Reducing family conflict and arguments

If family conflict and strife are occurring more often than you'd like, here are seven things to 'be' to help the situation*.



- Be a fire fighter, not a fire builder
- Inevitably, someone in your family in the next week (or maybe even today) is going to say something in a raised voice, nasty tone, or other way that irks, annoys, or frustrates you (and maybe others in the family as well). This is going to happen – but what happens next? Does the spark of anger continue to grow or does it get put out? This can be quite challenging in the moment, but sparks from communication fires need to be put out as soon as they begin to kindle. This can be done by calmly asking the person to restate the message in a different way, calling a time out, responding in a way that de-escalates the conflict, or redirecting the conversation to a different topic.
- Be a thermostat, not a thermometer

A thermometer merely reflects the temperature of its environment. If it's cold, it reads colds and if it's hot, the thermometer reads hot. A thermostat, in contrast, sets the temperature of the room – if things are icy, it can bring the temperature up, and if things are too heated, it works to bring the temperature down. Be that for your family. Be known as a person in your family that helps make conversations safe and supportive rather than someone that only mirrors how everyone else is talking.

- Be a guardrail, not a cliff
 - When relationships are strained and communication is difficult, having some guardrails in place can help prevent conversations from going in destructive directions. You can think of these as simple ground rules that everyone agrees to and adheres to – no arguing in front of the kids, no threatening or ultimatums, no bringing up certain topics, no talking negatively about someone who is not there, etc. Build some guardrails for your family conversations.
- Be partially culpable, not entirely innocent What is your part in the conflict? It is easy to identify (and dwell on) all the shortcomings and faults of the other family member, but there may be some words you said or ways you acted that were not helpful for the relationship. This is not meant to excuse, minimize, or enable the harmful behavior of someone else, but it is taking responsibility for our behavior and findings ways to improve.
 - We all want supportive, loving relationships with our family...but sometimes reality tells a different story.

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E Be a teammate, not an opponent

It can feel good to win an argument, but sometimes 'winning' an argument equates to losing in the relationship. Keep the focus on working together to overcome whatever challenge you are facing. Remember, the objective here is not to defeat your family member, but rather defeat whatever is standing in the way of you two having the relationship you want to have together.

Be a smile, not a frown

Find activities that allow you to have fun and build positive memories together, absent of conflict. Healthy family relationships are not merely about the absence of fighting and arguing, but also about the presence of laughter, enjoyment, and positivity.

Be a marathon runner, not a sprinter

Building strong family relationships is a weekly, daily, at times hourly process. In research that follows families over time, change is very seldom quick or pronounced. Rather, it is much more gradual *but is possible*. Focus on the small steps necessary for change, being realistic about the time it may take to reduce the amount of fighting and build the type of relationship you desire.

There is no place for physical, emotional, or sexual abuse in a relationship. If you feel abused or otherwise unsafe, learn more at **thehotline.org** or call The National Domestic Violence Hotline at **800-799-SAFE (7233)**.

*Information on these pages is intended for low- to moderate-grade conflicts. If there are intense issues your family is dealing with, seeking personalized assistance from a therapist, counselor, or other trained professional may be recommended.

With strained family relationships, this information can be easy to read, yet quite difficult to put into practice. However, relationships with family members will shape our lives, for better or for worse. Let's aim to make it for better.

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Additional Resources

Have a New Kid by Friday (podcast by Dr. Kevin Leman) | ihr.fm/3e99YMb

Tips of the Month for Families (The Family Institute) | bit.ly/32peHX6

