

# Three Ways to Make Difficult Conversations Productive

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## Let's Get Uncomfortable.

Arguing with the person you love is scary: Conflict isn't fun; fighting is emotionally draining; and typically, at least one person is left feeling hurt, angry, or confused.

The fear of creating conflict is one of the most powerful concerns for couples to overcome, which is why we often avoid difficult conversations. We procrastinate. We make excuses. We stuff it all down, deep inside, and convince ourselves that everything will be okay, preferring to keep the door slammed shut on our vulnerability, because it's easier than admitting we made a mistake. Worse, conflict could lead to hurting our partner, disrupting our own happiness, or being forced to admit that our sought-after relationship might not have what it takes to make it.

The reality is, however, we won't always see eye-to-eye with those we love. And that's exactly why the health of your long-term partnership depends on your ability to successfully master the skill (and art) of what we call "productive disagreement."

### **Time for a Reframe.**

Productive disagreement (when done right) can strengthen your relationship in two big ways: by challenging each of you to see the other's side, and forcing you to solve the problem...together. It allows you to voice your opinion freely, which then fosters trust and respect for the other's perspective. Productive disagreement is never about "winning" or proving that one of you is absolutely right; it's about growing your combined strength and knowledge of one another through learning and understanding.

(Sounds good, right?)

Productive disagreement takes some preparation and practice. Here are three essentials to making any crucial conversation (even a disagreement) a productive one.

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## **Trust**

To whittle down topics enough to get the honest answers you're looking for, you need trust. Foster it by creating an emotionally safe place where your partner can open up about touchy topics. If they do open up, don't shut them down with sarcasm, defensiveness or by being argumentative. Make them feel respected and listened to...otherwise, you'll undermine what's supposed to be an enriching process and, instead, will have an uphill battle toward revelation.

### **Pro Tip: Ask your partner to give you the same respect.**

Now: If you've got some work to do in the trust department—if your trust in each other has been tested, or if you've got some work to do in this area—you'll have to address that very foundational piece, first. Rebuilding trust is complex and takes work on both sides, so we'll save that topic for another time. But if you're confident that you and your partner share deep trust, continue on.

## Timing

There's a right and a wrong way to bring up difficult topics, so your approach to *timing* your talk will dramatically affect the *quality* of your talk. Patience is important here (and so is recognizing when patience becomes avoidance). If one partner isn't ready to talk deeply, they may be less than honest and even blame you for putting them in an uncomfortable situation. Pay attention to cues, and do your best to balance their needs and yours.

How can you set yourself up for success?

- Give your partner an advanced heads-up that you'd like to have an important but potentially potent conversation with them, as well as an idea of what the topic is, and when you'd like to talk about it. If you're nervous, say so: People naturally want to put others at ease when they are in distress, and so showing some vulnerability will trigger their empathy and lower their defenses.
- Assure your partner about your intentions and goals for the conversation, so you don't inadvertently build their anxiety and defenses. Acknowledge that it's a tough topic for you to bring up...but that addressing the problem together will lead the best possible outcome.
- Pick the right setting and time of day to talk (...because hitting them with emotion-filled frustrations when they walk in from a long workday won't net the result that you want).
- Always talk BEFORE you reach your own boiling point. Last thing you want, despite your best planning, is to burst into an emotional downpour of accusations.

Remember: It's you and them versus the problem...not you versus them.

## Truth

There are many degrees of lying, from the white ones to bombshells...but when it comes to having a productive disagreement, you can't afford to cut corners. In the face of discomfort, it's natural for our fight/flight/lie instincts to get triggered, which is why we have to commit to tell the truth—even if it is painful—or we won't get honest answers. So gear up, and prepare yourself to be 100 percent truthful.

Minimizing issues will only perpetuate the problem, and if you've set the stage properly, you'll be able to have a productive conversation that will actually address the problem instead of create new ones. We believe that you can say anything to anyone, as long as you say it nicely.

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### **Be Patient.**

Once you've gotten through what we hope was a productive disagreement, don't expect immediate relief. It's very likely that it will take them time to process (remember: you had time to prepare, they didn't) and if they're sad or hurt, they deserve time to work through their feelings.

**Pro Tip: Before finishing the discussion—and this goes for any time you have a crucial conversation with someone—ask what they need from you. Then, do your best to honor it (even if it's hard).**

In our experience, navigating crucial conversations using this trust-timing-truth method and learning how to productively disagree is a relationship skill you'll use again and again (and not just with your partner: This works with co-workers, parents and children, too). The more you use it, the more you'll learn to tailor it to your partner's needs, which will (hopefully) help your disagreements reach positive outcomes. You can even practice with small, inconsequential conversations, to get a sense of the flow and language that feels natural to you. They probably won't notice your mindful approach (and that's okay!). It'll give you confidence when the stakes are higher in more heated situations.

Disagreements are inevitable, but conflict doesn't have to be. Executing a productive conversation about a tough topic will undoubtedly strengthen your relationship by giving you the tools to overcome bumps in the road and come out stronger for it.