

Perhaps you were drawn to read this because it seems that you and your spouse are not getting along. You find yourself in constant conflict and at times arguing over silly things. You may find yourself wondering, “What happened and how can I stop the madness?”

Like all couples, you and your spouse have a pattern when it comes to how you deal with conflict. If you want to decrease arguing and increase connection in your marriage, you will need to focus less on the content of the arguments and instead focus on your pattern of interaction.

Possibly when your spouse approaches you with an issue you immediately become defensive, maybe you verbally attack him or her, or maybe you just avoid talking about the issue and totally shut down. It could be that you are the one that takes an issue or concern to your partner only to get verbally attacked or feel ignored. How you respond to conflict will impact how your partner responds to you. It has been said that we cannot change another person, only ourselves. So the next time you and your partner start to argue or you feel tension try the following steps:

1. Identify your interaction style. How would you ordinarily respond to conflict? Do you tackle it head on? Do you ignore the issue and pretend it’s not there?
2. Make a guess on how your interaction style may be impacting your partner and make a mental note of this. For example: If you withdraw this may make your partner poke and prod you more. Conversely, if you verbally aggress the situation too much it may make your partner withdraw.
3. Think of one thing you can do differently during conflict and be intentional about doing that one thing. For example, could you voice what you think or feel about something rather than shut down? Or could you use a validating statement like “I can see how you might feel that way” to help your partner feel heard?
4. When things are calm, talk to your partner about the problematic patterns you see in your arguments. See if you can both start catching the pattern and deescalate some of the conflict.

Sue Johnson (2014) asserts three important components for connection in marriage, that you are Accessible, Responsive and Engaging (A.R.E.). This helps your partner know that you ARE there for him or her, that you ARE trustworthy and caring. Above all, **remember your partner is not the enemy, the problematic pattern of your arguing and communication is the enemy.** Become a team and fight the enemy rather than one another.

These concepts are pieces of Emotionally Focused Therapy (EFT) for couples. To learn more about this type of therapy and how it can help you and your partner please feel free to contact me.