

Arguments can damage relationships irreparably: it's time to break the cycle

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#ModernRelationships

Research shows that when a couple splits up the emotions most commonly experienced include confusion, shock, guilt, frustration, grief, loss, resentment, anger, rejection, shame and relief. The circumstances of the break up – who decides it's over, whether there was infidelity, who leaves, who initiates the divorce or civil partnership dissolution – inevitably affects these feelings and how each individual behaves and reacts. In trying to manage these emotions and navigate the choppy waters of a separation, a soon to be ex-spouse or partner may become unpredictable and unreliable in the other's eyes. Feelings of rejection and bitterness can induce a desire to 'hurt back', escalating anger and conflict, and making it impossible to reach decisions.

Even when both parties are agreed that their marriage is over, feelings of frustration and grief, as well as shame, often surface, all of which affect an individual's capacity to absorb information, make decisions, and access support at the time when they most need to do so.

As a family lawyer, whilst pragmatic and strategic legal advice is obviously a fundamental part of my job, understanding (and helping clients to understand), that this cocktail of emotions is entirely normal, plays a vital role. After a separation, each person is likely to have a unique and private narrative as to the reason why the relationship broke down. Very rarely will those two narratives be the same. But, and it is a positive 'but', disagreements are normal part and parcel of family life. They are important and the key is knowing how to disagree in a way that is constructive, rather than destructive: in other words the key is learning how to argue better.

Good communication, even about a disagreement, is key to a good relationship, both before and after any split and particularly where children are involved. Knowing how to argue better can help parents manage their conflict and avoid getting stuck in a vicious argumentative cycle. That improves the chances of co-operation and discovering ways to get along better.

These are my top tips on how to break the negative cycle and transform it into a positive one:

- **Recognise** the impact of your own emotions on how you communicate
- **Regulate** those feelings so you can stay calm and explain your point of view
- **Listen actively** and patiently and try to hear what is unsaid as well as what is said
- **Speak clearly** about what you want, and what you want family life to be like, without focusing on what others should do differently
- **Negotiate fairly and confidently** to tackle problems that arise to get a solution that meets everyone's needs sufficiently

Focusing on the benefits of good communication is a real passion of mine and so I am delighted to be a trustee of the charity [One Plus One](#). One Plus One aims to strengthen relationships by creating resources to help families and front line workers tackle relationship issues early on. Based on the latest research evidence, their work promotes early action in relationship support. They equip people with the skills and knowledge to work on relationship issues before they become entrenched. They also provide support for couples who are separating including training on how to argue better.

Being involved with a charity concerned wholly with supporting relationships has given me a brand new perspective at work. Looking at relationships from the other end of the telescope not only helps me to think about how I do my job, but enables me to use some of my experience to help One Plus One do theirs.

[Visit our campaign hub focusing on conflict](#)

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