

## How To De-Escalate An Argument

By Peggy L. Ferguson, Ph.D.

Many couples get into a dysfunctional pattern of conflict escalation and withdrawal as they attempt to discuss the problems and issues in their life. Each unsuccessful attempt to solve the identified problem sets the tone for the next time that they attempt to resolve the issue. Unresolved issues tend to be self-perpetuating and can persist over decades.

A common pattern is where a couple identifies some relationship issue or problem to discuss and starts talking. They begin to get upset, bring out the [dirty fight tactics](#), and the argument is "on". They eventually de-escalate (after having said hateful things to each other) with one leaving the scene, and the other furious over the partner's refusal to stay and "fight". The next time they are discussing some conflict, even an innocuous subject, the old unresolved issue comes back with a vengeance, and they pick up where they left off. It's like putting a comma in the discussion when they withdraw to de-escalate. Subsequent arguments involve returning to the comma to resume the same old ten year old argument. Nothing really gets resolved.

It really is possible however, to actually resolve the issues that separate you. To do so, you have to develop an emotional environment that feels "safe" to both parties. Since you cannot make your partner change, your energies are best spent by being responsible for your own communication behavior.

A safe environment is one that keeps the emotions at a manageable level. It is not possible to problem solve when your adrenaline and compulsion to be understood overwhelms your ability to listen. Defenses take over and neither party is able to "hear" what the other person is saying. [Problem solving](#) involves a "give and take" proposition, where each person feels safe to share their perception and feelings, and to know that they have been heard. It may take some time and some practice to replace old dysfunctional communication patterns, but it can be done by using good communication behaviors such as ["I" messages](#) vs. "You" messages, using a basic problem solving model, and de-escalating the discussion as needed. A basic problem solving model (Steps to Fair Fighting) are discussed in my other articles.

Many couples find that they have been looking at each other through "angry colored glasses" for such a long time, that they have to make several attempts using fair fight tactics to resolve even the simplest of conflicts, and with the help of de-escalation techniques, they are eventually able to be successful. Below is a list of de-escalation techniques that many couples find helpful.

1. Stick to one problem at a time.
2. Return to the problem that has been identified.
3. Use well placed ["I" statements](#) in stead of "You" statements.
4. Remind yourself of the goal of the conversation - do you want to solve a problem? Ask yourself if your communication behavior is conducive to solving a problem? If not, re-group and change tactics to accomplish your goal.

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5. Seek to understand your spouse's point of view rather than compulsively explaining your own.
6. Agree to disagree on the details. Any two people will view the same events differently, so they will often not agree on how something happened, what was said, etc. It is not necessary to agree on how an issue or problem came about, in order to solve it.
7. Monitor your physiological responses. Relax your body. Take some breaths.
8. Make sure that what you heard was what s/he said. Use reflective listening with "what I hear you saying is...".
9. Control your own responses regardless of what your spouse is doing. You don't have to say everything you think or feel in the moment. If it is not helpful to problem solving, don't say it.
10. Appropriate use of humor can de-escalate a discussion. If you typically use humor to distract to keep from dealing with conflicts, don't use it for de-escalation. It can have the opposite effect.
11. Take a time out, with an agreed-upon time back in. If you have a history of leaving the scene of the argument and never getting back to problem solving, a "time-out" will typically be viewed as more of the same unless you have an agreed upon time back in and follow through with it.

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