

Handling Disagreements in a Healthy Way

What to Know

Arguments do not have to be unpleasant events that escalate where one person is right, and one is wrong. In fact, healthy disagreements present opportunities for your relationships (and your communication skills) to become stronger.

How you argue and handle disagreements can either strengthen or weaken your relationships. “One-upping” others, controlling conversations, pushing your points of view, or always having to be right tends to erode relationships. What else do unhealthy arguments involve?

- Both people feel defeated or unheard.
- There is defensiveness, yelling, and accusations.
- There are a lot of “you” statements.
- Both people talk in circles.
- There’s clear intent to cause pain or hurt the other person.
- Neither person is listening.
- Blame always lies with the other person.
- No one takes responsibility.
- There are threats or emotional abuse.

Healthy disagreements can be productive. Here are tips to have a healthy argument.

Get curious. Ask yourself the following questions:

- Have you had this argument in the past? Why do you keep having the same argument?
- What is the other person feeling?
- How are you feeling?

Understanding what went wrong that led to an escalation can help you avoid it in the future.

Plan time to talk. When there is conflict or a disagreement, schedule time to discuss your grievances with the other person. It’s best to avoid discussing the issue after an exhausting and stressful workday. If you schedule time, you can both prepare yourselves for a respectful and honest conversation. You can gather your thoughts and present them in a considerate and caring way. In the heat of the moment – or when you’re tired, hungry, or stressed out – you might say things you don’t mean.

Use active listening. Fully digest and understand what the other person is saying. When having a disagreement, listen and paraphrase what the other person said. Ask for clarification, and really *listen*. Use open body language and maintain appropriate eye contact.

Replace complaints with requests. Be constructive rather than destructive. Re-phrase what you say in a respectful and caring tone.

Take a timeout. If your emotions get the best of you, recognize when it happens and remove yourself from the situation. Excuse yourself and set a time when you will talk again. Do the following during your timeout.

1. Write out the things you want to say to get the frustration and anger out.
2. Write down how you could have done better in this situation.
3. Come up with three solutions to the disagreement, which you will present once you have calmed down.

This worksheet will help you handle a disagreement in a healthy way.

What to Do

The next time you have a disagreement with a family member, friend, partner, or co-worker, complete the following steps.

Describe the disagreement or argument.

Have you had this argument in the past? _____ If yes, why do you keep having the same argument?

What is the other person feeling? How can you tell?

How are you feeling?

Do you understand what went wrong and why the disagreement escalated? Explain.

Brainstorm some possible solutions.

Schedule time to discuss your grievances with the other person. When will you do it? Where?

Do you need a neutral third person or mediator to be involved? _____ If yes, who might that be?

What are some ways you can actively listen to the other person's point of view and perspective? Be specific.

What are your complaints? Re-phrase to make them requests.

Complaint #1 _____

Request _____

Complaint #2 _____

Request _____

Complaint #3 _____

Request _____

After you have the scheduled discussion to discuss the disagreement, describe what happened.

Did you take a timeout? _____ Why? Explain.

What could you have done differently in this situation?

Reflections on This Exercise

How helpful was this exercise? _____

(1 = not very helpful, 5 = moderately helpful, 10 = extremely helpful)

What did you learn from this exercise?
