

By far the most common communication problem for couples is what I call **Simultaneous Arguing**. Simultaneous arguing is an experience I am sure you are very familiar with. Simply put it is what happens when two people are arguing their point *at the same time*. What is surprising is that most people continue to do this despite its obvious ineffectiveness. They think that an argument is most likely to succeed if they argue their point *at the same time that their partner or opponent is making their argument*. So they interrupt the other person to contradict them and generally respond to every argument with their counterargument. The most intelligent of people do this continually, in denial of its crude ineffectiveness. It is quite an astonishing human skill deficit and proves that we are driven less by reason and more by emotion than we ever care to admit.

Couples engage in simultaneous arguing in their attempt to solve chronic problems. However, it never works. Using simultaneous arguing, is like trying to press home a thumb tack with a sledge hammer or trying to lose weight through the exercise of eating. It's 'gorilla' tactics in that the principle of simultaneous arguing is that you are more likely to get the other person to see your point of view by *rejecting what they have to say and forcing your argument upon them!* It is entirely self-defeating and predictable. Yet everyone does it.

The alternative method for people is very simply **Sequential Arguing** – that is the principle of arguing your points, not at the same time, but one after the other.

An anti-dote to negative simultaneous arguing is what I call **The Floor** technique. The principle of 'the floor' exercise that only one person can have the floor at a time. When you have the floor you argue your point while the other person tries to listen and understand your point. You relinquish the floor when your point has been understood. It's a simple exercise but very hard to do. Try it for fun and see! Why? Because most people want the floor, they even need the floor and are unable to surrender it to the other person. However, democratic debate should demand that the floor is held sequentially.

It is an interesting human fact that, during conflict, your urge to regain the floor, to defend against another person's argument, or to instantly fight-back is not a resonaed response but the everyday equivalent of the animal reflex to defend itself under threat. When you rise up in protest against your husbands weak or incorrect argument you are, in fact, responding with a reflex not dissimilar to your dog's reflex to bark at a sudden noise. When you take the 'floor' from your partner and fight back against his point of view or argument it is because your own argument is so dear to you that it is a symbol of your status in the world. It is also the symbol of your significance and safety because if you lose your argument you fear that you will lose your self – quite literally. Therefore, when your partner is in danger of erasing your point of view you rise up in protest like a frightened cat.

The thing is that, for the emotionally secure person, their significance, status, or safety is actually never at stake in these conflicts or fights so they can listen to and respect the other person's point of view because it does not threaten their sense of themselves.

However, the insecure person gets very offended when those close to them challenge a precious belief or assumption because their sense of themselves is invested in having other people confirm their beliefs. The insecure husband or father rises up with a “How dare you question my beliefs?” kind of attitude.

When you get two people in a relationship or family who need others to confirm their points of view then you have a recipe for on-going conflict. Their argument, their beliefs, their point of view is their everyday status symbols that show how significant they are. Challenge their point of view and it is reacted to as if you questioned the integrity of their inner self.

During conflict, people defend against other people’s point of view and argument as if it were a lethal virus that must be warded off at all costs. People in conflict act as if showing some understanding of the other person’s argument is to leave them open to its toxic influence. Parents, therefore, will put their child in their place, will shout their teenagers down, will interrupt their husband or wife, will bat away every argument or impassioned challenge as if it were a lethal influence. I get disheartened when I witness the arrogant chest-forward posturing of a parent that quenches their children’s impulse to self-expression with smug righteousness. How people love the warm secure feeling they get out of being *right* and of proving that to the other person who questions it. How I much prefer the company of people whose relationship to others and life is one that is open to influence, open to new perspectives, and has a sense of imagination that can appreciate the integrity of the poorly articulated argument. People who are wise rarely seem to be righteous. They embrace the mystery of life with ease.

The next time your teenager or spouse argues with you, see if you can find a way to let them feel Good about what they are trying to express.

The most common communication deficit in family life is what I would call the absence of *Advanced Listening*. The ability to listen and communicate understanding to another person involves two separate skills: (1) the ability to listen and hear what another person is saying and (2) the ability to communicate that understanding to the other person.

It is amazing that most people consider themselves to be good listeners when, in fact, their listening skills are usually very crude. They are not too bad at *basic listening* – that is just hearing what has been said, but they are dreadful at *advanced listening* – being able to let the other person know that they understand what has been said.

It is a staggering fact that this ability, if not faculty, is so absent in everyday life. Most couples I work with in marriage counseling show a shocking inability to engage in advanced listening. The urge to argue with the other person, prove them wrong, disagree, and defend is so powerful as to prevent any useful problem-solving or communication.

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While it can work with small everyday exchanges, it never works with chronic or serious communication problems between spouses, parents and children, or even co-workers.

There are a number of very common types of poor listeners, which include:

1. **The interrupter:** The person who listens to the other person until they hear something that is of interest to them at which point they interrupt and take over the conversation by changing it to their topic of interest.
2. **The verbal vomitor:** The person who talks too much and dominates most conversations with 'verbal diarrhea' while being entirely oblivious to the disrespect and disinterest they show in what other people have to say.
3. **The disinterested listener:** The person who listens to the words that are spoken but tunes out the other person by letting them ramble on without giving them any feedback other than occasional grunts.
4. **The questioner:** The person who keeps the other person talking by asking endless questions.