

Couples Issues

Fair feud? 6 issues couples should argue about

Most couples argue at some point, and many experts agree it can be a positive thing — but how you argue and what you argue about could make the difference between building a healthy relationship and one that's headed for divorce. How does one know which arguments are important and will help strengthen a relationship?

A lot of couples fight some. Some couples fight a lot. But almost all couples fight over the same three things: money, chores and how much time the two of them spend together. Problem is, most of us wind up having these same arguments over and over again. In part, that's because these three issues are hot buttons for almost everyone, pure stressors that speak to our sense of love and fairness.

But as you've no doubt discovered, seldom are these issues really resolved. If you find yourselves going back to the same problems the way some celebs go back to rehab — lots of emotional turmoil, but little actual progress — there are arguments that really are worth having — arguments that will strengthen your relationship and increase your overall happiness. So, what *should* you be arguing about?

Sex

Why? Because each of you should be looking to make your sex life new/better/great/bed-shaking. And the only way you'll get there is by having an open conversation, even if it feels more uncomfortable than a transatlantic coach airline seat. You should tell the other person what you want.

In "Men's Health" surveys of more than 2,000 men and women, 35 percent of women and 40 percent of men say they're not having enough spontaneous sex. Research shows that the female snuggle impulse is also her aphrodisiac, so men, take an honest look at your attempts at intimacy. Find out what intimacy means to each other, then provide it. Because when you stop arguing about sex, you stop having sex.

Raising the kids

As long as you don't argue (or hurl produce) in front of the kids. Happily married couples tend to make the best parents, but happily divorced parents aren't far behind, according to researchers at the NIH. While there's a lot of choice in how you decide to punish, reward and set boundaries, the most important part is being each other's support system and being jointly involved.

Studies suggest that children whose parents are "highly involved" in their school-related activities perform better academically. Unfortunately, in many couples, either dad or mom sets the rules. One parent is the primary caregiver — even if both parents work (there are 105,000 stay-at-home dads and 5.2 million stay-at-home moms in this country — but Bureau of Labor statistics show that one in three working women now cash bigger paychecks than their husbands do). If both of you are deeply invested in how the kids are raised, you're going to fight about things like time-outs, toys, curfews, hair styles, clothes choices, and the best way to make your daughter's first date sweat. But that's OK — it means you're both dedicated to the same goal.

Retirement

You know you need to be financially prepared to retire, but you need something else: You need to be *emotionally* prepared. Most couples aren't. Your partner's vision of retirement may be a cabin in the woods; yours, a retirement community with unlimited Bunco. She/he may want to stick close to the grandkids; you might want to hop the first flight to Europe the minute work ends.

So fight it out: Arguing about it forces you to plan. And it's not just how to retire, but when to retire, that invites a fight. According to a Fidelity Investments study, one-third of workers are forced to postpone retirement because they haven't saved enough money.

Your health

Except for ladder falls, errant nail-gun incidents and other accidents, the average man won't see a doctor between his last high school physical and his first heart attack (on the plus side, that does save the need to argue about retirement).

But it's worth nagging your partner to get active — and get screened for preventable diseases. Rates of melanoma, the easiest cancer to prevent and detect, have nearly doubled over the past decade, and the Skin Cancer Foundation estimates that one in every 50 Americans will have melanoma within the next five

years. What's more, the risk of diabetes rises with age and doubles after 40, and the risk of cardiovascular disease rises as well. However, high-risk diabetes candidates can cut their risk by 58 percent by changing their diets and exercise, and LDL cholesterol responds remarkably well to those lifestyle changes. Bickering about regularly getting to the doctor — and the gym — can prolong your life.

Working overtime

In a society where working a lot has as much value and esteem as an iAnything, it's no surprise that many of us have trouble balancing between work and home. But you've got to let your partner know when you're feeling neglected, before you're both more bitter than a lemon peel.

An Australian study found that those who had stressful jobs were more likely than others to suffer from anxiety and poor health. And coming home stressed from work makes you more likely to blow up at your kids and lash out at your spouse. Be aware of how you spend your time at the office, and cut the nonsense, like obsessively checking e-mail or surfing the Web. The more efficient you are from 9 to 5, the more you'll get done, and the less of a problem it'll be to leave at 5:15. Then undo the day's damage: Research shows that 10 minutes of hand-holding and a 20-second hug from your spouse can lessen the damaging effects of stress.

How you listen to each other

Ninety-three percent of couples who fight dirty will be separated in 10 years, according to marital researchers at the University of Utah. So while arguing can be a healthy means of expressing your feelings, unreasonable yelling and non-constructive criticism won't get you anywhere. Except in court.

What's more, one-sided arguments can harm your heart: According to a University of Utah study, after 150 healthy couples discussed a contentious topic — family, money, chores and so forth — for six minutes, those who were on the receiving end of a domineering, one-sided argument experienced a significant (and lasting) hardening of their coronary arteries. Countering your partner's bickering with your own complaints won't work. Instead, be aware of your trigger points and your own unhealthy responses and the way you interact during these arguments provides an opportunity for your relationship to grow.

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