Everybody Wins
The Chapman Guide To
Solving Conflicts Without Arguing

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What’s So Bad about Arguing?
Let’s start at the beginning. In the dating phase of your relationship, chances are that you and your spouse were enamored with each other. You liked what you saw. You enjoyed spending time together. You could talk for hours. He or she was the most wonderful person you could imagine. In short, you were smitten. The courtship may have been long or short, but your positive feelings led you to the marriage altar, where you made a commitment “for better, for worse; for richer, for poorer; in sickness and in health; to love and to cherish, so long as we both shall live.” The promises you made to each other were colossal, but at the time you fully intended to keep them. You were caught up in the current of love and it all seemed so effortless. You knew that you and your mate had differences, but you never thought that someday those differences
would become divisive.

Unfortunately, the euphoric feelings of being in love have an average life span of two years.¹ Then we come back to the world of reality, where theoretical differences become actual. Some of these differences we come to view as assets. Alan likes to cook; Nancy doesn’t. She likes to clear the table and wash dishes; he doesn’t. These differences make for a harmonious mealtime experience. Alan and Nancy work together as a team, each using his or her expertise for the benefit of the other. They experience the pleasure of harmony and may even express it with statements such as, “We were meant for each other,” “We are a perfect match,” “Life could not be better,” and “I’m so glad I married you.” When differences are viewed as assets, and husbands and wives work together in harmony, life is beautiful.

Other differences may become divisive. Bob likes sports and spends every Monday night watching football. Jill says, “Football is fine for the players, who are making millions of dollars by bashing their bodies against one another, but why would people
want to waste their lives watching other people play a stupid game?” Surely the man she married is smarter than that.

“It’s just my way of relaxing,” Bob says.

“It’s just your way of wasting your life,” Jill replies.

“You have got to be crazy. Every man in the world watches *Monday Night Football*.”

“Only the losers.”

“Look, I work five days a week. Give me a break and let me watch football on Monday nights.”

“Sure you work. So do I. But how about *us*? Why can’t we spend a night together? It’s football, baseball, basketball, car races. And if nothing else is on, you watch that dumb wrestling. There’s never any time for *us.*” Jill starts to cry and walks out of the room. Bob turns off the TV and now the real fight begins. *Monday Night Football* gives way to a verbal
boxing match. Before the evening is over, Bob and Jill will argue themselves into an intense state of unhappiness.

What did an evening of argument accomplish? Some might say, “Nothing,” but that answer would be naive. The argument accomplished a great deal. For one thing, it created greater emotional distance between a husband and wife who now view each other as an enemy rather than a friend. Each feels the other is unreasonable and, perhaps, irrational. Not only that, but they have also stimulated feelings of hurt, anger, and resentment, and troubling questions are rushing to their minds:

“What has gotten into him?”

“What is her problem?”

“I can’t believe the things she said.”

“How could he be so cruel?”
“What happened to our love?”

“Have I married the wrong person?”

They may even end up sleeping in separate bedrooms that night, or lying stock still and rigid in the same bed as they silently replay the argument in their minds. Yes, the argument accomplished a great deal. Unfortunately, the accomplishments were all destructive.

Perhaps the only positive thing that came from the argument was that Bob and Jill identified a point of conflict in their marriage. He discovered that she intensely dislikes his watching *Monday Night Football*, and she discovered that he finds great pleasure in watching football on Monday nights. But because the argument did not resolve the conflict, it now stands as an emotional barrier between them that will affect the way they process their relationship. Now, every Monday night, Bob will watch television with a conscious awareness that he is displeasing his wife. And every Monday night, Jill will say to herself, “He loves football more than he loves me. What kind of
husband is that?”

We’ll come back to Bob and Jill later, but first let me clarify what I mean by the word *argue*. It is a word that is best known in the legal arena, where attorneys present arguments to show that a defendant is either guilty or not guilty. These arguments are statements made by the attorneys based on available evidence. They are designed to appeal to a jury’s sense of logic and reason. The implication is clear: Any reasonable person would agree with my argument. On occasion, an attorney may also appeal to the emotions of a jury by presenting aspects of the case designed to stimulate empathy for the attorney’s argument.

In a courtroom, arguments are perfectly permissible. In fact, cases could not be tried without arguments from both sides. Both attorneys present evidence and their interpretation of the evidence, seeking to convince the jury that their position is the correct one. Witnesses can be cross-examined, and implications can be challenged. The judicial system is based on the assumption that by means of argument and counterargument, we are likely to discover the truth
about guilt or innocence.

We all know that the cause of justice is not always served in the courtroom, but at least the case is resolved. Defendants who are found not guilty go free. Defendants who are found guilty may pay a fine, be placed on probation, or go to prison, depending on the severity of the case. Or the case might be appealed to a higher court, in which case more arguments would be presented at each level of appeal until a final judgment is handed down. In every case, somebody wins and somebody loses. Occasionally, one might hear an attorney make a statement such as, “I thought our arguments were good, but apparently the jury was not convinced.” Or the winning attorney might say, “We made our case. The arguments were solid, and I think the jury recognized the truth.”

When you choose to argue with your spouse, you are electing to use a judicial system to convince your spouse of the truth or validity of your position. Unfortunately, what works fairly well in a court of law works very poorly in a marriage relationship,
because there is no judge available to determine whether you or your spouse is “out of order.” Arguments quickly become charged with emotion and you may end up yelling, screaming, or crying; pouring out words that assassinate your mate’s character; questioning his or her motives; and condemning his or her behavior as unloving, unkind, and undisciplined.

When you argue, your objective is the same as it would be in a courtroom: You want to win the case. You want your side to be vindicated and your spouse to be found guilty of your accusations. This is what is so gravely harmful about arguments. They ultimately lead to one of three results: (1) You win and your spouse loses; (2) you lose and your spouse wins; or (3) you argue to a draw. When an argument ends in a draw, both spouses are losers. Neither one is convinced by the other’s arguments, and both parties walk away disappointed, frustrated, hurt, angry, bitter, and often despairing of hope for their marriage.

None of these outcomes is good. The winner may
feel good for a few moments or a few days, but eventually, living with the loser becomes unbearable. The loser walks away from an argument like a whipped dog that goes away to lick its wounds. It’s not a pretty picture, but it’s a common experience. In fact, it’s so common that we have a saying for it: “He’s in the doghouse.” Being in the doghouse means that one spouse has incurred the displeasure of the other and must live at a distance until he or she can once again find the spouse’s favor. When conflicts are not resolved and both spouses walk away with stinging words of rebuke and condemnation ringing in their ears, they will typically withdraw from each other emotionally and hope for a better day. If a better day does not come in time, they may eventually seek a “better partner” or resign themselves to the coldness of a winter marriage.

Any victory won by means of an argument will be short lived. The loser will eventually come back with a new argument (or an old argument restated) in an effort to persuade his or her spouse. But the renewed argument will also end with a win, lose, or draw verdict. So you see, arguments never resolve
anything; they only reveal conflicts. Once a conflict is revealed, a couple must find a way to resolve it with dignity and with respect for the other person. I believe there are thousands of couples who would like to learn how to resolve conflicts without arguing. That is the purpose of this book.

PUTTING THE PRINCIPLES INTO PRACTICE

1. List three issues you and your spouse have argued about within the past year.

2. What do you find most painful about arguments?

3. What have arguments accomplished in your marriage?

4. On a scale of 1–10, how strongly are you motivated to find a better way to resolve conflicts?