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Amity



Amity Next Time: Parenting Together

A quick & easy self-help resource packed with practical problem solving ideas to improve communication between couples.

by Kate Nicolle and Emily Nickson Williams

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Dudley
Metropolitan Borough Council



About us

This book has been written by us, Kate and Emily, we're Amity and we are relationship experts. We care A LOT about people having strong, thriving relationships.

In fact, we believe that good quality relationships are a right not a privilege. We think that relationships are the most important thing in the world because they can make us feel happier, safer and more loved. They can also make us feel lonely, sad and sometimes anxious. That's why we think that relationship care is something we should all pay attention to.

What is relationship care?

It's simple really. Relationship care is about looking after the relationships you have with the people in your life who are important to you, in the same way that you might focus on the care of your physical and mental health.

If you want to know more about what we do:

www.amityrelationshipsolutions.org

We hope you find our little book useful,

Kate & Emily

This booklet is designed to help you help yourself at the times when arguing and poor communication are overwhelming your relationship.

Disagreeing and having arguments is normal, you will never erase them from your relationship, you will always have things you disagree on, there will always be a next time and this booklet will help you to navigate the next time better.

Healthy relationships are healthy not because they have no arguments in them, but because you have worked out how to see each other's point of view, own the impact of your behaviour on the other person and repair the situation in a meaningful way.

Relationships often become challenging at times of stress and/or change. Stress is very often the cause of our disagreements. If the way you deal with that stress is not ideal then it can cause problems in your relationship. When things change in your life, a new baby, new job etc it requires change and adjustment to happen too. This change can be hard, so often causes couples to struggle at times of adjustment.

If you want to learn how to make sure things go better next time you clash, there are some simple steps you can take to understand why you end up arguing and how to improve the way you communicate in the future.



What happened?

Reflect on what happened, for example -
did you get irritated with each other, raise your voices,
talk over one another and not listen.... then one of you stormed off?

Why did it happen?

Why was it a falling out rather than a discussion?
Did you start to blame and criticise each other, causing both of you to be defensive
and start to focus on who is in the wrong rather than how to sort things out?

What could you do differently next time?

Use some strategies to help you both reflect on how you behave
when you are in conflict. Why you behave the way you do and what you
could change that would result in more discussions and less falling out.

Let's think about these three
questions in a bit more detail, not
only will this help you, it will also
help your children. Children pick up
on more than we think so of course
it's much better if they pick up on
the skills of how to argue better than
how to have a shouting match!



What happened

Thinking about the event of an argument afterwards, when you have calmed down is a really helpful thing to do, but it takes effort and maturity because you might have to acknowledge that some things you said and did made the situation worse or were helpful.

But that is the point, if you don't want to keep making the same mistakes in the way you communicate you need to think about how you are doing it. This is not so you can be clearer about who is to blame, it's to help you to make better decisions in the future.

Answering these questions can be a valuable exercise for each of you to carry out.

What did I say and do?

What was my partner thinking a feeling because of what I said and did?

What did my partner say and do?

What was I thinking and feeling because of that and how did that then make me behave towards them? What did my thoughts and feelings make me do?

SO

What effect did all of this have on how the argument developed? It caused what to happen?

How did you end up behaving towards each other?

Thinking about **What Happened** is the first step towards doing it better next time. Trying to understand why the argument happened in the first place and how, the way you both behaved in it impacted on what happened next is very useful information.

It can help to take a step away from the situation and think about what might be causing you to disagree with your partner.

Things that might cause you to argue:

- ★ How to parent, we often think our way is the best way and can be inflexible about our partners ideas about how it should be done!
- ★ Things that have caused stress in the house.... money issues, household chores, social media etc
- ★ Previous arguments and things that have happened in the past getting brought up again, despite you both saying you are over it.
- ★ Other people getting involved in your relationship or parenting and giving their opinion and taking sides.

There are countless reasons why you might argue, most of the time the reasons are linked to stress, if it causes stress it causes conflict!

It's really helpful to think about what might be causing each of you to be stressed?

When is the last time you asked your partner if they were worrying about anything?

Or do you do the less helpful thing and assume you know. Our assumptions are very often wrong and by not asking or talking about it you miss the chance to build understanding, compassion and empathy into your relationship.

Think of it like this, what is more likely to get you to your destination quickly, guessing the way or using a map?

We get lazy in relationships and we guess the way rather than take time to look at the map.

If you change that habit today your relationship will benefit right away, it's a quick win and we all love one of those!

How you argue, **your arguing style**, can have a big influence on whether you resolve your disagreements or not. When you reflect on **What Happened**, the answer is often, 'What always happens...you got focussed on talking about who did what and who was right or wrong and I got all defensive and overwhelmed with it all and walked away.'

Thinking about how you operate in an argument can really help you understand each other better, for example: **Are you a walker or a pusher?** (there are more styles than this, like being a sulker for instance but let's use these two as examples).



pusher

walker

The **pusher style** is to push for a discussion there and then, to immediately address the issue and want to get things sorted out.

The **walker style** is to engage with the discussion for a time but as soon as things get emotional or argumentative, walk away to try and process the situation and hope that some space might calm things down.

The issue here is that the pusher feels disrespected by the walker leaving and often follows telling them the conversation isn't over, the walker thinking 'it is now!' As the walker is actually trying to calm things down by removing themselves.

No one is purposefully trying to annoy the other by walking out or following, both are trying to deal with the situation in their own way. BUT by doing this it can make things worse, one feeling disrespected and not listened to, the other feeling badgered and pressured.

So next time, try to press pause in the moment and think about how the way in which you each engage in arguments is affecting what ends up happening, what could you change that might help?

So, let's recap.....

- You have had a think about what happened.
Who said and did what and how that influenced what happened.
- You are going to read the map not guess the way and check in with your partner about what is going on for them, not just assume you know.
- By engaging with these steps you are showing respect for the relationship and your partner. You are showing kindness and compassion in your relationship and we often find we are low on those key essentials when we stop to look.

Why did it happen?

We are moving on to why did it happen, why did it spiral into a clash rather than you manage to calmly talk the issue through?

There are some obvious things here like, you were tired, had a bad day etc.

But there are often more complex things that can be the reason.

Here are things couples often say about why it happens.....

- ★ Because my partner wasn't listening to me
- ★ Because they don't understand
- ★ Because you think you know what I am thinking and feeling but you don't, you just assume you do
- ★ Because neither of us will take responsibility for our actions and are keen to blame the other
- ★ Because they always think they are right

Think about this question....Who is winning in your relationship?

Were you tempted to answer? Most people are because they get caught up in who is right and who is wrong. A relationship is not a competition but so often, we end up creating a competitive atmosphere, not on purpose but it just evolves that way.

This happens because couples can get drawn into playing 'toxic tennis'!

You mention I forgot to put the bins out, so I mention you forgot to pay the bills in retaliation, so I win because your mistake is worse than mine.

I feel **defensive** (despite it being true that I forgot to put the bins out) I don't like it when you criticise me. So I will now look out for an opportunity to **criticise** you and when I do you will feel **defensive**.

And so the game of 'toxic tennis' continues all the while, your children are in the audience watching the unhelpful, unhealthy game unfold!

Once you have a downer on your partner/relationship it's easy for this negative feeling to snowball, suddenly everything they do you see in a bad light and you start to spot lots of things to be critical of.



If this is the status of your relationship it doesn't take much to ignite a niggling disagreement, especially when there are so many stressful everyday things that make life challenging.

Arguments start, not necessarily because of a significantly big difference of opinion, but often because you are feeling unloved, unappreciated and disconnected from one another. Rather than be vulnerable and tell your partner that, you might communicate your dissatisfaction by making chippy, sarcastic comments instead. This is very common and is what leads to the 'toxic tennis' situation.

The answer then is to find a way to understand each other better and one way you can do this is by making sure you understand each other's love language. Not as sappy as it sounds!

It goes like this, in order to feel close, connected and like a team, you need to know how to make each other feel safe and secure. This is where the little things matter. Small, kind, thoughtful gestures that often go out of the window when you are stressed and trying to juggle all that life throws at you.

You need to know each other's love language.

There are 5 LL's

Acts, Affirmation, Touch, Time, and Gifts.

Which one works for you, makes you feel loved and appreciated?

Here's how they work in action....

Acts:

Would you like a cup of tea

Affirmation:

That was a perfect cup of tea you made me

Touch:

A cuddle in exchange for a cuppa?

Time:

Wanna have a cuppa with me?

Gifts:

I made you a cup of tea and found you a biscuit



If you know which of these works for your partner it helps you to make good decisions about how you show them you care and ways to connect with them, little and often. So, when the niggling disagreements come, because you are feeling more connected as you have put the ground work in to make solid foundations, the conflict curve is likely to be less steep as you are likely to be generally in a better place with one another when the conflict occurs.

What could you do differently Next Time?

Here's what everyone in a relationship needs to try to do to make Next Time better.

Acknowledge

Show your partner respect by being mature enough to acknowledge that you may have said something that upset them, done something that hurt their feelings and that you care enough to recognise that and offer an apology for upsetting them/hurting their feelings.

As soon as you acknowledge how the other person is feeling they feel heard, feel the respect you are showing them and can start to see that you are trying to repair the situation.

Acknowledging their perspective on the situation and why they might have behaved the way they did.



Use 'I' rather than 'You'

"You never help me tidy the house!"
"I could really do with some help with the tidying"

Which of these would make you feel defensive if said to you?

When we say things that begin with 'You' the other person is automatically on the defensive,



they feel criticised and blamed. So what follows is unlikely to be a positive conversation. However, if you use 'I' instead you are owning your feelings and sharing them with the other person in a non-confrontational way, meaning you are more likely to have a positive conversation where you both listen to each other rather than get into the toxic tennis game.

Make a note to yourself to try and notice how much you say 'You' at the start of a sentence to your partner and how often what follows it is positive and how often it is negative.

This is another small win, if you notice that you do a lot of negative 'You's' try to change that. This will help you to start to build a kinder, more compassionate, healthy relationship. And remember your children will be watching and learning from this too.

Be clear about what you need

Let's be clear, we would all like to say we need an all expenses paid holiday to the Caribbean, but this is not really what is meant by being clear about what you need.

Think about why you got so cross or upset about a particular issue that caused a disruption between you and your partner.

What do you need now because of it?

- ★ Do you need a hug?
- ★ Some time on your own?
- ★ Practical help with the things you've been struggling with?
- ★ To hear an apology or acknowledgement?
- ★ Do you need them to do a specific task?
- ★ Do you need to hear "I love and appreciate you" more often?



Whatever it is let your partner know. They can't do it if they don't know you need it, they are not mind readers!

It can be hard asking for what you need as we can feel scared of being rejected and the person not being willing to give it to us/do it for us. But if you can get over that awkward feeling your relationship will be much stronger.

Sometimes when a partner recognises an issue they are keen to jump into **fix it** mode. They want to make things better, so immediately start to look for solutions.

For example: If you come home from work and you've had a difficult day and start to explain to your partner the in's and out's of what went on, it can be normal for your partner to hear the issues and start to suggest what you might do to fix it, email so and so, have a conversation with xyz. While this is well intentioned and an effort to help, what you **actually need** is just a cup of tea and a hug, no advice! But that is not what you are brave enough to ask for, for fear of that need not being met or offending them by rejecting their advice.

The more honesty two people have between them the more resilient their relationship is. Couples often operate on **assumptions** and this leads to **misunderstandings** and that leads to **arguments**.

So if you can try to kick the habit of assuming you each know what is going on for the other and try to say how you feel and ask for what you need, it's much easier to avoid misunderstandings. This will encourage a warmer bond between you.

Helpful things you can do for your relationship

- **Be kind.** Simple, look for opportunities to say a kind thing or do a kind thing.
- Show you want to communicate in a positive way by actually **listening to learn not just listening so you can respond**.
- Think about your partners love language and **activate your actions**
- **Repair as this helps you to prepare.** Repairing (acknowledging/apologising) the damage done by arguments means you will be better prepared to communicate more positively the next time you clash.
- **Try to understand your partners point of view.** What matters to them may not matter to you and visa versa. However, if you don't make the effort to appreciate their perspective on something you can be sure that you will stay stuck, both of you making your points over and over again.
- **Learn to move on.** It's easy to dwell on an issue or bring up the past, this weakens your bond and trust. Learning to put things to bed is recognising whatever it was happened and the feelings it caused, but accepting they can't be changed, so making peace and moving on where you can is very beneficial.

- **Try to be honest and vulnerable if you can.**

Honest about how you feel, honest about what you would like to be different, what you need from your partner. Of course it's a bit scary being vulnerable with another person but that is how we get close to other people by showing our real selves. Your relationship will thank you for it!

- If you are not getting on brilliantly it's easy to focus on the negative things about your partner. Once the way they eat a bag of crisps is annoying all of a sudden so is everything else they do. Instead of focussing on these little negatives, **look for the positives**. If you only look for bad, bad is all you will see.



Unhelpful things for your relationship:

- Just because you are not talking does not mean you are listening. Not properly listening to your partner it is VERY unhelpful.
- Not valuing your partners perspective on something because you don't share their point of view.
- Saying you are 'over it' when you clearly are not.
- Not being clear with your expectations. Expecting your partner to understand your needs AND meet them when you haven't even shared them with your partner is an impossible task for them to complete successfully!
- Being defensive, it never, ever helps a situation.
- Telling your partner what is wrong with them and what they need to do differently. What you are basically saying is, 'Be more like me because I'm better.'

Some tips for the times when you need to repair when some damage has been done, big or small....

... **Repair to Prepare**

Try to do some of the following:

- Express remorse if you have hurt the other person (even if they have neglected to do so in the past!)
- Acknowledge the hurt/harm caused by what you said/did
- Take responsibility for what you are responsible for
- Offer an explanation....not an excuse (do not say "I'm sorry, but...")
- Show a commitment to change, try to do things differently next time
- Request forgiveness if that feels important to you ie; you want to take back something unkind/untrue

You might not be able to do all of these but even if you only do some of them you are helping to repair the damage done and preparing for it to go better next time. This is worth doing if you can, repair is always better than ruin (even when you get a bit of a rush from 'telling it like it is'!)

So what are you going to do differently Next Time?

There will always be a next time you argue as disagreeing in relationships is normal, but how you deal with them is key to keeping a relationship strong and healthy. You want your children to learn from a strong and healthy relationship. Arguments will be a part of that and how you deal with them will set an example to your children of how to communicate in helpful way.

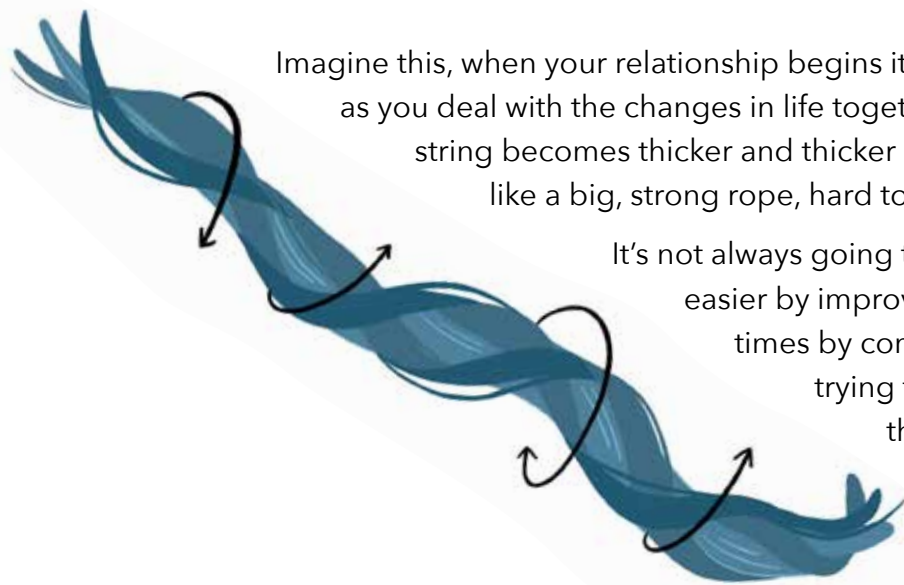
This is a good moment to decide to change your behaviour. Even if it's changing only one thing.

Think about everything you have read, what changes do you think would make the most difference to your relationship? Like trying not to be defensive, or appreciating your partners point of view.

Relationships take effort and when they are not like living in a



romance novel that doesn't mean it's a relationship in trouble. But it's a relationship in change. Life changes all the time and that means our relationships have to change too. Change is always a challenge but the more change your relationship endures the stronger your bond becomes.



Imagine this, when your relationship begins it's like a little piece of string. But as you deal with the changes in life together, good and bad, that piece of string becomes thicker and thicker and stronger and stronger until it's like a big, strong rope, hard to break and less likely to fray.

It's not always going to be easy but you can make it easier by improving the way you handle difficult times by communicating in a better way, by trying to make sure Next Time is better than last time.

We need to dispel the myth that empathy is walking in someone else's shoes. Rather than walking in your shoes, I need to listen to the story you tell about what it's like in your shoes and believe you, even when it doesn't match with my experiences.

Brene Brown



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