

How Words Can Ease Marital Stress

Learn what to say - and what not to say - for a healthy marriage.

:: By Polly Campbell

When my husband forgot to follow up on the life insurance, I was ticked. It was the third time he'd put it off and I'd had enough of his procrastination.

"You never follow through," I said, not long after he got home from work. Not my best move.

With that single, ill-formed sentence, our minor disagreement veered wildly off course into an argument that left us both feeling hurt and stressed - and still without life insurance.

Think before you speak

I could have - should have - followed a different script and probably averted the argument altogether. Certainly, better communication would have lowered the [stress level](#) for both of us and made it easier to solve the issue at hand. Instead, we spent a lot of time that evening arguing and apologizing and debating how we could improve our communication. We never did get to the question of the life insurance.

Disagreements and frustrations like this one are bound to erupt in any close relationship, but experts say careful word choices can lower the stress couples feel during a conflict.

In one study, couples who used words such as “think,” “reason,” “because,” “understand,” “why,” and other analytical words during an argument experienced lower levels of cytokines, the proteins produced by cells that help aid the body’s [immune system](#). Cytokine levels usually peak during periods of high stress and can increase your risk of [cardiovascular disease](#), [arthritis](#), [diabetes](#), and other serious health conditions. The research was led by Jennifer Graham, Ph.D., assistant professor of bio-behavioral health at Penn State University, and published in *Health Psychology*.

The men in the study actually experienced greater benefit than women, but women tended to use more of the cognitive words that indicate people are thinking about the issue in a deep way, Graham says.

Words like “thoughtful and “understand” may help diffuse arguments and lower stress because they help us stay in our cognitive brain where we can communicate respectfully with each other and solve problems, says relationship expert Katie Hendricks, Ph.D, chief executive officer of The Hendricks Institute and co-author, along with her husband Gay Hendricks, of “Conscious Loving: The Journey to Co-Commitment.”

Often, during an argument or disagreement, we tend to slip into our territorial or “lizard” brains and experience the fight-or-flight emotions and behaviors that leave us feeling defensive and more combative, Hendricks says. A careful choice of words could eliminate that edgy feeling between partners and allow people to work on more important matters.

“The big payoff is that you spend less and less time in repetitive patterns that never seem to resolve the big issue,” Hendricks says.

Phrases that can impact a relationship

Words can hurt, or they can inspire, encourage and uplift. Even a well-placed pause can shift the tenor of the argument or conversation toward a more productive place that leaves both people feeling better, Hendricks says. Next time your disagreement is veering toward volatility, try these two phrases to shift the energy - instantly.

1. “I wonder.” This causes people to ponder the issue at hand instead of blame each other.
2. “Hmmm.” This sound, the soft hum and release of air, actually changes our physiology, Hendricks says. “It’s impossible to say ‘hmmm’ and be critical.” And in that moment, a shift can occur and move the conversation in a more positive

direction.

Although your relationship may never be free from disagreement - after all, people are bound to think differently - it is possible to have an [argument-free marriage](#), Hendricks says. One way to do it is to stay away from trigger words and phrases that tend to assign blame and promote defensiveness, making it hard to have a productive conversation about anything. Trigger phrases include “You always...,” “You never...,” and “There you go again.”

Managing disagreements

While the words you choose are essential to managing discord, they account for only about 10 percent of our communication experience, Hendricks said. These other tips can help peace prevail in a relationship despite differences.

Be aware of nuance, tone and body language. Sarcasm, contempt and aggressive gestures can derail even the best discussion. Pay attention to how you communicate when you’re not speaking.

Take a trigger inventory. When you’re not fighting or angry, sit down with your partner and take a minute to discuss those things that fire you up or make you mad. Listen carefully to what your partner says. For example, I know my husband has a problem with raised voices. A loud voice triggers some unpleasant childhood memories and puts him on the defensive even when the words aren’t threatening. I’ve learned how to lower my tone and communicate my message softly. As a result, he feels safer and more willing to discuss the big issues.

Breathe. When you feel the disagreement is headed for a pothole, slow down and take a deep breath. When we’re mad, we tend to breathe from our chest at a rate faster than 12 breaths a minute. Slow that down by paying attention to your breath and breathing from your belly. In the few seconds it takes you to change your breathing, you can also shift the conversation into a more peaceful, productive mode.


Practice, practice, practice. This kind of conflict management is not a skill that people are born with, Hendricks says. But, it is one we can learn to the benefit of any relationship. Practice appreciating rather than complaining. Work to become aware, not only of what you’re feeling, but of what your partner is experiencing as well.

“People can actually build their vocabulary and their skills,” Hendricks says. “At first you won’t succeed, but it’s an ongoing practice.”

And it's worth the work, she says. "By speaking unarguably, you get to know your partner better. You discover how you can work together. That takes you to a better class of problem so that over time it actually allows you to take on more interesting problems, and you can support each other and really be creative in how you live.

"You create an appreciation for each other and for learning how to take healthy responsibility for your actions and see your partner as your ally."

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