

Do continual arguments badly affect your relationship?

In recent days the world has been horrified to witness how the age long history of conflict in the Middle East has now turned to full blown war. Families are being torn apart as the conflict escalates.

In no way is this a comparison, but over the years I have worked with so many couples who feel and behave as if they are at war with each other. They come to their sessions seemingly wanting to improve their relationship but before too long, they are positioning themselves in their usual fighting positions. For some couples it seems impossible to disagree with each other without resorting to full blown conflict.

The psychotherapist Esther Perel says “Conflict is intrinsic to all relationships. The presence of bickering or disagreements doesn’t mean the relationship isn’t good, or that it isn’t worth it, often it’s an alarm. Your relationship needs attention.’

It doesn’t take rocket science to understand that the enormous pressures that our lives have been under these past few years seems to have diminished our capacity to manage conflict more effectively. Why is it so many more couples seem to present in sessions either the inability to manage their escalating arguments and the belief it would be better to end the relationship, or just bury heads in the sand and avoid conflict because they are afraid of the consequences?

An important thing to remember is that occasional bickering and conflicts and arguments are a normal and a healthy part of our close relationships. They help us learn how to communicate with each other, find common ground and compromise. When we feel safe and secure with our partners to express our feelings, we usually argue less.

Hearing from partners that they bicker all the time, feel constantly criticised and feel they can’t do anything right should sound an alarm bell. In contrast those couples who tell me proudly they never argue or have many disagreements always makes my heart sink and invites me to question what else might be going on for them. Couples who use an avoidant approach to conflict and constantly compromise are often afraid to acknowledge their emotions which in time can build up resentments. A partnership with no arguments is often a partnership of lethargy and little energy so working out how to argue affectively to keep your relationships safe and growing is the goal.

TAKE OWNERSHIP

When couples feel they aren’t communicating well and seek out couples therapy it's often because there is an escalation of their arguments that keep repeating. As their conflict increases, it feels very detrimental and threatening to their relationship. The more distant they feel from each other, the more the conflict cycle continues to play out.

My role as their therapist is to help them understand their patterns of escalation in a non -blaming way and to help turn Conflict into Connection. Firstly, we need to take a pause, breathe easily and decide to work out what is really going on. This amount of

conflict can't surely be because I forgot to empty the dishwasher or spent too much time playing games on my phone? They are more likely to be caused by our needs and vulnerabilities not being met by our partners. When you prefer to play on the phone than come and sit and talk to me it may trigger my own insecurity of whether I feel you really love me and want to spend time with me.

I often ask these questions:

- What do you think you are fighting about?
- How do your arguing differences show up?
- How do they play out in your relationship?
- How do you handle the difference and how do they impact each of you?

Esther Perel identifies 3 hidden dimensions under most relationship fights:

- Power and Control
- Care and Closeness
- Respect and Recognition

When working with couples caught up in this negative cycle of distress, it's important to help them understand how they both contribute to the cycle. Perhaps one partner may habitually blame the other when something goes wrong, or maybe they're just tired and stressed out after a long day at work, then they can lash out at one another. Alternatively, if a disagreement happens, one person may shut down and completely withdraw which makes the other person respond with more anger and fear.

Can we ask these questions of ourselves and each other to REFLECT instead of REACT?

- How do I argue? Do I escalate, shut down or avoid?
- Why do we repeatedly fight about the same things?
- How did I experience arguing and conflict in my family of origin?
- What did I learn from that experience?
- What do I need that's different?
- What do I need to do that's different?

Recognising these cycles and taking responsibility for your own behaviour and feelings is crucial to learning how to have less highly charged arguments. Arguments do not need to feel inevitable. They just need working on!

When partners are in this very familiar negative cycle it's easy to overlook and not pay any attention to what is working and what your partner is doing that is positive.

It's crucial to keep things balanced so noticing and calling out when something feels different and positive helps to move away from the negative destructive patterns. It always surprises me how couples find this much more difficult to do!!

It takes time and patience to understand how we get caught up in these negative cycles. It takes commitment and a longing for a closer connection to create new patterns.

As Esther Perel suggests

'Sometimes the best fight you can have is the fight for each other.'

If you would like to discuss things further or to make an appointment, you can call me on either:

07976 403741 or (020) 8959 9528.

Alternatively you can contact me by email by clicking [here](#).