

GAINING PERSPECTIVE ON AN ARGUMENT

Difficulty: **INTENSIVE** | Frequency: **3X/YEAR** | Duration: **15 MINS**



WHY YOU SHOULD TRY IT

Fighting and arguing can introduce a lot of negativity into romantic relationships, as one person’s criticisms and accusations may be met with defensiveness and angry retaliation. The quality of the relationship may decline, which can harm mental and physical health.

During arguments, some of our emotional pain comes from the evaluations we make about our partner’s behaviors and intentions—but these evaluations aren’t always correct. The technique of “emotional reappraisal” can help us reinterpret emotionally charged events in more accurate, positive, and constructive ways. For example, we might feel that a partner who cancels dinner repeatedly doesn’t respect us, but remind ourselves that he’s overburdened at work now and shows care and respect in other ways.

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Of course, we don’t want to use this practice to excuse or rationalize unacceptable behavior. But in the context of a generally healthy partnership, it can help lessen negative feelings, build connection and empathy, and ultimately improve the relationship.

TIME REQUIRED

15 minutes, several times a year for the formal practice. You can use perspective-taking skills whenever conflict arises with your partner.

HOW TO DO IT

It’s easy to get wrapped up in our own heads when we argue with our partners. This exercise will help you gain some perspective on your feelings during conflict.

Think about a major disagreement you had with your partner in the past four months, and how much distress it’s still causing you. Then, follow these steps:

1. Think about this disagreement with your partner from the perspective of a neutral third party who wants the best for all involved, a person who sees things from a neutral point of view. How might this person think about the disagreement? How would they view your partner’s behaviors and perspective? How might they find the good that could come from it? (5 minutes)
2. Some people find it helpful to take this third-party perspective during their interactions with their romantic partner. However, almost everybody finds it challenging to take this third-party perspective at all times. In your relationship with your partner, what obstacles do you face in trying to take this third-party perspective, especially when you’re having a disagreement? What might help you overcome them? For example, if you find yourself getting caught up in the heat of the moment, it might help to pause and take a deep breath. (5 minutes)
3. Despite the obstacles to taking a third-party perspective, people can be successful in doing so. Over the next four months, try your best to take this third-party perspective during interactions with your partner, especially during disagreements. How might you be most successful in taking this perspective in your interactions with your partner over the next four months? How might taking this perspective help you make the best of disagreements in your relationship? (5 minutes)

Allow these reflections to inform your interactions with your partner over the coming months.

EVIDENCE IT THAT WORKS

Finkel, E. J., Slotter, E. B., Luchies, L. B., Walton, G. M., & Gross, J. J. (2013). [A brief intervention to promote conflict reappraisal preserves marital quality over time](#). *Psychological Science*, 24(8), 1595-601.

A group of heterosexual married couples practiced Gaining Perspective on an Argument every four months for a year. In the year before the experiment, they had reported a decline in marital quality—their sense of satisfaction, love, intimacy, trust, passion, and commitment in their relationship. But as soon as they began practicing, that decline stopped (while declines continued in a control group who didn't do the practice). These benefits were partly accounted for by the reduced distress they felt around conflict.

WHY IT WORKS

When we experience conflict with others, we typically take a first-person perspective, concerned with our own thoughts, feelings, and values. This practice invites us to adopt a third-person perspective, the perspective of an observer who sees both partners' points of view and wants to achieve the best resolution for everyone.

When we do this, research suggests, we also reduce the anger and distress that we're feeling. Rather than responding out of indignation or pain, we can act from the desire to see our partners—and ourselves—be happy and connected.

Reflecting in advance about how to implement these strategies, and what obstacles we might encounter, makes us more likely to succeed.

SOURCES

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This practice is part of [Greater Good in Action](#), a clearinghouse of the best research-tested methods for increasing happiness, resilience, kindness, and connection, created by the [Greater Good Science Center](#) at UC Berkeley and [HopeLab](#).

