

The North Fulton Marriage Newsletter

Volume 1 - October 2007

How to Defuse an Argument

I very often tell my marriage counseling clients that the objective of counseling is not to eliminate conflict from their lives, rather the objective is to help them learn to more appropriately deal with conflict. Conflict happens, that is life. But, the problem that some couples face is that their day-to-day conflicts tend to escalate to the point that the emotional outcomes are uncontrollable. Some couples may find that small conflicts lead to arguments, and that their arguments lead to one or both of them going off...like a bomb. But if we can prevent the fuse from being lit, then we can prevent an emotional explosion.

The word defuse literally means to remove a fuse from a bomb. Quite simply, we want to remove those “emotional fuses” that, when lit, lead to explosive arguments. Many couples are very knowledgeable about their spouses’ emotional fuses and will intentionally light them when arguing. In most cases this is done out of spite or to seek emotional revenge. Inherently, there is an emotional payoff to enacting revenge, but it is typically short-lived. The primary payoff of an angry outburst is that it reduces stress in the short term, by letting out emotional steam. But, unfortunately, within seconds or minutes of an angry outburst, couples will probably begin to feel guilty about what they said or did. Their guilt may, over time, lead to decreased self-esteem, which will increase the probability that they will lash out again.

So, how do you defuse an argument? One of the most effective ways to defuse an argument is to simply take a “timeout” before things escalate. You can matter-of-factly tell your spouse “I need to take a timeout.” If you don’t overtly state that you need to take a break, and just walk off without saying anything, then your spouse may feel that you are just avoiding or withdrawing. Timeouts work, and are most effective if you and your spouse have an understanding ahead of time. Talk with your spouse about having a timeout plan for arguments. You and your spouse can even have an agreement about how long timeouts should last. Also, try to avoid leaving the house with no planned time to return. This inevitably will create more tension, and may make your spouse feel abandoned. Leaving the house in itself is perfectly fine, but your spouse needs to know that you intend to return. When you take a timeout, try to engage in stress reducing activities, such as taking a walk, listening to music, reading, or even deep breathing. Do whatever works for you! Another effective way to defuse an argument is to use simple thought restructuring. For example, if you find yourself beginning to argue with your spouse over something pretty trivial, then ask yourself “If my spouse were to die tragically tomorrow, would I be concerned with this?” That should put things in perspective really fast.

So, remember the following when attempting to defuse an argument:

- Avoid intentionally lighting your spouse’s emotional fuse or pushing their buttons for revenge
- Have a timeout plan with your spouse and take a timeout before arguments escalate
- Use thought restructuring to help put arguments into perspective

John H. Pruett, Jr., MS, EdS, NCC, LPC
Founder
Georgia Professional Counseling Center, Inc.



Reference: McKay & Rogers. “The Anger Control Workbook”.
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Georgia Professional Counseling Center, Inc.

602 Abbey Court, Alpharetta, GA 30004

www.licensedtherapy.com

Phone: 770-656-9711 Email: jp@licensedtherapy.com

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