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Effective arguing 101: Disagree without being disagreeable

By SHERRIE PENSIERO

During a recent rerun of "Everybody Loves Raymond," Ray advised his brother to roll over and play dead rather than to argue with his wife. Thinking that was good advice, I decided to research some effective ways to win an argument. When I mentioned the topic to my husband, he quipped that I really didn't have to do much research. Whatever. (See definition below.)

Arguing over trivial matters with a mate, friend, relative, or boss can set the stage for chronic fighting, which is exhausting. That's not to suggest that you should roll over and play dead, nor should you give up your "self" in the process of trying to please the other person.

"Nothing defuses a petty argument faster than humor," claims Stacy D. Phillips, a certified family law specialist and author. Making light of the pettiness will help you find the absurdity of your situation. Humor is essential in any relationship, but don't use humor - or what you perceive as humorous - to devalue what your mate is feeling.

Phillips offers the following tips for effective arguing in any relationship:

1. Don't taunt: Avoid the temptation to do or say those things that you know irritate the other person like constant teasing, eye-rolling, or smirking.
2. Change the subject: If it appears you're going down that familiar trail of bickering, ambush the conversation by jumping in with a comment on a more pleasant topic. (Not your mother-in-law.)
3. Stick to your agreements: If you say you will be on time, do it. Flaking on a small agreement can escalate into something bigger.
4. Hold your tongue: Though you may want to blurt out a criticism or a snide remark, restrain yourself. If you can't say something nice, say nothing.
5. Don't engage: It takes two to tango, so if you refuse to play the bickering game, he/she will have to look elsewhere to argue.
6. Forget about being right: It's irritating to count on someone for something and not have them come through. But save the "I'm right and you're wrong" for the big stuff.
7. Forget the tit for tat: It's a natural response to want to get even with those who hurt your feelings or make you mad, but leveling the playing field does nothing for your relationship.
8. If it's not a deal-breaker, let it go: Sometimes we get mired in petty things when it's better to roll with them. Ask yourself if your argument is worth the demise of your relationship.
9. Find another outlet for venting: Many arguments are a result of one person unloading on another because he/she has had a bad day. Take up boxing, get on the treadmill, run like Forrest Gump, but do not take out your bad day on someone else.

Now, I agree that these are great tips for any relationship, but in all fairness, I want to give the men in the reading audience some advice on what to do if they hear any of the following terminology from their women during an argument:

1. Fine: This is the word women use to end an argument when they are right and you need to shut up.
2. Nothing: This is the calm before the storm, and you should be on your toes. Arguments that begin with "nothing" usually end in "fine."
3. Loud sigh: A non-verbal statement that means she thinks you're an idiot and wonders why she is wasting her time arguing with you about "nothing." (See No. 2.)
4. Go ahead: This is a dare, not permission. Don't do it.
5. That's OK: One of the most dangerous statements a woman can make to a man. It means she wants to think long and hard before deciding how and when you will pay for your mistake.
6. Whatever: The frying pan is soaring. (See intro.)

In conclusion, if you find yourself in a precarious position, take a hint from the guy in the Cheerios commercial - the best ad to hit the small screen in years:

A wife is eating cereal when her husband asks, "Are you trying to watch your weight?" to which the wife replies, "No, do I need to watch my weight?" The husband - sensing that he's headed for trouble - answers, "No, it's just that the box says 110 calories, low-fat and high fiber." The wife glares at him and asks, "What else does the box say?" and the husband replies, "The box says 'Shut up, Steve.'"

Extremely smart man. Wonder where he lives?

(A former educator, Sherrie is the co-owner of Old Broads Unlimited and co-author of "Self-Esteem for Old Broads." The book is available on www.amazon.com. She develops seminars on self-esteem for women. She may be contacted at sherpensiero@yahoo.com.)



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