

How to Stop Arguing, by Oren Jay Sofer

Adapted by Gary Shumway (original text at <https://www.orenjaysofer.com/stop-arguing>)

Do you want to transform your communication habits and improve your relationships?

Do you find yourself arguing with your spouse, friend, co-worker, or people with different points of view? Do you ever feel stuck having the same argument over and over again? Do you avoid discussion altogether because you are not confident it will do any good?

Heated arguments can get ugly quickly: raised voices, blaming each other, feeling defensive, refusing to budge, rehashing old wounds. Even a few harsh, angry words can take a toll on the relationship. When we lack the skills to handle conflict, the results can be disastrous: mistrust, hurt feelings, disappointment and eventually emotional distance, a broken heart, or failed relationships. Many of us use avoidance and pull back into safe environments that have little conflict and avoid working things out.

Conflict is natural

I can recall as a child hearing my folks arguing late at night—their passion and anger clear in their voices. I grew up in a Jewish family, where self-expression was direct and blunt. If someone was upset with you, they let you know!

We all have different ways of handling conflict. Some rush in ready to fight, others do everything they can to avoid confrontation hoping it will resolve itself. Some are quick to give up their own needs to appease, while others take a more roundabout approach working indirectly to solve a problem.

Yet conflict is an inevitable, natural part of life. Our ability to handle disagreements skillfully can be the difference between a healthy marriage and a divorce, between a successful professional career and a dead-end job. Poor communication is one of the primary reasons couples split up. Professionally, 85% of job success comes from having strong “soft skills” like communication and relationship building.

These six principles can help you get out of a rut in a relationship, so you can stop having the same, tired arguments repeatedly.

I. Take Responsibility for Your Mind

When you’re hurt, angry, or upset, have you ever looked for someone else to blame? What did they say or do that “made me” feel this way? Herein lies the root of the most insidious problem in interpersonal relationships: the mistaken belief that other people cause our pain.

Of course, other people’s words and actions affect us. To say otherwise would be naïve and outright false. And yet, can someone else actually *make you* feel something? Do they really have that kind of power over you?

Most of us have been conditioned to **project our feelings and unmet needs outward** onto other people. Here are a few examples of projecting:

- If I want more consideration and balance in a relationship, I start believing that “you’re selfish.”
- If I want more intimacy and connection than you do, you’re “cold and aloof.”
- If you want more connection than I do, then you’re “needy and controlling.”
- Whatever is happening *here* in my own mind and heart, I make it about *you* being wrong.

This sets us up to fail. When we blame others for our unmet needs, they tend to get defensive. Instead, take a step back and shift the basis of the argument by owning what’s happening in your own mind.

Instead of blaming others for our feelings, take responsibility for emotions in two key ways:

- **Become aware of the stories you’re telling yourself.**
Many unpleasant emotions are not a result of another’s actions, but of the meaning we make of those actions. How are you interpreting what’s happening? Be patient; it can take time to let go of our natural desire to defend ourselves.
- **Understand that your feelings point to something that matters to you.**
They’re signals about your needs. Once you identify your needs, you can talk about them with more clarity, power, and less blame. Knowing your needs also enables you to solve problems contributing to the conflict.

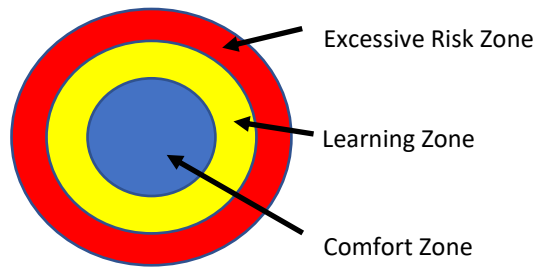
II. Increase Your Capacity for Discomfort

Difficult conversations are hard because of the difficult emotions we feel. It’s our inability to handle our emotions, and the unpleasant sensations associated with them, that cause us to say and do things we later regret.

The more we learn to tolerate discomfort, the more internal freedom we have. When we can feel our emotions and stay balanced, without letting them take over, we have more space inside and more choice about how to engage.

Here are a few ways you can increase your tolerance for uncomfortable sensations:

- Work within your “learning zone,” not too much, not little. See diagram below.¹
- Focus your attention in your body, rather than on thoughts that trigger the emotion. Notice the location of the physical sensations your emotions evoke.
- Feel your hands or your feet, which helps to dissipate the intensity of energy in your body.
- Attend to your breathing, in particular the ease and relaxation of the outbreath.



III. Timing and Pace

What about during the actual conversation? What can we do to minimize the chances of getting caught in the same old ruts and patterns?

First, attend to the timing and context. At the end of a long workday is probably not the best time to have a difficult conversation about finances or the relationship.

If you want to bring something up, check first if it's a good time for the other person. Similarly, if they broach a difficult subject, consider if you're in the right frame of mind and have enough inner resources to engage skillfully. (Ask yourself: are you hungry, angry, lonely, tired, or scared? If so, you may be under-resourced.) If not, assure them that you want to have the conversation and then let them know that you don't think you have the bandwidth to discuss it now. Suggest an alternate time so they're not left wondering if it will even happen.

During the conversation itself, one of the best things you can do to break old habits is to slow down. Even a few seconds can make the difference between an awful blunder that will take days to repair or holding your tongue.

- **Try taking short pauses** before you speak to consider what you're about to say and whether it will be helpful.
- If the conversation is moving quickly, **insert a pause by asking for one**: "All of this is feeling really charged right now and I want to do my best to respond in a way that's going to be helpful. I'd like a moment to just gather my thoughts, ok?"

IV. Show up and Remember your Values

There is a difference between showing up and *showing up while remembering your values*. Showing up without my values can include me arriving late to a meeting or conversation with the stresses of the day swirling around me and the resulting mix of emotions just beneath the surface. I have not thought about our agenda. I am not present. The first pre-requisite for a successful conversation is being present and aware.

Consider for a moment how many misunderstandings you've had simply because someone wasn't paying attention? Or how different it feels to speak to someone who gives you their full attention and someone who is distracted, only half-listening? **If you want to stop arguing, start being more present.**

The more aware we are, the more choice we have. When you're present, you have access to your wisdom and your best intentions. This means fewer moments spent arguing mindlessly.

The second condition for an effective conversation is choosing a clear and helpful intention. How we speak, listen and relate is guided primarily by our intention, by where we're coming from. Intention is the motivating force behind our words and actions.

Even a few words of kindness or a simple gesture of warmth can transform the whole atmosphere of a difficult conversation. What's more, when we can come from our best intentions—kindness, honesty, patience, generosity, compassion—we're standing on solid ground and get less swayed by a sharp comment or dig.

What's more, a huge portion of human communication is nonverbal. In fact, when there is a contradiction between what one says and how one says it, [studies have shown](#) that humans place far more weight on the nonverbal cues of body language and tone of voice than the words themselves.

To summarize:

- Before (and even during) a challenging conversation, take a few moments to **recollect your values**. What's most important to you? Regardless of the outcome, how do you want to show up? Before a meeting or conversation, spend a few minutes writing--yes, writing--your values that relate to the subject at hand. Afterwards: did this help you keep your values in mind and activated during the meeting?
- **When we speak and act in line with our values, we have more clarity, power and integrity.**

V. Offer Understanding

Arguments escalate when neither party feels heard. Yet just because you think you understand doesn't mean that the other person feels heard. See the difference?

Showing understanding is a fundamental building block of communication. It's how we know that we're hearing one another. In ordinary conversation most of this happens through facial expression, gesture, or other subtle cues. In tense conversations, this flow of affirming social information grinds to a halt. Instead of acknowledging what we've just heard we contradict it— and the argument ensues.

If you want to defuse tension and get out of a rut, show the other person that you understand them and hear what they are saying. This doesn't mean that you AGREE, just that you comprehend their perspective. (If you don't understand, ask genuine questions until you do.)

To break the cycle one person has to be willing to listen, and to indicate that they've understood. It feels risky, because we fear that understanding is perilously close to agreement! If neither party can listen, then it's time to stop the conversation!

During an argument, it can be challenging to put aside your own thoughts and feelings long enough to offer some empathy to the other person. In the long run, though, listening is in our own best interest for the simple fact that **people are generally more willing to listen when they feel heard.**

Showing understanding to help someone feel heard depends on a myriad of factors: from context to culture to personal style. Here are a few ways to offer understanding, each of which may be appropriate depending on the situation.

- **Sit still.**² Avoid extraneous activity and motion, glancing around, fidgeting.
- **Listen quietly**, take in what they say, and show understanding by nodding or another nonverbal gesture.
- **Offer a verbal affirmation** such as, “I hear you. I can understand why you’d be upset.”
- **Try saying back what you understand.** “Let me see if I’m following. It sounds like...[summarize your understanding]. Is that right?”

VI. Take Risks and Speak from your Heart

Finally, we get to our turn to talk! This is left to last because it is usually top of mind for most of us.

The final step in defusing the argument is learning how to speak openly, honestly and authentically without blame or judgment. Blaming someone is often easier (and less vulnerable) than sharing how we really feel inside.

To be fully authentic means being willing to take a risk and speak from your heart. Can you separate your interpretations and judgments from how you actually feel on the inside? When we state our feelings directly, without blame or judgement, **there’s less to argue with.**

Next, what matters to you? What’s really important in this situation? What do you want, value, or need? When we’re in conflict, we usually focus on what’s wrong, what we don’t like, or what we want to stop. Instead, see if you can identify what you DO want? What is it you would like to move towards?

- Connect your feelings to what matters to you, rather than to the other person’s actions (“I feel hurt because I want/need...” rather than “I feel hurt because you said / did...”)
- Shift your focus from what is wrong, what you don’t like, or what you want to stop. Instead, identify what you do want/need to move towards.

These six steps can help you interrupt the destructive cycles of arguing that are so common in our lives. They can also strengthen a relationship, increasing connection and intimacy when things are going well.

Learning new communication skills takes time, energy, and effort. However, it’s entirely possible to radically shift the way we communicate. The key is patience, persistence, and taking it one step at a time.

¹ Welcoming the Unwelcome, Pema Chodron

² Dialogue and The Art of Thinking Together, William Isaacs