

Difficult conversations – when people disagree



THE DOCTOR IS IN
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We all wince at the thought of having a difficult conversation with someone we love, especially when our viewpoint and theirs are diametrically opposed.

When couples come into my office saying that they rarely argue and yet are barely speaking with each other, they are likely “checked out” of the relationship, and I am far more concerned than when I see couples who fight.

All couples disagree, and conflict is inevitable within any marriage. How these disagreements get resolved and what toll they take on the relationship is what’s important. A healthy couple are not in competition with one another, but rather work together on the same team to resolve issues with honesty, caring and respect.

Given that all couples fight, what types of fights do they have?

First, there are the solvable problems – these fights usually require finding a way to hear and support each other and compromise in a way both can live with. Examples include the early riser who tries to have a discussion with the night owl at 6 a.m. and gets ignored, or the night hawk whose amorous passes at the early bird get rebuffed at midnight; one prefers the toilet seat up, and the other down.

Assuming there is a desire to work together, most couples acknowledge these differences, figure out how to live with the other person’s lifestyle preferences and quirks, and make the relationship work. These are the resolvable fights and compromise is generally the number one solution.

John Gottman, a well-known couple’s therapist and researcher, says that 69 percent of all disagreements are not solvable. When couples have the same fight over and over again, something is often getting in the way of resolving the issue. Often helping couples to rewrite the script, to act more compassionately, be more emotionally available by finding and making time to listen, allows each one to feel heard and validated in an empathetic way. This can lead to good will and a desire to be there for each other even when they may fundamentally disagree.

Many of these problems are perpetual or ongoing. With no two individuals being alike, there are bound to be differences in belief systems as a function of upbringing, personality and other influencing factors. There may be clashes in parenting style, spending habits, religious values and so much more. These may bug you to no end, and with you each having your own way of doing things that may be downright annoying, but you learn to live with these silly bickering fights and move on.

So, whether it is an issue about your constantly being on your phone, your partner’s super-high stress level, or how and when to discipline the kids, these issues will require great flexibility and understanding on both your parts in order to find a suitable compromise. It is at times like this in my office that I take out my magic wand and have couples create a mutual vision statement so they can work together to find ways to implement the values that each feel are important.

LIFE HOWEVER becomes much more difficult when these perpetual problems cannot be resolved at all, and the result is gridlock. Usually, the problematic issues are not how do Miss Neat and Mr. Messy live together, but rather much more serious issues involving a clash of value systems and core beliefs.

Do we make aliyah or not? Do we get married or live together? Do we get married if I’m religious and you are secular, and how do we raise the kids? Do we both have to vaccinate so that we can socialize and travel together, even if I’m not high-risk

and am fundamentally against this vaccination for me? Do we have to vaccinate our 5-year-old? Do we have (any or more) children when I am happy with the status quo?

There is no shortage of examples of these complicated issues which have no clear, simple, single answers. A “yes” or “no” answer often leaves one person happy and the other potentially angry or miserable, one a winner and the other a loser, but are there other possibilities?

Even if you are madly in love with your partner, value their positives and appreciate your relationship, can you find parts of these “irreconcilable” beliefs that you have in common? Are the positives good enough to enable you to live with an “agree to disagree” situation where there is no real solution? Can you work toward trying to understand and honor the core values, deeper meaning and perhaps un-

fulfilled childhood dreams, or at least some of the requests of your partner that influence his perspective? Do you even want to?

If yes, you’ll need to understand the passion of someone choosing a religious or secular lifestyle, living in Israel, having a child, feeling their concerns about the pressure, fears and risks to vaccinate or not, and see how these all play out for you as a couple, or when the best interests of your child may be in conflict. Only you can decide what you can be open minded and flexible about, and what’s an absolute red line and worth losing your partner for.

Will one of you choose to bend even temporarily if everything else is perfect, or will it ultimately be the nonnegotiable deal-breaker? Even if you can’t reconcile the underlying belief systems, is there an action going forward on which you can agree?

If you have the right person in your life, you will have to decide whether your partner or the issue is worth fighting for.

How do you make it happen? If you sincerely want to work toward trying to make making your relationship better every day, here are some important guidelines:

- Set aside uninterrupted time and a place free from distractions and interruptions in order to discuss it.
- Be friends first. Always create a safe environment without attacking and remember that good communication and goodwill are essential.
- Pick your issues.
- Be patient and emotionally available – put your agenda aside, make eye contact, take a step back and truly listen attentively and with curiosity, caring and a desire to really understand your partner’s perspective. Don’t interrupt or plan your rebuttal.
- Reframe what you heard to ensure that you understand what your partner said.
- In order to hear each other you must remain calm. If you get triggered, stop the discussion and set a time when you can go back to it. If your partner feels threatened, they’ll respond with anger or fear and leave the argument, emotionally or physically. Take a time-out to allow your nervous system to settle down.
- Look for areas of agreement and ways to validate your partner’s ideals and honor his or her dreams. Focus on the positives.
- Things said in anger are not easily forgotten. Be intentional, not reactive, in how you respond.
- Talk to your partner with the respect that you’d like to receive. No name calling, shaming or blaming, nagging or pressure.
- Professional couples counseling is a good idea at any stage of a relationship, both for those with problems and those choosing to strengthen an already healthy relationship. ■

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YOU HAVE to decide whether your partner or the issue is worth fighting for. (Priscilla Du Preez/Unsplash)