

RESEARCH REVIEW

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PREVENTING INEFFECTIVE ARGUING, VERBAL ALTERCATIONS, AND VERBAL AGGRESSION

Aggressive verbal interactions between partners are among the triggers of domestic violence (DV) incidents. While mild arguments are generally common in relationships, heated and emotionally-charged arguments can result in serious physical violence, which in their most severe form can result in homicide and suicide. In addition, such arguments can also result in serious psychological abuse. As a result, efforts to minimize aggressive and unproductive verbal arguments can promote military family well-being.

Ineffective arguing. Arguments that fail to resolve issues are ineffective and may result in potential harm to the involved parties. In this *Research Review (RR)* we define ineffective arguing and present some common topics that are often the basis for argumentative exchanges that can become dangerous. As a means of preventing abuse and violence, we suggest methods to defuse such arguments and to introduce possible avenues to their resolution. Ineffective arguing has been defined as “dysfunctional couple conflict resolution patterns, including ending an argument without achieving a resolution, not feeling heard, and repeatedly arguing about the same issue” (Lowery, Novak, McWey, & Ketring, 2023).

Arguments and relationship breakup. Arguments leading to angry exchanges can lead to escalation of physical violence perpetration and the breakup of relationships. A national study of 15,162 people between the ages 16-74 years in 2010-2012, reported the reasons for live-in partnership breakup in the past five years varied by gender and type of relationship (married vs. cohabita-

tion). A greater percentage of women (14.1%) than men (10.9%) reported a breakup of a marriage or cohabiting relationship (Gravningen et al., 2017). The duration of the marriages was similar for men and women (14%), but was much shorter for cohabitations, 3.5 years for men and 4.6 years for women. Although growing apart was the main reason reported for the breakups, arguments were the reported cause for 27% of men and 30% of women. Other sex-related differences in reasons for breakup were unfaithfulness/adultery (18% vs 24% for men and women, respectively), and lack of respect/appreciation (17% vs 25%), irrespective of partnership type. The most striking difference was the occurrence of reports of domestic violence, reported by 16% of women and 4% of men.

Emotionally-charged topics of conflict. Many common topics result in domestic arguments, but among the most serious include those about finances and other economic hardships, suspected or confirmed infidelity, parenting practices involving child rearing and other child-related issues (such as custody and visiting practices when parents are separated or divorced), involvement of relatives, control issues such as phone monitoring, questioning the whereabouts of the partner, failure to share household responsibilities and chores, and plans for the future.

Contempt. Triggers for aggressive arguments can be verbal as well as non-verbal. Showing contempt for one’s partner has elements of both. Demonstrations of contempt include anger, insults, perceived discourtesy, refusal to respond (silent treatment), eye rolling, com-

mands, hostile humor, sarcasm, mockery, name calling, facial displays of disgust and dislike, criticism, stonewalling, defensiveness, belligerence, and other antagonistic actions particular to the relationship (Sommer, Iyican, & Babcock, 2016).

Strategies to Defuse Arguments. There are many possible strategies to stop hostile arguments. Self-help tools are readily available on the Internet. Please visit the Center for the Study of Traumatic Stress (CSTS) Safe is Strong website (<https://www.cstsonline.org/safe/welcome>) and click the “Healthy Parenting Relationships” tab for resources on conflict resolution skills, anger management, problem solving, effective communication, and others. We suggest that those who wish to learn more effective ways to stop arguing consider three domains: *physiological*, *behavioral*, and *cognitive*. Some examples based on these strategies follow.

- **Physiological strategies** aim to calm oneself and to calm others. Recognize characteristics of emotional arousal, including rapid heartbeat, sweating, muscular tension, and shortness of breath. Strategies that may be used to defuse these physiological reactions include those aimed at lowering emotional reactivity and arousal, such as taking deep breaths and relaxing tense muscles.
- **Behavioral strategies** are intended to stop the argument or to decrease its intensity. Among these are pausing before speaking, speaking slower, lowering voice volume, keeping a normal voice tone and not speaking harshly or sarcastically, walking back a few steps if contact could lead to aggression, and leaving the scene if there is no resolution in sight.

For over 20 years, the Center’s Family Violence and Trauma Project has published the newsletters *Joining Forces Joining Families* (JFJF) and *Research Review: Family Violence* (RR) on child maltreatment and domestic violence. The publications provide critical information to professionals working in family services, primary care, and mental health as well as those in positions of community leadership or policy development. Please visit <https://www.cstsonline.org/resources/newsletters/> for links to these newsletters, and share this information with your colleagues.

- **Cognitive strategies** focus on intent (cognitions) rather than internal states (physiology). What is your intent? Can you compromise? Consider the other person’s feelings and intent. Postpone the discussion if no resolution is in sight or if conflict escalates. Listen to the other person until s/he is finished talking before shouting or interrupting.

Risk factors that lead to ineffective arguments.

Recent alcohol use by either partner is a risk for lack of emotional and behavioral control. In addition to the risk of homicide and suicide, brandishing or threatening with a weapon, especially firearms, can result in the partner’s fear and can destroy the opportunity to discuss the issues. Other risk factors include personality styles such as rigidity in holding an opinion, the need to always be right, and lack of empathy for the partner’s feelings and position.

Barriers to stopping an argument. The presence of recent alcohol use by either partner is a risk for lack of emotional and behavioral control. Brandish or threatening with a weapon, especially firearms, can result in fear and an inability. Other barriers can be identified in personality style such as rigidity in holding an opinion and the need to always be right.

Summary. Arguments can escalate resulting in harmful or even tragic consequences. To avoid such outcomes, individuals will benefit from strategies to defuse argu-



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ments and resolve issues without distress or harm. These strategies include:

- recognizing when an argument is ineffective and stopping the argument or changing strategy
- being aware of topics that are emotionally charged and taking steps to minimize an emotional response rather than responding to the emotions
- being aware of physiological, behavioral, and cognitive strategies that can defuse an argument
- not arguing when there has been recent alcohol consumption by either party
- never threatening or having a weapon, particularly a firearm, near the scene of an argument

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