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dispute

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Responding Positively to Arguments

4 ways to help end misplaced anger and say the right things without reacting negatively.

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Every couple has arguments, it's how you respond that's important.

You're helping your spouse work on a project. It's not going well, there's a deadline, and your sweetheart is getting increasingly frustrated. Finally, they just blow up and say something like, "You're not helping! You're only making it worse! I should never have asked you to help!"

You're stunned. You promptly blow up in return saying, "Well, if that's how you feel about it, see if I help you again!" and out the door you storm, stomping your feet and slamming the door for good measure. Or out the door you skulk, feeling devalued and unappreciated.

What just happened? Why did you react so strongly? Nothing earthshaking or life threatening happened. So why are you either fuming and ready to punch something, or feeling devastated and lower than an earthworm?

Your feelings were hurt—that much is obvious—and hurt is a normal, natural reaction to someone putting your opinion down or failing to value your input. However, as natural and instinctive as the reaction may be, your response to your hurt, either to devalue yourself or blow up at your erstwhile beloved, is not instinctive, it is chosen.

"Chosen?" you ask yourself. "How can I choose something like that? It just happens!" No, it doesn't. Even if there is only a nanosecond between the hurt you feel and your response to that hurt, there is time in there during which you do, albeit usually on a subconscious level, choose your response.

That puts you in the power seat, which is good news. You see, anytime you are at choice with something you have power. It's when people feel they don't have choice that they feel powerless. So how are you supposed to choose in that nanosecond and how? Here are four ways to help you make the right decision:

1. Stop. When you feel yourself reacting strongly to something your spouse did/said with either hurt or anger, stop. Take a moment to breathe, which will help you settle down inside yourself.

2. You are worthy. Remind yourself that you are a good and worthy person, that whatever is going on doesn't change that. Regardless of what your ideas, opinions and ways of doing things are, they are yours and they are valuable.

3. Don't accept the hurt. Just because your spouse says something that hurts or angers you doesn't mean you have to respond in hurt or angry mode. You can choose to respond differently.

4. Seek to understand. Now, rather than go into self-destruct or other-destruct, go into an understanding mode. As best you can, try to understand what is going on with your honey. For example, recognize that he or she is blowing up out of his/her frustration at the situation, and empathize with that. Be quiet for a moment. Next, respect your spouse's need for space by leaving, but also support them by letting them know you're there for them if they need you. "OK. I know it's really frustrating for you. I'm sorry I couldn't be of more help. I'll be in the den if you need me."

Most of the pokes and jabs we feel from our mates in the course of an ordinary day aren't meant to hurt us they are the result of our partner's aggravation with something else, or of their failure to say things in ways that respect our feelings. The more you are able and willing to understand why your spouse is saying such things rather than just reacting to them, the more ease and good feelings you can bring into your relationship.

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