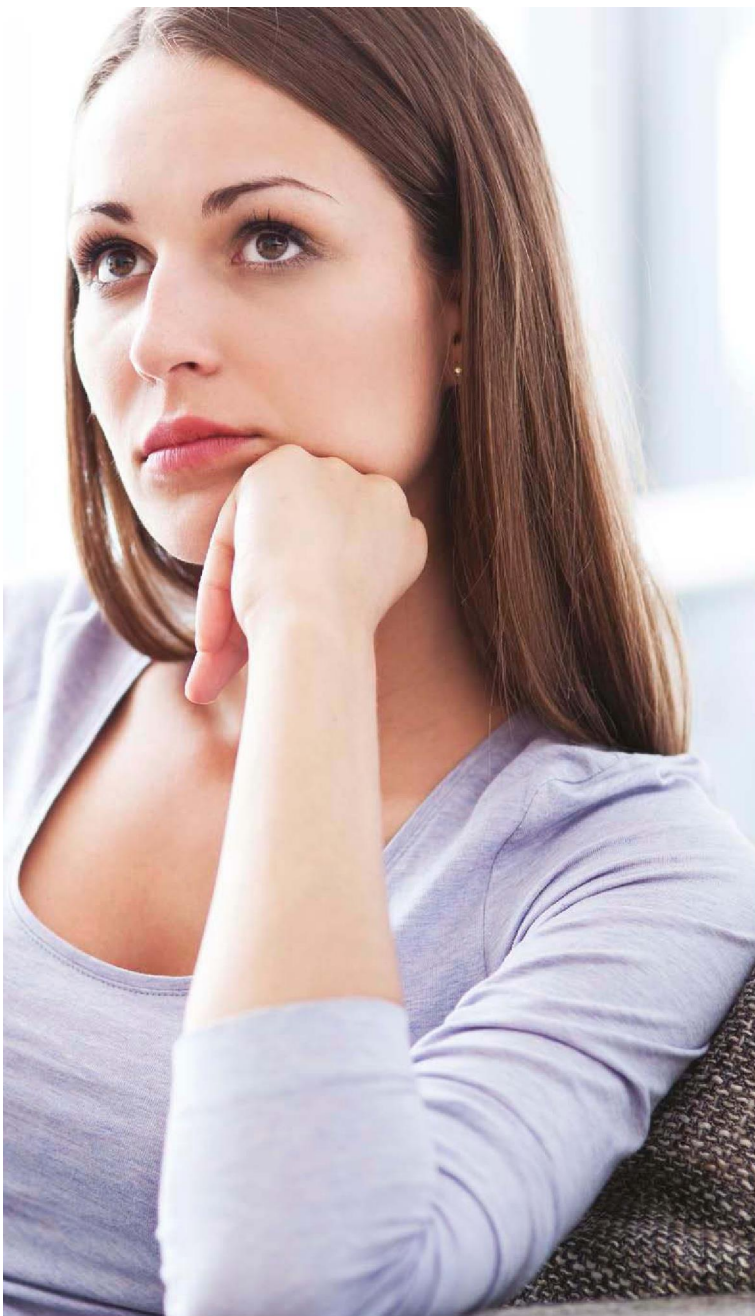
When arguments involve hurling abuse or flinging crockery and cutlery, it is clear that the dark side has set in! An argument is healthy when it is addressed in a respectful manner and when each party is open to



constructive criticism without interpreting it as a personal attack. Each party must be given a chance to voice their opinion and to feel like they have been heard. “Arguments can bring learning, healing, enlightenment and growth, both in ourselves and in relationships. No one is perfect, and we need to be open to making changes in ourselves or in the way we think about things,” says Gabrielle.

Archetypal Therapist, Miriam Cohen agrees. “A healthy argument is when a couple consciously makes time and space to raise issues that are bothersome and addresses them in a coherent dialogue. Waiting until you are overwhelmed and then exploding at someone is not a healthy way to argue,” says Miriam.

The timing of conflict is important too. If you want to address something, but your partner is tired or in an irritable mood, the timing is clearly wrong. You should both be in a calm state of mind and willing to discuss the issue on hand. “When you feel a necessity to express something, you need to ask your partner if they are available to listen what you have to say. If they say no, it is important to learn how to contain your emotions like an adult,” says Miriam. “We often do not really hear what the other person is saying and lots of important messages get lost in



translation. There are different techniques that can be applied to help you listen to your partner. These can be taught by a professional couple’s counsellor.”

When something upsets you, the first thing you should do is question why it is unsettling you. Think of it as one finger pointing forward and three pointing back, suggests Miriam. Look at your own behaviour, and reflect upon your defences and why you react in a certain way before blaming others for the way you feel. You are responsible for your feelings and emotions. Own them. Take the time to analyse your feelings and you will notice patterns developing. Reflect upon these patterns to find a deeper understanding of yourself. “A good way to begin an argument is to first own your ‘stuff’ by explaining to your partner how you feel you have contributed to the dynamic (it takes two to Tango),” says Miriam. “Then, when you feel that your partner has heard you, you can proceed to tell them what it is you feel they have done or said that has been difficult for you. This is not about blame. It is an honest reflection

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of what you have co-created in the dynamic,” says Miriam. “You will also need to be willing to hear what your partner has to say about their experience without being defensive or blaming.”

DON'T DO THIS IN AN ARGUMENT...

Dr John Demartini, human behavioural specialist, educator, author and founder of the Demartini Institute says the worst thing you can do in an argument is to try to dominate, criticise and threaten the other party “This induces the other person’s defence and defiance response. It is not always about winning. It is about communicating. The truth may be somewhere between or transcendent to either opinion,” says Dr Demartini.

“John M. Gottman, Executive Director of the Relationship Research Institute has identified four behavioural patterns that consistently predict relationship break-ups or continued misery,” says Marlene de Lange from Grow Consulting, a development consultancy that focuses on developing people, organisations and communities. These behaviours include criticism, contempt, defensiveness and stonewalling. “Criticism means that you attack your partner’s personality or character. Whereas healthy complaints mean that you address only the specific action at which your partner has failed. Contempt is composed of a set of behaviours that communicate disgust. It includes sarcasm, name calling, eye rolling, mockery, hostile humour and condescension. Contempt is the most lethal of the four as it leads to greater conflict and negativity, and ultimately destroys the relationship. Defensiveness conveys the message, “The problem is not me. It’s you!” You imply that your partner is responsible for the entire conflict and you sidestep any responsibility. Stonewalling means disengaging, withdrawal and sulking. Rather than dealing directly with the issue or with your partner, you check out by tuning out, turning away or engaging in busyness,” explains Marlene.

What to do when the argument gets heated?

- Calm down and listen attentively to the other person's side again.
- Find potential benefits to what they are saying and attempt to communicate your intentions in terms of their highest values.
- Relax and open up after this. If you help them get what they want, they will be more likely to help you get what you want.
- Agree to disagree and to move on.
- Revisit the disagreement at a later stage from a new perspective when you are both more objective.

Finally, while arguing from time to time is inevitable, the basis of any relationship should be one of mutual care, support and positivity. It is vital for parties to be willing to reconnect after an argument through a gentle touch, teasing gesture or light conversation. “When an attempt to reconnect is ignored and rejected, the relationship runs the risk of spiralling into chronic hostility and distance,” warns Marlene.