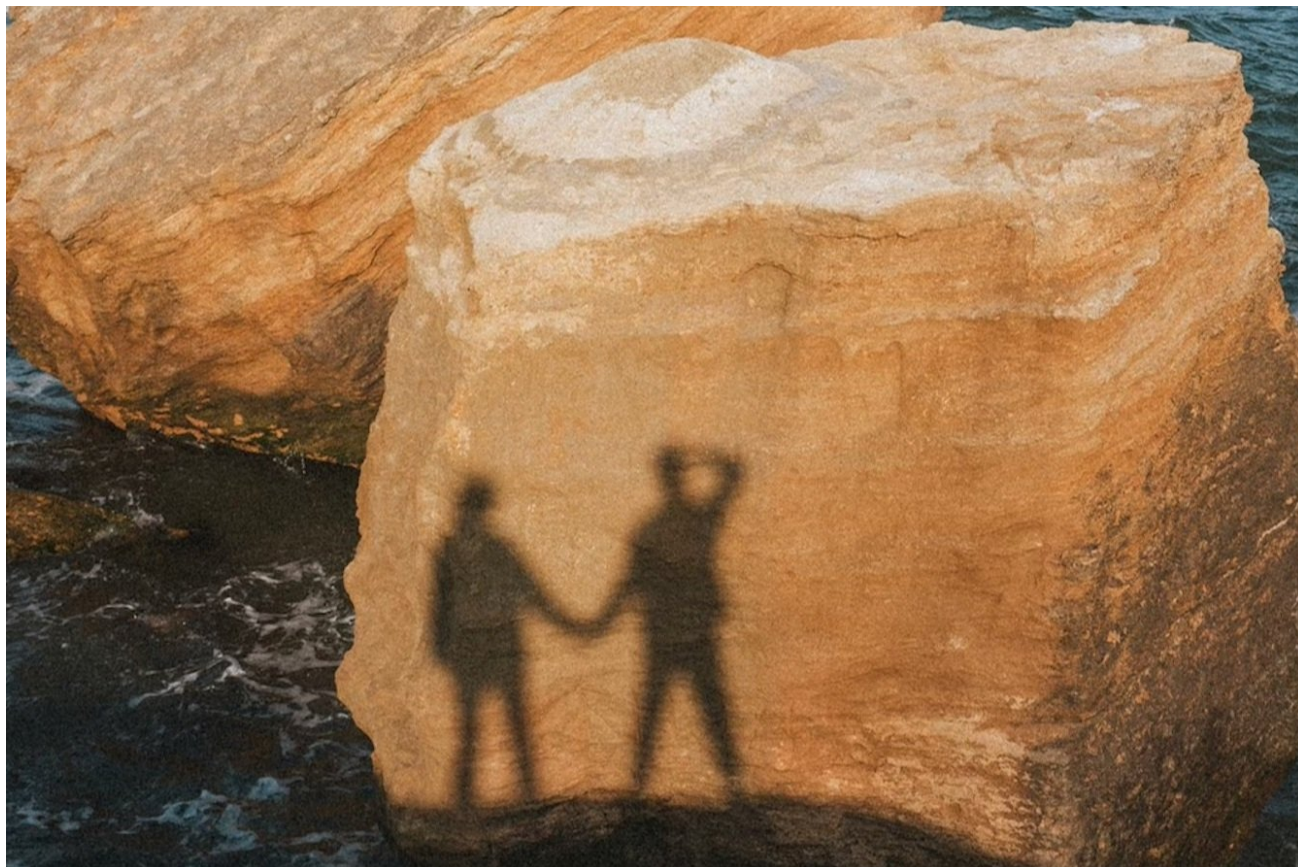


# Stop Doing This One Thing When You Fight With Your Partner

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by **Marissa Pomerance**

There's something we all do when we fight with our partner that's so common, we don't even notice we're doing it. But it's making our fights worse. It turns them into mind-numbing, circular squabbles that go nowhere.

Here it is: we spend the entire time debating over "facts."

See if this sounds familiar:

*You tell your partner you're frustrated that they leave their clothes strewn about the house, which makes you feel like their mother because you're constantly cleaning up after them. And they say, "well how often do I really DO that?" And you say, "you did it Tuesday, after you got home from work and left your jacket and sweatshirt on the couch!" And they say, "no, that was Monday, and I only left my jacket on the couch, NOT my*

*sweatshirt. And didn't I put them back later?" And you say, "yes, but only after I asked you to! I shouldn't have to tell you. It makes me feel like I'm managing you!" And they say, "there are plenty of times I clean up after you too, like throwing away your used Starbucks cups!" And then you say, "WHEN have you ever done that?"*

And on and on it goes.

So then you spend an hour debating over what was left where, and who cleaned up what, and neither of you walk away from the fight feeling seen or heard.

Why do we do this, why should we stop, and HOW do we stop? Let's discuss.

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### **Why we feel the need to engage in factual debates.**

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It's ok to want clear examples if our partner is mad at us; how can we properly address their assertion that we don't prioritize quality time together if we fundamentally disagree and don't understand how last week's movie night doesn't count? It's easier to correct our behavior when we know what we did wrong.

But there's a point where needing "information" and "examples" becomes counter-productive. And that point is when we hear their examples and information, and then find ways to disprove them and prove that WE are "right" and their understanding, perspective, or grievance is "wrong."

I get it—the compulsion to defend ourselves when we feel attacked is REAL. Taking responsibility for the way we hurt our partner, giving a real apology, trying to not be defensive are adult skills that take a lot of time and internal self-work to develop. Especially if we struggle with the need to be “right,” admitting to ourselves that we were in the wrong is one of the most hideous feelings on earth, so we’ll do whatever it takes to get rid of that shameful feeling. According to Gottman Institute certified Marriage & Family Therapist Elizabeth Earnshaw, “it’s incredibly uncomfortable to hear how we might be wrong or have hurt the other person, and when things are uncomfortable, humans tend to avoid them.”

Trying to listen, hear our partner’s criticism, and take it to heart, are even harder in a moment of conflict when we’re feeling emotionally flooded. “When people are in conflict, they start to be pumped full of stress hormones. Stress hormones make us lose our capacity for verbal reasoning, problem-solving, and curiosity,” says Earnshaw. “Instead, we become rigid and myopic—we lose the capacity for flexible thinking. Once we are in this place, it’s nearly impossible to find any resolution.”

Plus, for many of us, if our parents or caregivers modeled this behavior, then we were raised to believe this is the *only* way to fight.

### **Debating prevents us from really hearing our partners.**

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It’s not *just* that this kind of debate becomes mind-numbingly circular. When our entire fight becomes about establishing the facts and who’s right or wrong, we’ve completely lost the plot. We also lose our “relational focus. We become absorbed into our own self-narrative and have forgotten the reality that other perceptions exist,” says Earnshaw. “This means there is no room to learn more about your partner’s perspective. I have rarely seen it matter at all to establish facts. Does it really matter if your partner came in the door at 5:00 or 5:10?”

When we tell our husband that we’re tired of being the *only* one who handles our kids’ schooling, and they point out the 3 times they helped the kids with homework, they haven’t proved us wrong or made us feel better or “solved” the problem. The problem will just fester and get worse, because they’re not hearing the fundamental issue—which is that we need their help, and feel resentful for not getting more of it. Debate prevents us from being vulnerable enough to explore our core feelings or get to the root of which needs aren’t being met and why.

Don’t forget; the point of fighting with our partner isn’t to win. The point of fighting is to understand why someone is hurt or mad or frustrated, and figure out what can be done to fix it and prevent it from happening again. “As long as you focus on winning a debate with

your partner, you won't be able to win at life with your partner. You are less likely to come up with outcomes that consider both people,” Earnshaw explains.

## Here's what to *try* to do instead.

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If fighting has always meant arguing over facts, figuring out who's right or wrong, and crowning a victor, it's hard to imagine what a fight might look like *without* the factual debate.

What does it look like to just...stop? What adult skills do we need to continue to develop to even attempt to (*ugh*) put our own egos aside? Do we just like...*listen* and then...*apologize* and say we'll do better? What if we don't agree with our partner's contention that we steamroll them on important financial decisions, and need them to prove their point?

It may not be “easy,” but here are Earnshaw's suggestions for how to stop this circular debate, and how to make our fights more productive:

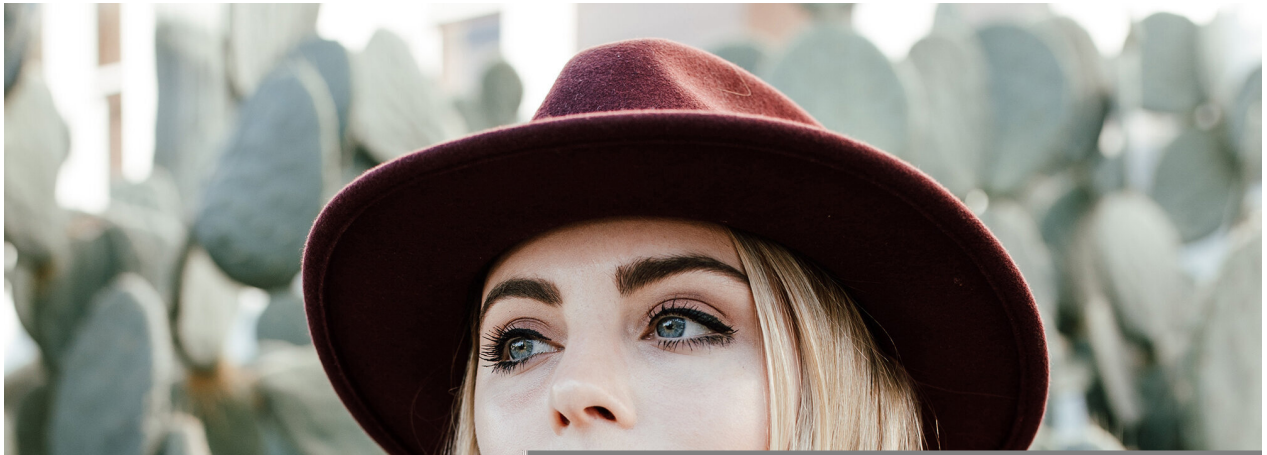
- 1. Give up the need to be “right”:** It's not about being right or wrong. Likely you are both right. And, at the end of the day, the facts don't matter as much as what you perceive the facts to be. Your perception of the facts influences how you feel and think, and that is what matters to discuss. Learn to slow down, be curious about what the other person experienced, and use this information to develop a plan for navigating differences better in the future.
- 2. Remember that you're on the same team:** When you start to develop a relational focus, you care about both people being winners--because of that, you lose the need to be right. You want the other person to feel understood just as much as you want them to understand. So learning how to live relationally is all about letting go of the need to be right.
- 3. Stop having an agenda:** Learning to listen means putting your own agenda to the side. Each time you think about your own points, opinions, and the corrections you want to make while the person is speaking, you aren't listening to hear. Instead, you are listening to react. Try to notice when you want to interrupt and imagine putting those interruptions in a basket beside you. You can bring up those thoughts and opinions when it's your turn. Don't begin to express your own perception until the other person can answer "yes" to the question "do you feel like I understand what you're saying?"

4. **Make your partner FEEL heard:** Repeat back what the other person said, challenge yourself to figure out what makes sense about what they are saying, and commit to helping them feel understood and cared about—that should be the ultimate goal.
5. **Change this dynamic yourself:** It takes two people to argue. Once one person stops engaging in that way, it changes the dynamic. You can't wait on others to change; you've got to change your own dysfunctional patterns once you notice them. Sometimes your partner will respond by changing the way they engage, and sometimes they won't. But either way, you've improved your own communication skills and can decide what to do moving forward.

Happy arguing!

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