

LL29-Why Do Couples Quarrel?

I'm Alvean Lyons, and I'm Doug Weiss and welcome to Love Life.

So Douglas, we have a great question this week from our audience members, and what they really want to know is the inevitable thing that happens in every relationship in some form or fashion, the fight. And the question is, why are we always fighting, and how do we stop that loop experience we're doing over and over a gain. It becomes cyclical inside of relationships. You talk about, and much of your work is about the dynamics that exist inside of couple relationships and the impact it has on the overall health of the relationships. Can you speak a little bit towards what your experience has been, what you've seen, conversations that you've had around this fighting thing?

Well I think you're right, that inevitably, in every relationship, there's going to be some disagreement and if you look at the the subjects, the topics around which people fight are fairly consistent. That's not to say this is the entire universe, but what couples fight about, well they fight about money, they fight about sex, they fight about parenting..... Yep and different views on.....

Even with their furry pets and human children

.....and they fight about control.

If you dissect that spectrum of issues, ultimately they come down to one thing. Even in fights about sex or money it's really about one partner asserting their will over the other, and so you have to ask the question why do you need to do that? You know there's an old saying that's been applied to academia, the fight is so fierce because the stakes are so low. You can apply it to some of these contentious moments that occur in a relationship when there are control issues. Where one partner or both are expressing a sublimation of something deeper..... I'm not getting what I want. I'm not fulfilled, and therefore I'm going to manifest my frustration and my angst over this in contention with you for who's in charge. What have you seen?

I see this all too often. And it seems to produce this new dynamic that becomes a new normal inside of the relationship. We no longer fight about the issue, we don't attack the issue, we start attacking each other. I start presuming your intentions when things take place, and I project onto you what it is that you are feeling, or tell you what you're trying to say, or what you mean. When you do these things it stops being about just the trash going out or did you pick up the kids at such and such time, or when you got home. It stops being about that and it starts being: you don't care about me, you don't care about our family. These things are not important to you anymore. You used to make these a priority and it's no longer just the issue anymore. To your point, that's often because the presenting issue as we refer to it in psychology, is rarely the actual issue. There's something underneath that, there's some fracture that exists underneath that that we have not addressed that is manifesting itself in all of these other wardrobes and outfits. But it's really not the naked issue.

So we would be derelict if we didn't say that acknowledging that this happens the question is really how do you stop? I don't mean fighting. You've said, I'm paraphrasing, you have to learn how to fight Well. I'll ask you to explain further, but I take from that that, first, you need to learn how not to escalate. I have found myself, and I've watched others engaged in what is really a kind of minor flare up, a little quarrel. And you can watch it take off, and I've certainly personally experienced this, there comes a point in time where it's out of control. It's as if nothing you can say can take this down, back to the original issue and contain it. A forest fire has flared up out of a simple little spark and it for both parties there appears to be no understanding of how to back away gracefully. I wish I could tell you that I'm always capable of that but I have learned a few lessons over time, and one of them is to learn to laugh at yourself.

In the middle of those kinds of debates where you've said something that you know wasn't intended to be pointed in your mind, but was taken as such by the person it was directed at, you need to be able to stop and say, you know what? That was a really stupid decision, what was I thinking? You need to disarm the

situation before it goes nuclear. So humor is one thing and frankly being able to look at yourself and be painfully honest about your own foibles and flaws when you're in the middle of this low level sniping with each other. We need to be able to say what are we doing? What do you want to do next? Do you want to continue this? I don't, and it's not that I want to disengage right now, I want to hear what you have to say but, I want to hear it thoughtfully. I don't want to hear it angrily because there's nothing that's going to be accomplished by that except that I'm going to get my feelings hurt, and your feelings are going to get hurt. The likelihood is we're going to say things that we don't really mean but in the heat of the moment our frustrations will boil over.

As a matter of fact, my husband and Iyou know that we always shower together. Always have, for nearly twenty five years, and we always have our morning conversations and our night conversations in the shower. It's just a good thing, a good practice. I just say to people as a whole it is a great practice. It doesn't have to be about it leading into physicality because that's not what it's about, it's really a good practice to be able to be Naked, both emotionally and physically, with the person that you love and know. That it's safe and you're in a non judgemental environment.

My husband has a bald head and he shaves his head every morning. He has his little shaving cream that is inside of the shower and I am a little bit obsessed about things staying in order. I will admit that I practically have a small touch of O.C.D. about keeping things clean and orderly. I will confess to this, and so he told me a couple of days ago when we're in the shower that something was broken on his cap so that I couldn't sit it up because everything would just kind of start to pour out. So, he says I know it's going to irritate you, but I need you to leave it laying flat so I don't lose all of the gel that's inside. This morning we're in the shower and I hop out of the shower before him and he proceeds to get ready to shave his head and he says: see I knew you weren't going to be able to leave it alone. I told you if you stand it up it's going to come out. I opened the shower door back and I said I didn't touch it, the housekeeper did it. And he started laughing. He said really, and I said yes the housekeeper did it. Believe it or not, this puppy does learn new tricks. So he started laughing and I said look at you, you were going to put the icing on the cupcake. You were going to tell me about how I always have to touch things, and normally that's true, but I didn't do it this time and so we start laughing at each other and he's like baby I'm so sorry. So he goes to kiss me and I gave him this really dry kiss to be funny and I said, see this is how I feel. I puckered my lips really tight so that the kiss wouldn't be soft at all and he starts laughing at me, and I said don't worry about it baby, I accuse you of things all the time, even in your absence. And I say all of that just to say that that moment could have turned into... you always accuse me of things that I don't do. You assume that I did something that I didn't do. It could have turned into something that it didn't need to turn into. But when you can laugh it off and then simultaneously own the fact that you do it too you defuse it. We call it the dry grass principle. A forest fire cannot exist and expand without the right conditions. If the conditions inside of the relationship are dry grass, when there is a momentary conflict it's like dropping a match on the grass and the whole thing goes up in flames not because that single match was that big a deal but because the conditions were right for it to turn into a massive fire. If you live with wet grass in your relationship when that match or conflict falls on that grass it fizzles out. The environment and the conditions are not right for it to turn into a fire. We have to be very conscious of our relationships. If we want to stop the cycle of fighting we have to make sure that we keep the grass wet by owning your own stuff and not projecting on your partner what he or she means or intends, or to presume evil or ill intent in every comment that is made. Sometimes it was just something stupid one of us said and it's not because I don't love you and it's not because you're not awesome, it was just a stupid moment and I can just own it.

Two things that I learned from you. I've referenced these before in our conversations. One has to do with what's often referred to as gunnysacking. Where we bring up past hurts or disagreements--- there was that time back when..... the laundry list gets brought out and there's a bill of particulars containing all the things that you've ever done that caused some unhappiness. The lesson is that when there is some degree of conflict and you've reached resolution it's over. Keep it in the past, that's where it belongs. It's not the prelude to the future. The other is a subject you spoke about brilliantly the other day. It's the you're alwaysnobody always does anything. It's an absurd statement to make on the face of it and yet we all have at one time or another I suspect. What we really mean when we say that is my frustration level is at level ten. That's the point of frustration. The lesson is descalation, stop the fire before it spreads.

We hope that we've shared some understanding with you about how relationships can devolve, but also how you can evolve and how you can arrest the behaviors that cause conflict, to move beyond them to a more mature affection and appreciation of each other.

We hope you'll write to us at doug@lovelife.digital or alvean@lovelife.digital with your thoughts and suggestions.

We want to thank Chelsea Washington, our producer, Todd Washburn, our Recording Engineer and the entire Love Life family, including you, our listeners. We'll be back next week with another episode. Until then, have a wonderful week. Bye folks.