

All couples argue. Is this a normal, expected and healthy part of a relationship? The final word is not out yet among the experts. Some say that arguing is normal and healthy, while others say beware. While an occasional argument might be unavoidable and can even add spice to the relationship, a pattern of habitual fighting left unchecked puts the relationship at risk. Granted, when couples first meet, they may experience no conflict. This is the infatuation stage of a relationship when both people may feel they have met the perfect partner, and happiness reigns supreme. But as time goes by any relationship is molded not only by the similarities between the partners but also by the differences which bring interest, excitement and complexity to the relationship. A healthy argument can clarify each partner's needs and allow each to maintain his or her own sense of personal integrity within the relationship. In other words, each person can hold on to the qualities which made him or her attractive to the other in the first place. The difference between a happy and an unhappy relationship is often due to how the partners argue.

Some people are unable to argue because they feel that their underlying anger, which can get triggered during an argument, will go out of control. Others find it difficult to argue since they feel inadequate within the relationship. Some were exposed to bitter arguments as they grew up so that they don't want to repeat the pattern of their unhappy parents during their own adulthood. When people just hate to argue, for whatever reason, they frequently make up prematurely without resolving the issue in order to avoid conflict. Or they may resort to fighting unfairly to gain power over and distance themselves from their partner instead of coming to a compromise and strengthening their commitment to the relationship. When goodwill and trust are damaged, the probability of using dirty fighting techniques increases. If a relationship reaches the point where arguments are frequent and damaging, the couple probably needs to make a commitment to resolve the problem and to try more productive methods of

relating on difficult topics. Relationship therapy, which focuses in part on establishing new communication patterns, aims to facilitate this goal.

Arguments and disagreements are not necessarily a sign of a failed relationship or that love is fading. They are often just a sign that the partners are expressing their own individuality, and this is healthy. It helps to ask whether the arguments usually lead in a downward spiral toward bitterness and stalemate or whether they lead to better communication and greater intimacy. And it is helpful to examine the themes of the arguments. Couples may find that they always argue about the same issues time and time again without ever resolving the underlying problem. It helps to see that arguments about money are rarely about money: they're usually about power. Arguments about kids are usually arguments about control. When we argue about chores, we are often more concerned about fairness. Sexual arguments are



### All About Us Biographies

Jody Michael, M.A., L.C.S.W. is founder and president of Jody Michael & Associates, a coaching consultancy that works one-on-one with individuals and small businesses to help them reach their career, executive, small business, and life goals.

She brings to her coaching practice over 15 years of corporate leadership in the finance industry, successful entrepreneurial ventures, teaching credentials, an M.A. and PhD studies from the University of Chicago, and more than eight years of practice applying clinical psychology principles to work-life, career, and business building issues.

To schedule an in-person office visit or an out-of-town phone consultation with Jody Michael, please call 773-275-5566.

Arguing is a Way to Keep Our  
Personal Integrity, Establish  
Healthy Boundaries and Build  
Mutual Respect in a Relationship...  
But Only If We Fight Fairly



# Trying to change our partner's way of living, of course, is wrongheaded and usually only brings more conflict into the relationship.

usually about intimacy; and arguments about jealousy and fidelity are usually about maturity. By identifying these underlying issues, we can often communicate more directly and with a more positive outcome.

If arguments begin to have a deteriorating effect on a relationship and no resolution appears in sight, it is time to examine the level of commitment each of the partners has to the relationship. Quite often this is the basic issue which remains unresolved by the two partners. People frequently avoid this topic for fear that their partner may be on the verge of bailing out, so they never get a good reading on how the partner feels about the degree of intimacy and longevity they ought to have in the relationship. Many arguments, in fact, stem from the fact that one of the partners feels that the other is less committed, and this gives rise to unresolved anger, fears of being abandoned, control attempts and trying to change the other person. At this stage we may even see our partner as the enemy, a competitor, and someone who is not to be trusted. Problems arise when each person sees the commitment differently or when their expectations are unrealistic. Unhealthy commitments assume that one person is responsible for the other person's happiness. A solid first step in working on conflict in a relationship is to clarify the degree of commitment each party feels toward the other. An adaptive commitment to a relationship assumes that there are two mature, independent people whose needs, wants and motives can change over the years...and this is precisely why communication about the commitment is necessary. It should be an open topic which can be brought up at any time. Couples who have been together for decades often attribute their success to the commitment they have made to the relationship.

In addition to reaching a good understanding of the nature of the commitment, there are several other guidelines that can be explored when a couple decides to bring their arguments to a more constructive level.

1. It is better to be close and happy than to be right. Blaming each other and trying to change the other person's opinions are both counter-productive. When we assume that one person is right and the other person is wrong, we put the person who is "wrong" on the defensive. Get out of this right vs. wrong framework altogether. Accept the fact that you simply see the issue differently.
2. Become aware of your impact on your partner. Arguments start when we say something without realizing how our partner will take it. Your partner may blame you for starting an argument when that is the last thing you had in mind. One goal of relationship therapy is to uncover what people mean when they say things...and what it means when they hear certain things. During an argument, check out what the other person means: "When you said that, did you mean that you feel I always have the upper hand?" Listen to what your partner is trying to tell you.
3. You can't change past history. Although you may feel hurt by something that happened in the past, the only options people have are to work for better circumstances in the present and the future. Of course, you may want to talk about things which have bothered you in the past, but holding a grudge usually interferes with the productive resolution of current problems...those things which you can do something about. Work on one current problem at a time, not a list of things from the past. Discuss the problem while it is relevant.
4. State your needs as specific requests for positive behavior change. It is not helpful to criticize the person's character; this simply puts the other into a defensive stance. Labeling the person with words like "crazy," "immature," or "slob" does not solve the specific problem you need to address, and it ensures that you will not be heard. These words are only meant to hurt (and it would be better in this case just to say, "Right now I feel like I want to hurt your feelings"). Let your partner know that it is a specific behavior that bothers you, and behaviors can be changed— especially when there is a commitment to the relationship.

## What's New? Small Business Alliance

Since inception, JMA has hand picked a small cadre of entrepreneurs that provide consistent high quality product and outstanding customer service at reasonable prices. If client needs arise that are specialized and are outside JMA's expertise, we go to our trusty list of specialized SBA service providers that we and many of our past clients have come to trust. If you would like to meet the team and review their specialties, please visit the Small Business Alliance, located in the 'About Us' section of our website, [www.jodymichael.com](http://www.jodymichael.com).

## How a Coach Can Help You

Whether your career is not quite where you'd like it to be, you're a small business owner in search of new ideas, or you're an executive reaching for the next rung, a coach can prove instrumental in helping you identify, accomplish, and achieve. Please refer to 'Client Case Studies' and read a few examples of how JMA coaches have helped their clients overcome obstacles and succeed.





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5. Use effective communication techniques. Use "I-statements" when you want to convey how you feel. Take responsibility for your own feelings and assume that your partner is responsible for his or her own. When you say, "I feel left out at parties," you and your partner can work on this constructively together. But when you say, "Buster, you take the cake; you don't care one thing about me when you're around your friends," your partner is seen as the enemy and resolution of the problem becomes difficult. When you use generalized words like "should," "ought," "always," or "never" you become like a parent and this places your partner in a childlike role where constructive discussion between two equal adults becomes virtually impossible. Making sure that your nonverbal message matches your verbal communication also facilitates an effective conversation..
6. De-escalate arguments which are getting out of control. It is not helpful to threaten the other person either verbally or physically and any sort of violence is unacceptable. Time-outs are a perfectly good way to give both parties a chance to cool down so that the problem can be resolved later after the heat has dissipated. Recognize the triggers which set off an argument, as well as the process of escalation, and take immediate steps to get things under control. Put your energy into resolution of the conflict. A component of relationship therapy is to clarify this destructive process and to learn tools for resolving problems and restoring personal integrity and mutual respect.

It is a wonder that relationships are as successful as they are. We seldom get any kind of formal training in how to manage relationships well. One lesson that many of us have never learned is that differences of opinion and polarized perspectives are to be expected and are normal and healthy. However, serious differences that lead to hurtful, destructive arguing require attention. Fortunately, help is readily available for learning these lessons, and it is only a phone call away.

## Dirty Fighting Techniques

If you really want to win the battle you may be able to by using any of the following techniques. But a word of warning is in order: when you use dirty fighting techniques to win an argument, both you and your partner ultimately lose!

**Escalating:** Quickly move from the main issue of the argument to questioning your partner's basic personality, and then move on to wondering whether the relationship is even worth it. Blame your partner for having a flawed personality so that a happy relationship will be impossible. You surely will gain the upper hand!

**Timing:** Look for a time when your partner is least able to respond or least expects an argument—like just before he or she leaves for work, or late at night, or during a favorite TV show. Catch your partner off guard!

**Crucializing:** Exaggerate the importance of an issue by drawing conclusions of great magnitude regarding the relationship. "If you loved me, you would never have done this" is a good one. Or try: "This proves you have never cared about me."

**Brown Bagging:** Never stick to just the original issue. Bring up as many problems as possible, and in great detail. Think of every complaint you can from your past history and lay them all on your partner at the same time. An overwhelmed person can never fight back effectively!

**Asking Why:** Treat your partner like an irresponsible child. "Why didn't you clean up after dinner?" "Why don't you love me like John loves Helen?" Make your partner feel that he or she is incapable of an adult relationship rather than focusing on the issue at hand.

**Cross Complaining:** When your partner complains about something, make sure you raise a complaint of your own. "I forgot to take make up the bed? How about all the times you haven't taken out the garbage?"

## A Listening Exercise for Couples

Reciprocal listening is a powerful tool for couples who need to improve their communication. Couples who try this may become aware of how limited their communication has been in the past. They also learn an effective technique, which can increase the respect, trust, and intimacy of their relationship. This exercise may seem structured and perhaps contrived at first, but stay with it. The rewards can be immense.

The couple decides on a minor disagreement that they need to talk about. Each partner takes turns being either the speaker or the listener. The speaker has five minutes to speak without interruption. As speaker, talk about the problem as you see it. Present your argument briefly and stick to the point. Be sure to use "I statements" to present your views and don't place the blame on your partner (that is, just talk about how you feel about the conflict without putting your partner in a defensive position). After five minutes your partner (the listener) will verbally summarize what he or she has heard. This allows the speaker to let the listener know if anything has been left out or if it has been misinterpreted. Keep going until the speaker feels that the point has been completely heard.

As the listener, pay close attention to what is being said and try to attune yourself to your partner's needs. When you summarize what your partner has said, make sure you don't disagree, argue, or criticize. Just repeat what you have heard.

**Over-Generalizing:** Use words like “never” or “always.” “You never act decent to my mother.” This will force your partner into defending his or her overall actions rather than looking at the issue at hand.

**Blaming:** Make it clear that you are not at fault and that you are simply the victim. Never admit that you play any part in the difficulty and that you will never make any changes. Let your partner know that he or she is entirely at fault and that if the relationship is to get any better, it is your partner who will have to change.

**Using Sarcasm:** This really gets their goat! “Well, look here at who’s so perfect all the time!” Use just the right tone and your partner may not have a good comeback. Push their buttons!

**Mind Reading:** Let your partner know that you are the expert in how he or she feels or thinks. This way you won’t have to deal with any issues at all. “You don’t really feel angry right now.” “You didn’t mean to say you wouldn’t be home for dinner.” Deprive your partner of all rights as an equal.

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**Fortune Telling:** Like mind-reading, this technique gives you the upper hand. “You will never change” demoralizes your partner and effectively blocks resolution of the real issues at hand. Pulling Rank: Don’t address the real issues— it’s much easier just to say that you bring home more money, or you have more friends, or you have more education, or you do more around the house. “When you make as much money as I do, then I’ll listen to you” works like a charm. Keep your partner down! There’s no need for equality in a relationship!

**Not Listening:** Don’t let your partner know that you value his or her opinion or feelings. Hear only what you want to hear and ignore the rest. Reinterpret whatever your partner says to suit your own needs. Better yet, interrupt whenever your partner starts to talk. Or pretend to read or fall asleep while your partner is talking. A powerful tactic is to leave the house whenever your partner brings up an issue for discussion.

**Giving Advice:** Whenever your partner wants to talk over a problem, always act like the expert. You should tell the person how to act, think and feel. Always have the better answer. If this is ever questioned you can always say that you were only trying to be helpful.

**Labeling:** Learn some negative terms like “neurotic,” “alcoholic,” “immature,” or “paranoid” to use whenever you want to give the impression that the other person is at fault. For a potent impact, use a term like “You slob...” whenever you want to suggest that your partner is inherently flawed as a person rather than focusing primarily on behaviors that can change.

**Avoiding Responsibility.** Bring any disagreement to a sudden halt by saying “I forgot.” Other convenient excuses could include: “I had too much to drink,” or “I guess I was tired.” Why engage in a discussion when it is much easier just to avoid the whole thing?

**Playing the Martyr:** If timed properly, this technique can completely disorient your partner. “You’re right, honey, I guess there really is no hope for me.” How can your partner respond to that? Let him or her think they have won the victory! If there is no other alternative, pretend to be sick until your partner’s behavior changes— and blame your illness on your partner.

**Rejecting Compromise:** Never back down. Stick with the philosophy that only one of you can win.

Now switch positions. The speaker becomes the listener and the listener, the speaker. Follow the same procedures until the new speaker feels satisfied that his or her position has been understood. It is important to avoid letting this exercise turn into an argument. Because this is such a powerful way of learning to listen and to communicate better, many people prefer to try it with a therapist present, at least for the first few attempts.

## Downtown Location

Continuing our tradition of offering comfortable and convenient locations for our clients, we announce the opening of our new downtown location at 405 N. Wabash. Solid natural materials and a birds-eye view of the Magnificent Mile create an ideal setting that prompts both relaxation and renewal. The ambience metaphorically reflects the new heights and perspective our clients achieve in their one-on-one work with us. Please call and schedule an appointment with us at this provocative setting today.

