

HELP! WE CAN'T COMMUNICATE

A couple's happiness depends upon the ability to resolve conflict on an ongoing basis.

Couples can find themselves avoiding each other or in conflict more often than desired. They may start to avoid topics of conversation so as to not get into yet another argument, but then find the frustrations building up until another fight ensues over the smallest of things. They wonder: *"How did we get here? Where did all the love go? Why are we at each other like this? Why can't we resolve our issues?"* There is no one answer. Each couple has its own dynamic and its own history. Here are five of the most common reasons that couples get into ongoing arguments that just keep looping on and on without resolve.

1. PERSONALITY CLASHES

We are attracted to a partner with whom we share common interests and who also has some different personality traits. At first these differences are at best enjoyable and at worst only slightly annoying. We believe in the beauty of the relationship and let frustrations go, but as time progresses the annoyances grow until we begin voicing this. We do so to try and get a need, want or wish met. We try to be heard but can often get met with defensiveness. In turn we crank up the volume. They respond in kind or withdraw. In the end neither gets heard. We begin to criticize and maybe even attack our partner's character.

2. STRESS

Life demands a lot from us. As stresses accumulate our resiliency decreases and we begin having less tolerance for everyday life annoyances. So when even the most normal of issues arise we get more negative preconceptions of them due to already feeling somewhat overwhelmed. We push back at our partner, we get misinterpreted more often ("that's not what I said" or "you're twisting my words"). To avoid stress in the relationship we begin avoiding even important matters that need to be tended to but seem too burdensome to deal with. We're often on edge. Things either blow up or wither.

3. UNRESOLVED PAST ISSUES

The unresolved past will revisit a couple over and over until it gets resolved. You might need to talk about something more than your partner wants to. Your partner tells you "let it go... it's the past... just get over it". You might need more discussion to get it resolved, but your partner pushes you away. You bury it, but it keeps surfacing in your mind and emotions. You can't let it go and it comes out in a disagreement about something totally unrelated where you seek to get understood. You're criticized for not letting it go.

4. SKILLS

We invest heavily in gaining skills for career and yet oddly enough we can assume that we should just magically know how to make a relationship work. Wise people increase their skill base in whatever they do in life. The same applies to relationships. If what you're doing isn't working then it might be as simple as learning some skills in listening, communicating, regulating unpleasant emotion, setting common goals, resolving the past, overcoming hurts/anger, learning trust, recreating intimacy, managing stress, etc.

5. FAMILY OF ORIGIN

No, not everything is the fault of Mom and Dad. But we do learn from the home we grew up in. We might find ourselves reproducing behaviours like some of the unhelpful actions we saw modeled or we might go to the opposite extreme to prove that "I am not like my Mom/Dad!". Neither are helpful. Further, many of us did not get the proper skills in handling conflict growing up. Understanding how this can affect us can be important in consciously and proactively creating the relational environment we desire.

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