

'Successful relationships aren't successful because they are problem free. They are successful because the couple have learned how to discuss the problems which come up constructively'.

PART SIX

How To Stop Arguing And Start Talking





When you argue, which Ego State, which of your 'Personalities' is in control?

P = Parent Ego State

Do you re-play the behaviour of your mother, father, or a grandparent?



A = Adult Ego State

Do you put your 'Common sense head on' and respond logically and calmly?

To read more about Ego States
see Part 2



C = Child Ego State

Do you behave like a child, in fact the child you used to be?

The first step in stopping arguing is

.....THE DECISION AND 'CONTRACT' TO STOP ARGUING.

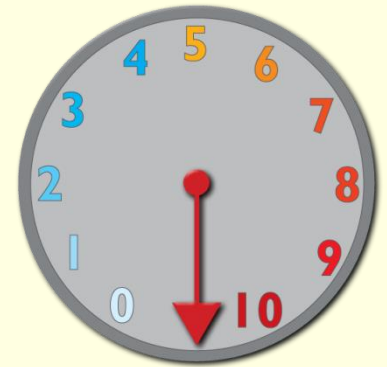
- It takes two to tango and it takes two to argue.
- An argument is when people don't listen or attempt to understand the other person's point of view and express their opinions in an aggressive or disrespectful way.
- Disagreeing is OK. Disagreeing is not arguing. You can still disagree after listening and trying to understand the other person's point of view.
- Being able to agree to disagree is the sign of a healthy relationship.

Withdraw the Permission you have given yourself to argue about trivialities

- Obviously, there are times when it's really important to get your partner to see something your way.
- But, very often in couples counselling, I find couples arguing about things which, no way, are worth falling out about. Both parties stubbornly try to impose their opinion.
- A good example, is arguing precisely what did or didn't happen on a particular occasion. Sometimes I wonder if they shared the same situation, their versions are so different.
- Without realising it, we all filter and distort our experience and create our own version of the truth.
- It's important to express your opinion, but it's really damaging to want it always accepted as the right version.

How important is what you want

- Couples often argue as though what each wants is 10 out of 10 on the scale of importance to them.
- Don't try to always get your own way. Have a think about how important on the 0 - 10 scale what your partner wants is to them and how important on the scale what you want is to you.
- If you can't both have what you want, let the one to whom it's most important have it their way and negotiate for a consolation prize.



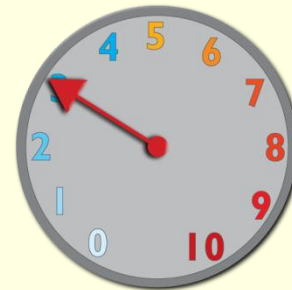
Shrink the importance of the issue using the 0 - 10 scale

Many things can be scaled downwards to a point where it's obvious that they are not worth arguing about.

10 = Life Threatening



3 = 'Not worth falling out about.

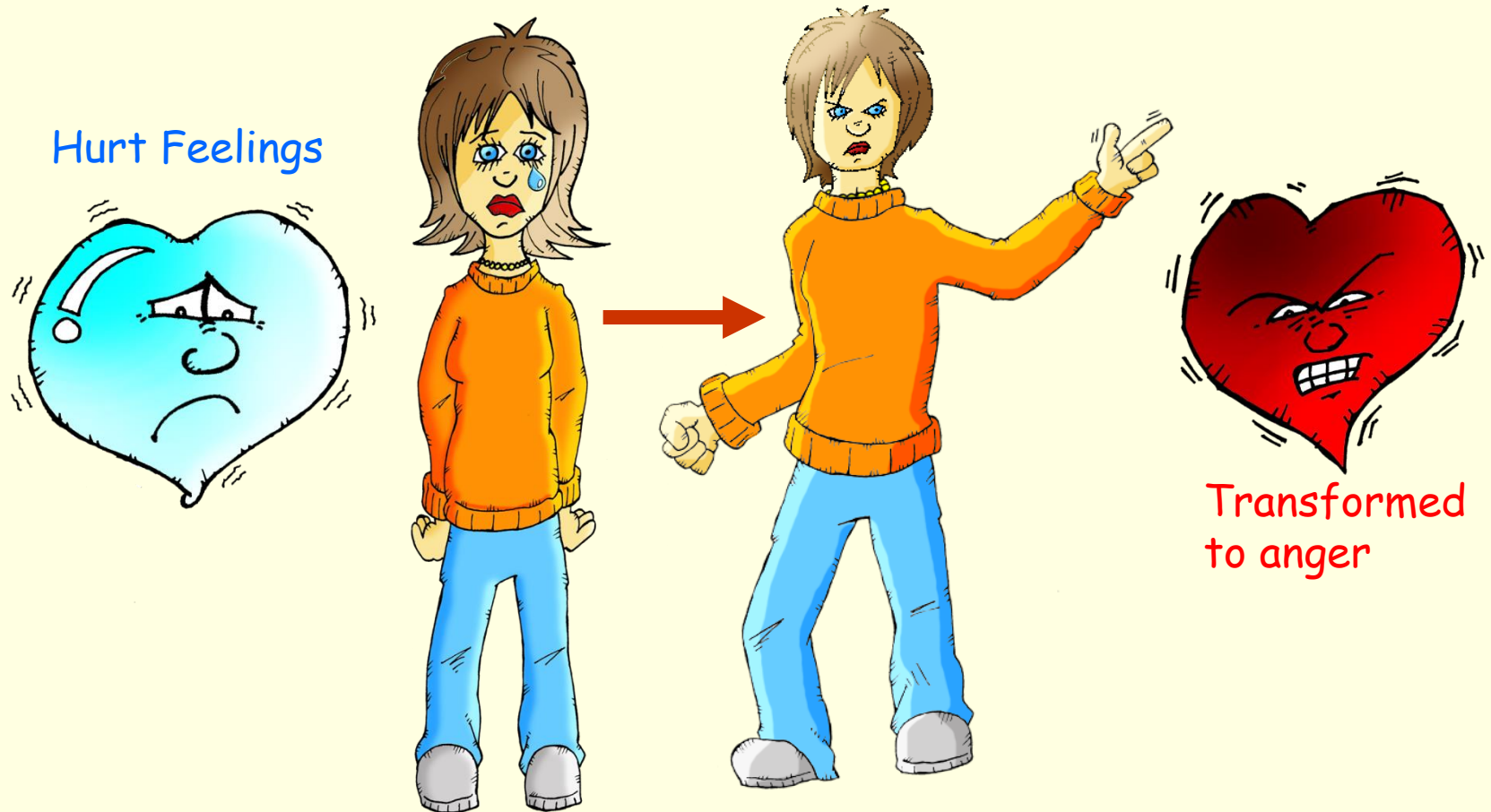


If unresolved hurt is why you argue.....

- When we have unresolved anger and hurt our empathy switch is 'off' and we become insensitive to the feelings of the person we are angry with.
- They then become angry and hurt in return and a situation develops where both parties have their empathy switch in the 'off' position and constructive communication breaks down.
- Where there is deep unresolved hurt you may need couples counselling or personal counselling to move forward.



When dealing with anger look for the hurt behind the anger



If you argue because you don't know how not

If you argue because you don't know how not to, it would be good to practice a proven technique called 'Constructive Discussion'.

A Constructive Discussion is, in some ways, like a formal business meeting.

Act professional about it, agreed time, duration, place, agenda, no interruptions and staying calm and factual.

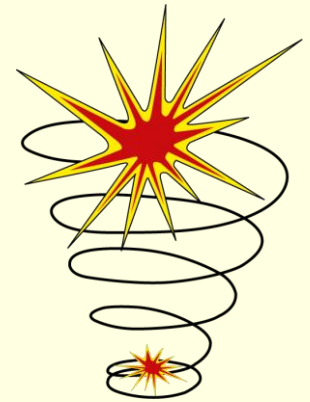
In time, talking calmly about issues will become natural.

Constructive Discussion needs the right attitude

- Don't set out to win: a relationship isn't a tennis match, it's a life journey together. Winners make losers. Losers look for chances to get even.
- A Constructive Discussion is an opportunity for you to be heard and your point of view understood.
- It's also a chance for you to understand your partner's point of view.
- It's an opportunity to work out solutions to problems and agree the best way forward.

For Constructive Discussion to work you have to suspend hostilities for a while!

- You have to suspend hostilities [even though you may not feel like it] for the duration of the Constructive Discussion.
- You will have a much better chance of staying calm during your attempts at Constructive Discussion if you have worked first on three key parts of this programme. Specifically:
 - Part 4 - Self Calming & Stress Reduction
 - Part 7 - Listening Skills
 - Part 9 - Releasing Anger & Frustration Safely



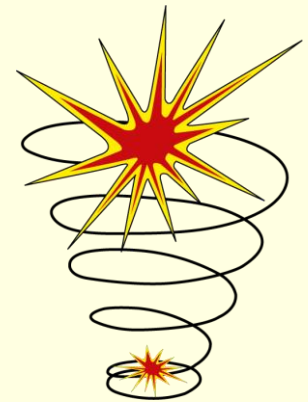
A partner who is verbally abusive

- If your partner verbally abuses you, your priority is to get them to withdraw the Permission [Part Three, Step Three] they have given themselves to be abusive.
- If it's safe, take on the storm that may follow and put your hand up in a stop signal.
- Tell them, 'Stop! I am not putting up with that'. Refuse to continue the exchange until they adapt a more acceptable tone.
- Think carefully before walking out of the room since this can enrage the other person and result in more extreme behaviour.



If you can't make Constructive Discussion work for you

- Sometimes, the issue/s are too difficult to discuss successfully without professional support and trying to discuss them without help is inadvisable.
- If you try Constructive Discussion a few times and it doesn't work for you, you need professional help, otherwise the inability to discuss things calmly probably means there's little hope for the relationship long term.



The Constructive Discussion 'Contract' should include the following.....

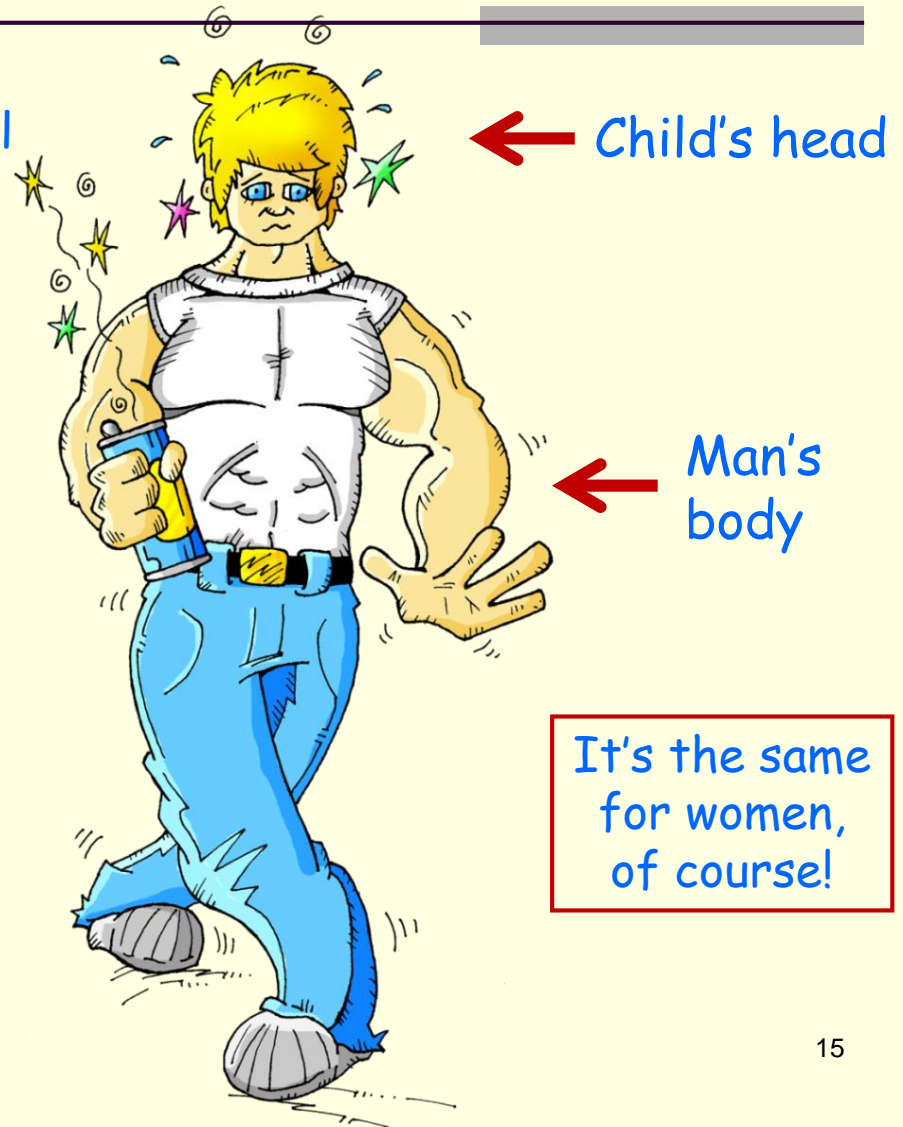
1. Agreed starting time and duration
2. The issue/s for discussion fixed in advance.
3. No additional issues may be introduced during the meeting.
4. Location is a place where you will not be interrupted.
5. TV and mobiles switched off.
6. House line ignored if it rings.
7. No abuse or shouting.
8. Both remain seated throughout.
9. No alcohol prior to or during discussion.
10. Time Out Agreement [See later]
11. Uninterrupted Speaking Time Agreement [See later]

Don't drink alcohol when there are issues to discuss

When we drink much, our rational common sense head is replaced by our Child head or Critical Parent head.

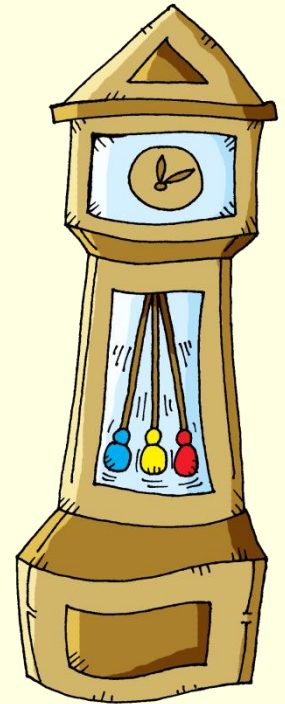
If we are holding unresolved anger or hurt, it will come out, often with destructive consequences.

Save discussion of issues for when you are alcohol free.



Advance agreement of a 'Time Out' clause is essential

- The Constructive Discussion 'contract' should have a 'TIME OUT' clause. This allows either party to withdraw from the discussion for a cooling off period of minutes, hours, even days.
- When 'TIME OUT' is used, it's conditional on the party requesting the 'TIME OUT' to agree when the discussion is to be continued. It mustn't be used to avoid discussing issues, only to allow a cooling off period.
- The 'TIME OUT' period can be used to release anger and frustration using one of the methods from Part 9.



Unless it's unsafe, stay in the room with your angry partner

- Take care before deciding to walk out of the room when your partner is angry.
- *When someone is angry their need is to feel heard.* Leaving the room can increase their frustration level and may provoke more extreme behaviour.
- It's a really good idea to allow a cooling off period with an agreed 'Time Out', but leaving the room when it's not OK with the other person for you to walk away, can be really frustrating for them and increase the spiral of anger.



Uninterrupted speaking time

- A key feature of a Constructive Discussion is 'Uninterrupted Speaking Time'. It means just that! Absolutely no interruptions of any kind. Questions and clarifications should be saved until the person has completed their agreed speaking time without interruption.
- Speaking time should be in equal amounts of say, five or ten minutes at a time each. If you or your partner don't use all your time, the other still gets the time agreed.
- Have a pen and a rule that whoever's turn it is to speak holds the pen and may not be interrupted during their allocated time.



Ban these wind up words!

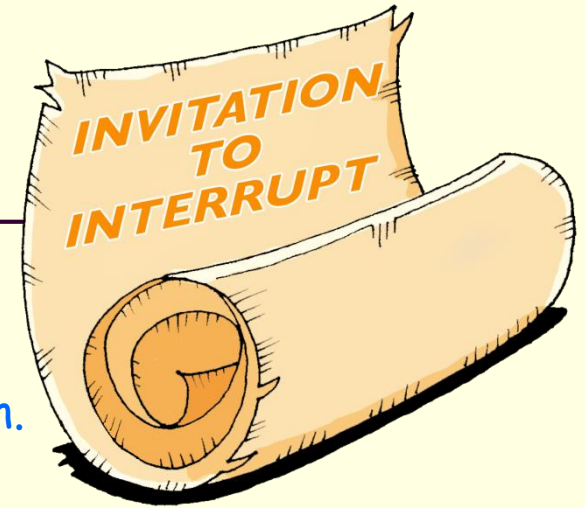
- You started it....No I didn't, you did!
- It's your fault - if you hadn't.....
- You need talk - how about when.....
- You always....you never.....
- Yes you did..... no I didn't!
- You saidno I didn't
- My life's harder than yours no it isn't
- The trouble with you is...

There are special words too - words which you have used to hurt each other in the past. It would be helpful to make a list of special hurtful words you agree to avoid using in future.



These expressions keep dialogue in a blaming loop which blocks constructive communication.

Don't invite interruption



The biggest problem with an Uninterrupted Speaking Time agreement is that the person who is speaking doesn't resist inviting interruption.

This is what happens:

1. Person A has started their agreed five minutes uninterrupted speaking time, when Person B pulls a face or shakes their head at something which has been said.
2. Person A stops talking and reacts with - 'What, why are you shaking your head, you know what I am saying is right!'
3. Person B accepts the 'invitation' to interrupt and starts off on their own stuff. Uninterrupted speaking time has broken down!

Expect your partner's body language to signal disagreement with what you are saying. Don't let it throw you off track: finish what you want to say.

Negotiate for what you want

- There are many times when you can't both have what you want because what you want and what your partners want's are mutually exclusive e.g.
She: 'I want us to take the kids out this Sunday'
He : 'I've had a tough week and I want to play golf'.
Somebody is not going to get what they want!

Learn to negotiate for a consolation prize.

'OK. You play golf, we'll take the kids out next week and you buy me dinner on Wednesday'.

- If you can't have what you want what would be a consolation prize? Or what consolation prize can you offer your partner so you get what you want.

If you can't agree about something, agree to disagree and move on

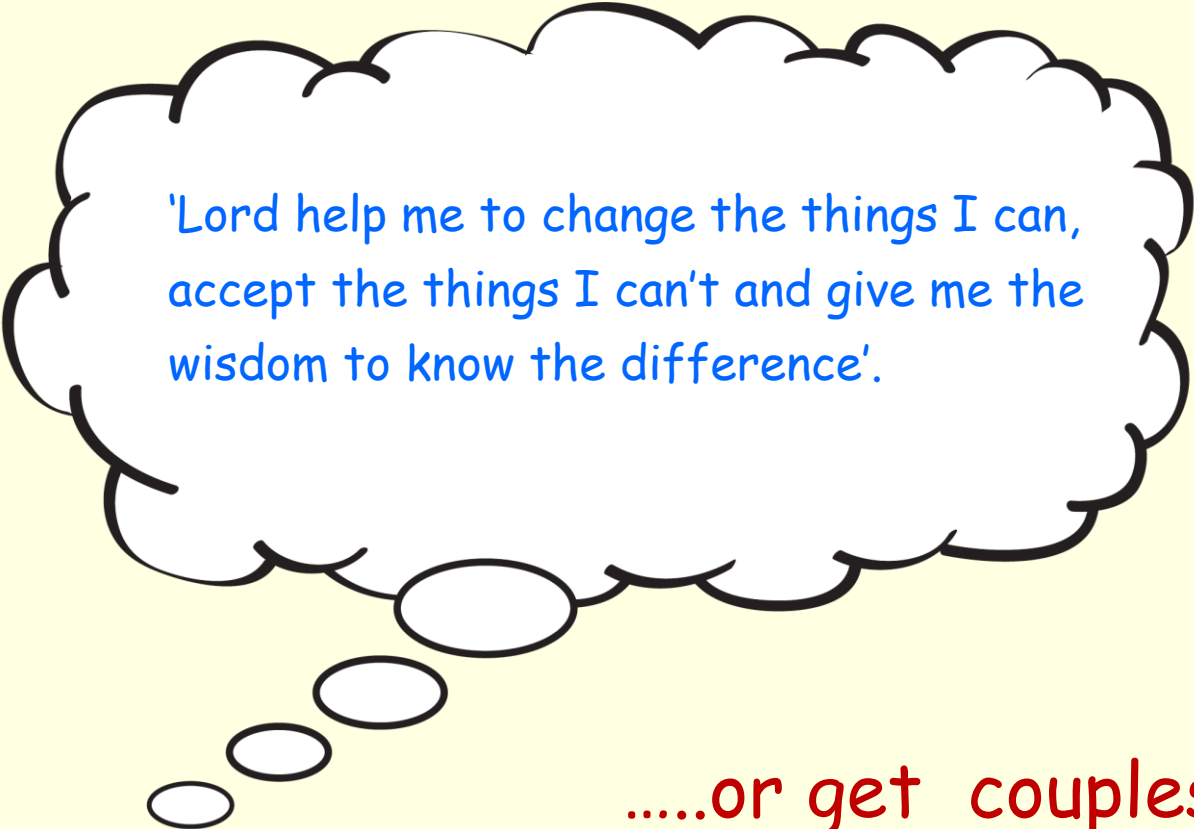
- Don't try to win arguments: a relationship isn't a tennis match, it's a life journey together. Winners make losers. Losers look for chances to get even.
- Arguing usually doesn't usually change anything for the better. Each person strengthens their attack/defence as they try to win. Both finish up even more convinced than ever that they are right and even more afraid to lose face after arguing so strongly.
- Trying to get someone to change their position by arguing is like trying to get a sharp stick out of the ground by pushing down on it! It just gets more embedded.



Other things which will help

- Avoid expressing opinions which are criticisms: stick to your version of the facts.
- A big block to effective listening is thinking about your response while your partner is still talking. Have a pen and paper handy and jot down bullet points to remind you what to come back to.
- If your partner's body language is telling you he/she is not listening, draw attention to it and sort that out first. Try to get them to maintain eye contact with you.

Don't keep battering away at things which aren't going to change! Accept what you can't change, or quit....



'Lord help me to change the things I can,
accept the things I can't and give me the
wisdom to know the difference'.

.....or get couples
counselling