

All Couples Fight.

Here's How Successful Couples Do It Differently

There's an art to arguing.

By Brittany Wong

Adapted by Stephen Andrew

All couples argue, and it's the *way* they argue that determines if their relationship will go the distance. "Instead of attacking the other person's character, happy couples color inside the lines and express their own feelings," psychotherapist Vikki Stark, director of the Sedona Counselling Center of Montreal, told The Huffington Post. "It's fine to say, 'I'm furious with you right now!' It's *not* fine to say, 'You're a sorry excuse for a human being.'" What else stands out in happy couples' approach to arguments? Below, Stark and other relationship experts share eight ways healthy couples may argue differently.

1. They don't run from fights. Stay in the process.

Couples in it for the long-haul don't shy away from discussing topics that could just as easily be swept under the rug. They ask the big, scary questions ASAP -- "When, if ever, are we going to have kids?" "What are we going to do if you get that job in another state? I don't want to move to there!" -- so they don't become bigger issues in the relationship later on, said Diane Sawaya Cloutier, an author and relationship expert. "When taboo or uncomfortable topics remain unaddressed, they can turn any benign event into a big drama that could have been avoided in the first place," she said. "Couples who talk about it can manage potential dramas." Being vulnerable with difficult topics creates intimacy.

2. They start slow and take turns talking.

Arguments generally end the same way they began, said Bonnie Ray Kennan, a marriage and family therapist based in Southern California. Couples who've mastered the art of arguing fairly take things slow, addressing difficult conversations with a soft, reassuring tone, with great and careful kindness, and dialing it down whenever things get too emotionally charged. They learn when they are in their reactive self. "Starting a difficult conversation softly and respectfully dramatically increases the chances of a good outcome," she said. "Conversely, a 'harsh start-up' is very hard to process well." Couples who argue with finesse also know the value of give and take: "One person speaks and the other person truly listens," Ray Kennan said.

3. They don't name call. Take 100% responsibility for your actions and thoughts.

Happy couples in long-term relationships rarely get into knock-down, drag-out fights because they don't lower themselves to school-yard tactics: no matter how heated things get, there's no name calling, eye rolling or biting sarcasm. Blaming is a form of violence. "Both partners understand that contemptuous behaviors are hard to take back and have a corrosive impact on a relationship," Ray Kennan said. "Over time, they've become mindful of the effects of such dirty fighting and so they take it out of their repertoire."

4. They know how to cool down.

They know when it's time to care for self and others. When things do get out of hand, savvy arguers know how to get a grip on their emotions. They value taking a time out, whether that means counting to 10 and taking slow, deep breaths or simply telling their spouse, "Hey, can we revisit this in the morning?" "These couples know how to acknowledge and honor their emotions without getting overrun by them," Amy Kipp, a couples and family therapist in San Antonio, told HuffPost. "They use self-soothing skills to make sure they're at their best. When both partners are able to soothe themselves and take breaks, they're usually able to reach a resolution (or agree to disagree!) with more ease."

5. They set ground rules for arguments. Saying your truth without shame or blame.

It's not that long-time couples have never resorted to low blows or have said something regrettable during an argument. They have in the past -- and then they learned from the mistake. Once the emotionally charged fight ends, smart couples lay down some ground rules for arguing so it never gets out of hand again, said author and relationship expert Mario P. Cloutier. The ground rules could be specific -- "We will not interrupt each other when one is giving his or her perspective" -- or more big picture: "It's not about being right. It's about getting to a common ground and resolving the problem," suggested Cloutier. To hold the right position is to destroy the relationship.

6. They use empathy to acknowledge each other's feelings and points of view.

They may be bumping heads but couples in happy, long-time relationships do their best to see the other side of the argument, Kipp said. "They may say, 'I know you see it differently than me, but I appreciate that you are listening to my perspective,'" she said. "These positive moments decrease defensiveness and allow for a more productive conversation."

7. They give each other the benefit of the doubt. Believe they mean well.

Partners who are able to have healthy and productive arguments don't jump to conclusions in the middle of fights. They aren't quick to assume their partner wants to leave them just because he or she is voicing a concern. They quiet their insecurities, listen deeply and try to give their partner the benefit of the doubt, Kipp said. "Healthy relationships mean that people assume their partner is doing the best they can at the moment," she explained. "In an argument, this means assuming both partners have the same goal: a mutually beneficial resolution. This allows arguments to be a team effort to achieve the goal rather than an adversarial 'fight.'"

8. They never forget that ultimately, they're a team, a partnership.

Even during their most tense arguments, healthy couples never forget that they're a team: for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health... and until the argument exhausts them and both parties agree that they'd rather call a timeout and get a bite to eat or take a walk. "Couples in satisfying long-term relationships are able to remember that, no matter how angry they may be, life will continue after today," said Stark. "Because of that, they don't want to do lasting damage. Even in an emotional state, they are able to hang on to the long-term value of the couple. They're a team, protecting their future together."