

Winning an Argument with a Difficult Intimate Partner

How do you solve problems and influence angry lovers?

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Anyone who has spent any time in a relationship will tell you one simple truth - no two people get along all of the time. Each person has different needs, wants, and desires. Sometimes, those two agendas do not match up and disagreement happens. After that, it takes a little [empathy](#) to understand their side...and a little [persuasion](#) to get them to see your side too!

Beyond the routine arguments and spats, however, some people find themselves with a disagreeable, angry, avoidant, or manipulative lover. They unwittingly connect with someone who fails to see their side of an issue. They love someone who has "thin skin" and refuses to acknowledge a shortcoming or imperfection. They may even get involved with someone who refuses to budge an inch and stubbornly disregards one of their needs...

So, what can be done? The usual "solution" falls into one of two categories; 1) find various ways to live with the situation because you love them, or 2) leave them and find someone else. Personally, I believe life is far too precious to grind through a miserable relationship forever. So, I don't advise #1. Then again, leaving someone you love is not a picnic either!

Given that, before you decide to pack your bags, I suggest you try option #3 - a bit of persuasion and influence.

Research on Influencing Defensive and Difficult Partners

Fortunately, research by Overall, Simpson, and Struthers (2013) recently tackled this very problem. The researchers video-recorded couples having discussions, where one partner (the agent of influence) wanted the other partner to change in some way (the target of influence). Partners were evaluated on their behaviors, particularly how angry or withdrawn they became during the discussion. After the chat, each partner was also asked to rate how successful the conversation had been and how satisfied they were with the outcome.

Overall and associates (2013) found some informative patterns among all of those responses. To start, they found that an individual partner's response to being the target of an influential discussion was fairly predictable. Some partners were trusting and open to their lovers, discussing the desired change, and made satisfying changes to their behaviors. Other partners, however, were routinely mistrusting and closed off (called [Attachment](#)-related Avoidance). These partners refused to discuss any changes, reacting with [anger](#) or withdrawal instead. As would be expected, their partners were generally unsatisfied with the outcome of the conversation too.

Nevertheless, the researchers noted that some lovers were better able to persuade their difficult partners than others. Those who had an avoidant and difficult partner, yet were successful in their influence attempts, responded to indications of anger and withdrawal in their partner with "softening techniques". These techniques 1) acknowledged the feelings and independence of the target partner, and 2) conveyed that the target was valued as a partner. More specifically, softening techniques included:

- Temporarily downplaying the severity of the problem until anger/withdrawal reduced.
- Acknowledging the target's past efforts to change and improvements.
- Highlighting other positive aspects about the partner and relationship.
- Acknowledging the target and his/her point of view.
- Inhibiting negative reactions to the problem or partner's destructive responses.
- Minimizing the influence attempt with positive feelings and [humor](#).
- Communicating caring, acceptance, and regard.
- Showing [optimism](#) regarding the problem or relationship.

By employing these softening techniques, lovers were better able to handle the negativity, withdrawal, and angry outbursts of their attachment-related avoidant partners. Furthermore, both they and their partners were more satisfied with the discussions. Most importantly too, the difficult partner was more likely to change when these techniques were used.

What This Means for You

If you find yourself dealing with an unreasonable partner, there are a couple of things you can do. To begin though, it is important to realize that their general "difficulty" may have very little to do with you and is out of your hands. Usually, it is a product of negative [childhood](#) experiences and past hurts. As a result, while you can influence a difficult partner to perform specific behaviors differently, there may be very little you can do to change their overall attitude. Therefore, if you do choose to stay, you may get them to do specific things for you, but you might always have to do twice the work to do it.

Assuming you do want to stay with a disagreeable partner, here are a couple of steps to influence them:

1) Develop a good rapport - These types of individuals are angry and emotional because they do not trust others. Therefore, it is important to set the tone of the relationship with caring, acceptance, and appreciation all around. If you can help it, do not let "fighting" be a routine. This step covers such "softening techniques" as acknowledging the partner's point of view, using humor, communicating caring, and showing optimism. (For more on that topic, see [here](#)).

2) Reward the good - No one is bad all the time. If you look hard enough, you can probably "catch" your partner doing something you like. Make sure to appreciate and reward that good behavior. That will keep the relationship positive and encourage them to do more too. This step employs softening techniques like acknowledging a partner's past positive efforts and highlighting their other positive qualities. It also functions as good old reinforcement. (For more on that topic, see [here](#)).

3) Redirect the bad - You are going to be upset, but that makes for bad persuasion. So, you have to decide whether you want to vent your emotions OR get them to change, because you can't have both. Assuming you really want them to change, it is beneficial if you "redirect" them to more positive

behaviors, rather than punish them for bad ones. Show them how to improve, rather than just point out what is wrong. Tell them what you would "prefer". This includes softening techniques like inhibiting responses to a partner's bad behaviors and temporarily downplaying severity of the situation. (For more on that topic, see [here](#)).

Conclusion

It may not be possible to "fix" a difficult partner. With extra effort and patience, however, it is possible to change some of their behaviors for the better. Therefore, if you find yourself stuck in a losing battle with an unreasonable lover, try a few softening techniques. Change things up and build some good feelings into the discussion. Acknowledge and reward them for all of the good things they do. After that, rather than focusing on the bad and punishing them, direct them instead to what you would "prefer" they do. You might just have a more satisfying outcome.

<https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/the-attraction-doctor/201307/winning-argument-difficult-intimate-partner>